Pursuing an *aito suomalainen* sport

By Elsa Jussila

The state of Florida is often associated with a large population of retirees, so it's easy to assume the state's Finnish American community mirrors that trend. While many Finnish Americans in the sunshine state are indeed older, there is a growing group of young Gen Z Finnish Americans thriving in the tropics, such as 18-year-old figure skater Milena Autero. Her story is a perfect example of the multi-generational bond and support of Florida's Finnish American community.

"I got into skating because of my grandma," Autero said. "As a kid I liked to do dance and such, but she told me that her granddaughter has to try one real aito suomalainen sport, so I went skating with her and fell in love with it. It was so much fun."

Born to Finnish parents and raised in Lake Worth, Milena first laced up a pair of skates as a child under the guidance of her grandmother, whose wisdom and encouragement set the wheels—or rather, the blades—in motion. Now Milena practices year-round, often juggling schoolwork, competitions, and travel while maintaining her commitment to the sport she loves. Although frequent visits to her local skating rink have become ordinary and second nature for her, she admits that being a figure skater in the Floridian tropics is quite unique.

"It's definitely different to skate here, the reaction I get is pretty funny." she laughed. "People are often like, 'You skate in Florida? Why?' but honestly, I think it's great. If the rink gets too cold, I just walk outside and warm up!" She isn't alone in her sport of choice, either. "We have a really good community of skaters here; there's a surprising amount of people involved."

Though she grew up in the U.S., Milena's connection to her Finnish roots remains strong.

"I spoke only Finnish until I went to school and started learning English there," she said. "Now my younger siblings prefer speaking English because it's what their friends speak, so I've made a conscious effort to keep speaking Finnish with my grandparents. I don't want to lose it."

The Finnish language has approximately only 5 million speakers worldwide, making Milena's commitment to preserving it within her family not just a personal choice, but also a meaningful act of cultural preservation.

And according to Milena, speaking the language can boost your appeal. "My friends are always asking me to talk in Finnish to them, they think it sounds cool because it's so different."

That sense of cultural responsibility extends to her lifestyle and habits as well. Weekly visits to the sauna, attending services at the local Finnish church, traveling to Finland whenever possible, visiting community centers like Suomitalo, and hunting down Finnish comfort foods like karjalanpiirakka and lohikeitto with her grandparents help Milena feel connected to the homeland she wasn't born in but deeply cherishes.

Milena Autero's specialty is solo dance figure skating, and though Milena only recently became a legal adult, she already has many impressive achievements. She became the 2023 U.S Novice Solo Dance National Champion, won bronze in Junior Solo Dance at the 2024 U.S Washington Picken Solo Dance International, and most recently placed 4th at the 2025 Atlanta U.S Solo Dance International. Still, Autero is shooting for the stars, saying: "Solo dance is not a recognized category in the Olympics yet, but if it becomes one, I'd love to try for it." She owes much of her ability and talent to the instruction of her fantastic coach, Steven Belanger.

Her achievements on the ice haven't come without challenges, however. Competitive figure skating is an expensive pursuit, with costs piling up from equipment, training, travel, costumes, and entry fees.

Hearing of a talented young Finn in need of help, the Finnish American community in Florida stepped up.

"When Kerhotalo offered me a scholarship, it made all the difference," she said with a smile.

"Because of the generosity of Kaija Kalervo and the rest of the Kerhotalo board of directors, I can continue doing what I love."

The Finnish presence in South Florida mainly began in the post-World War II era, when Finnish families sought warmth, opportunity, and growth in the United States. Areas like Lake Worth soon became cultural pockets where Finnish bakeries, social clubs, and churches flourished. Many if not most Finns in Florida live in or were born in the state because their grandparents decided to make the move from the tundra to the tropics decades ago. While it often feels as if the younger and older generations become more and more divided as the years go by, the Finnish Floridian community is a place where support for the elderly and hope for the youth thrives.

Traditions such as recipes, dances, and language are passed down with pride, and shared cultural values continue to strengthen the bonds between different age groups.

It's not uncommon to see three generations of Finnish Americans gathered for cultural events- mummi's and vaari's sharing stories of their arrival to America, parents reminiscing about their own transitions, and teens like Milena blending the old with the new. These gatherings are more than just celebrations—they're living bridges between continents, connecting identity, memory, and the ongoing journey of what it means to be Finnish in America.

For Milena, her place of birth may be far from Finland, but the spirit that drives her is undeniably full of Finnish sisu. Her story reflects a broader trend among Finnish American Millennials and Gen Z who are blending their heritage with modern ambition—and doing so in places as unexpected as the sandy beaches of Lake Worth.

With the unwavering support of her family and the tight-knit Finnish community in Palm Beach County, Milena Autero is gliding towards a bright future. Autero's story is more than just a unique example of a Floridian with a love for frost. It is also a testament to how cultural heritage and community support can lay the foundation for excellence. In this community, the elders are the backbone, and the youth are like torchbearers carrying their history forward.