

“IT’S OK TO HAVE BIG DREAMS!”

By Tim Nurvala, FFN Trustee

THIS IS THE ADVICE ELSA BRULE GIVES YOUNG PEOPLE MAKING THEIR WAY IN THE WORLD TODAY. IT’S ADVICE SHE HAS TAKEN TO HEART THROUGHOUT HER BUSY AND IMPACTFUL LIFE.

In December of last year, Elsa demonstrated this by making a big gift of \$25,000 to Finlandia Foundation National. A second generous gift of \$200,000 will help forge a new partnership with the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. This will enable Finlandia Foundation to offer increased opportunities to students and encourage cultural ties between the Academy and the United States.

Her interest in this effort grew from a recent project through the Sibelius Academy Global Music program that linked Sámi musicians of Finland with the

Native American students at St. Joseph’s Mission School in New Mexico. The struggle to maintain their language and music is similar in both cultures. The exchange was a celebration of shared joy in creating music. The vast difference in climate from Lapland to the Southwest added to the appreciation of what is mutually valued in both societies.

A quote by Hans Christian Andersen, “Where words fail, music speaks,” underscores the importance of such exchanges. From that experience, Elsa was enthusiastic about helping similar projects, such as facilitating the Finlandia Foundation’s partnership with the Sibelius Academy to expand the opportunities.

She credits her positive outlook and her boundless energy to her Finnish heritage. Elsa grew up in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, where Finnish culture is part of everyday life. Her mother and grandmother were both born in the United States but their Finnish heritage carried its way forward through their outlook as well as in the marvelous art of baking pulla. Elsa has mastered baking the cardamom bread later in life, and likes nothing better than sharing it with others.

Her grandfather was a strong influence in her childhood. He emigrated from eastern Finland to the United States when he was 18 years old to avoid being drafted into the Czar’s army, and made his way to the copper mines of the Upper Peninsula. He eventually owned a “biergarten” in Hancock, Michigan.

“He had a lot of common sense. He would give us, his three granddaughters, a dollar bill every time he visited and advise, ‘Now, put that in the bank.’ To describe a Finn in one word, I’d use practical!” says Elsa.

But, it was as a teenager that she remembers seeing a quote from famed humanitarian, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, that helped influence her love of philanthropy and making a difference in the lives of others. His message was, “I do not know what your destiny will be, but this I do know. You will always find happiness if you seek and find how to serve.” That idea has helped fuel much

of the impact that Elsa has made for so many others.

“There is nothing better than making a gift and watching it grow,” she says. Much of her philanthropic focus has been on literacy, in building and restoring school libraries, here in the U.S. and abroad. A recent project was the creation of one of the first community libraries in Cambodia, housed in a former Buddhist pagoda.

“Everyone could learn from what the Finns have done in these areas,” says Elsa. “The Finnish education system is among the best in the world. The new Oodi Library in Helsinki is an extraordinary model for how significant a library can be for a community.”

Making a big difference is something Elsa has done throughout her life. On a trip to Rwanda, she and Erika Sauer (the spouse of the former Finnish Ambassador to the United Nations) learned of a hospital that desperately needed a playroom for its hospitalized children. Seeing the need and the big impact it could have on their lives, the two women went to work creating an amazing playroom in just one day (above). It’s the positive “can-do” spirit that has characterized Elsa’s outlook throughout her life.

To the Finlandia Foundation she says, “I’m glad you’re here!” Elsa is quick to point out that she is a proud American, but that “we need to take the opportunity to be ambassadors for the wonderful country of Finland, our mother country, which is doing so many great things. The Finnish appreciation of education, culture, reading and literature, as well as music, has played such an important part in their success.” She celebrates Finland for being so innovative in such a competitive world.

The true realization of her own Finnish connection wasn’t complete

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until she made a moving and transformative trip to Finland over 20 years ago, to meet her mother’s family for the first time. Elsa was amazed by how familiar it was: the warm welcoming spirit, the humor, the stalwart and positive attitude, the food---even though she’d never been there before. Now, she goes to Finland as often as she can. On a lighter note, Elsa also loves to draw and has developed a series of delightful renderings of *tonnttu*, Finnish elves!

She identifies having Finnish character as her strength to get her through any challenges she faces. It is a reminder that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, with a heritage honed on resilience, hard work and dedication to doing what is right. Her grandson wisely reminded her one day, “What good is sisu, if you don’t use it?”

Whether it is hospitals in Rwanda, libraries in Cambodia, schools in New York City or musical partnerships with the Sibelius Academy, Elsa is making a big impact.

What does the future hold for Elsa Brule? She is not ready to make any public announcements yet, but she is working on a new endeavor that will have a meaningful and lasting effect on many people’s lives. Rest assured, she is taking her own advice and “DREAMING BIG!”

Photo by Rick Guidotti