

Finlandia Foundation National's Saving Finland in America Named 2024 Expatriate of the Year by Finland Society (Suomi-Seura)

Pasadena, CA, Oct 24, 2024 — The Finnish Expatriate of the Year Award, established in 1983 by Finland Society (Suomi-Seura), is given to an expatriate Finn who has demonstrated exceptional success in their field. This year, for the first time in the award's history, the recognition has been given to a project rather than an individual or group: Finlandia Foundation National's *Saving Finland in America* campaign.

This groundbreaking initiative, which mobilized Finns, Finnish Americans and friends of Finland, was selected for its innovative approach to preserving Finnish-American heritage, which was put at risk of being lost after the closure of Finlandia University in March of 2023. Last year's award went to a group, the Finnish Expatriate Choir, making 2024 the first time a project has received this honor—highlighting the profound impact of *Saving Finland in America*.

Through a combination of perseverance and teamwork, a dedicated task force appointed by Finlandia Foundation National (FFN) led the effort to secure \$5.5 million from over 900 donors—far exceeding the initial \$3 million goal—ensuring that the legacy of Finnish-American history remains intact for future generations.

Anne-Mari Paster, immediate Past President of FFN, who spearheaded the project, shared her thoughts on the urgent nature of the mission: *"Failure was not an option. We knew the Finnish-American legacy was at grave risk, and it was up to us to save it. Finlandia Foundation National's 70 years championing Finnish-American heritage had prepared us for this moment, and although it was a massive undertaking, it was an opportunity we couldn't afford to miss."*

As **Thomas Flanagan**, Executive Director of FFN, reflected: *"This project took on a life of its own. After hearing about the closure of Finlandia University just two weeks into my role, it became clear that our work was about more than saving artifacts—it was about preserving our collective identity and heritage. There was never a question of 'if' we would do this, but rather, 'how.'"*

The collaboration united Finnish and Finnish-American communities across the United States, along with friends of Finland, to safeguard the archives, folk school, art gallery, bookstore, and *Finnish American Reporter*, all part of the Finnish American Heritage Center in Hancock, Michigan. This northern city in Michigan's Upper Peninsula has a rich history of Finnish migration and is often referred to as the "nesting place" of Finnish America. FFN has since expanded its efforts to digitize archives, highlight the work of the Finnish American Folk School and Finlandia Art Gallery, and promote Finnish art, culture, and heritage in innovative ways.

Michel Wendell, a key member of the task force, emphasized the personal nature of the mission: *"For us, this was about more than just history—it was about understanding our cultural foundation and taking it forward. As someone who has spent my career*

bridging Finland and America, this work has been deeply meaningful, and I am proud of the community that came together to make it possible."

Finland Society (Suomi-Seura), founded in 1927, is a Finland-based organization that has been connecting Finns living abroad with their homeland for nearly a century, fostering a strong sense of community and belonging while providing crucial support to expatriates by promoting Finnish culture, language, and identity worldwide. The award will be presented in a special ceremony in Helsinki later this year, and the event will be live-streamed for global audiences. The *Saving Finland in America* project serves as a reminder of the power of collective effort and the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

Finlandia Foundation National extends its heartfelt thanks to the thousands of donors, volunteers, and benefactors who contributed to this monumental achievement. "This recognition by Finland Society is a testament to the fact that what we are doing matters—both in the US and in Finland," says Flanagan, "But the winner wasn't me, FFN, or even the Finnish American Heritage Center. It was *Saving Finland in America*—the campaign, the project, and the mission—that earned this prestigious honor."

For more information, visit finlandiafoundation.org.

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