

Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula is copper country. In the early 1900's, the Keweenaw was a booming copper mining area, with over 90,000 residents. People immigrated to the area from all over the world, seeking work in the mines and its supporting businesses on the surface. Local communities were home to people from around the world, who introduced and shared rich cultural traditions, like Finnish Sisu. At the heart of this mining region was the village of Calumet, a community of thousands, living and working next to the largest copper mining company in the area, Calumet and Hecla. Copper was king, central to the local economy, and the communities' identity.

By the 1970's, the area's copper industry had been in slow decline for decades, when the last native copper mine closed. Local communities were hit hard. Jobs were lost. People moved away to seek other opportunities, and commerce drew to a crawl. Just as local businesses struggled to stay afloat, so too did the people who remained.

Today, the Calumet area has about 3,000 residents, and is home to Keweenaw National Historical Park, established to preserve and interpret this historically significant history. Although historic mining companies like Calumet and Hecla are no longer active, the buildings, streets, rail lines, and other infrastructure that once supported this booming industry are evident throughout the landscape and communities in and around the historical park. Because many of these features are woven into the fabric of the community, it would be easy to miss the remarkable history that is right in our own back yard.

The Keweenaw is more than just history; it is a mosaic of beautiful scenery, recreational opportunities, and cultural attractions. So with all of these world class resources hiding in plain sight, how do we highlight them, and help the next generation to see and appreciate all that their area has to offer, especially one whose rich past has been shadowed by decades of economic instability and uncertainty? This question sparked the creation of Project Sisu, with a grant from the National Park Foundation.

Keweenaw National Historical Park and Washington Middle School of Calumet worked together to select a group of twelve students to embark on a Keweenaw summer adventure. Together, we wanted to change perceptions about the park, teach the value of the area's history, and give the participants an opportunity to be immersed in the local treasures. Through weekly outings, the students participated in cultural events, completed service-learning projects, volunteered, hiked, camped and learned about the Keweenaw's history.

They recorded their thoughts and observations and compiled these ideas into an activity map, geared towards sharing their experiences with other youth, their families and friends. No such map of the Keweenaw had ever been produced, and the students were incredibly excited to create it. The map has already helped to introduce children of all ages to the variety of fun and interesting places throughout the park and the Keweenaw Peninsula.

Keweenaw National Historical Park is an untapped resource for the youth of Calumet. Project Sisu is a first attempt to realize the opportunities for youth to use the park to engage with their community and its heritage. While all of the students participated in the same activities, Project Sisu meant something different to each person. (Girl's voice): "Project Sisu is a group that goes around the Keweenaw to learn more about it. I think Project Sisu changed me because when I got to learn more about one place, I loved it. It changed how I love to learn about the Keweenaw. Before, I didn't know much about it." (Girl's voice:) "I think it gave me a different perspective on all of the different Parks that are here in the U.P." (Girl's voice) "I got to visit places I probably never would have visited."

Over the course of the summer, participant's enthusiasm for the Keweenaw grew, while their confidence in themselves and their peers became evident. Marked by the friendships they formed, the openness they exhibited, and the smiles they displayed. Project Sisu is best summed up by team leader Zoe Lincoln: "The highlight of Project Sisu, for me, was when we got to take the kids to the Porcupine Mountains. Our group had somehow become a little family. They were so comfortable with each other, they were completely at ease, talking, and smiling, and had this entirely different group of kids than what we had started out with."