ASHFIELD — A local theater company has been awarded a $275,000 National Creative Placemaking grant from ArtPlace America.

Double Edge Theater, a 35-year-old company that moved to Ashfield in 1992, was one of 23 recipients selected from 987 applicants. The money will support the development of a cultural center for a Native American programming, with studio space for "emerging artists" in a 551 Main St. barn. Besides that renovation work, the grant will also help Double Edge enlarge its garden space, add a "hoop house" to extend the growing season and a new kitchen to provide food for performers, students and volunteers.

The grant was one of four or five awarded in Massachusetts, and the only one to a rural arts organization."

This grant is a piece of a much larger structure that's being built, has been built, will be built," said co-Artistic Director Matthew Glassman, who wrote the grant."

It's a huge, monumental grant for us, especially at the scale that we work, but it's also a very small piece when seen through another lens," Glassman said.

That work will involve adding more year-round programming, as well as more scholarships, programming, internships and training programs aimed at Latina women, African-Americans, and
disadvantaged rural and urban populations. Among these are Native Americans, whose storytelling venues, founding co-artistic director Stacy Klein said, seemed underrepresented around the region when the theater ensemble was doing research for its two-day town spectacle in May."

In order to have 'living culture' — Double Edge's term for integration of creativity, social responsibility and learning in daily life — everyone has to be engaged," said Klein. "If any person is excluded, there can't be a culture."

Rhonda Anderson of Colrain, an Inupiaq Arthaban who is working with Double Edge, said she hopes to use the renovated space to create a program for Native American students to learn about their cultural identity.

Although more than 37,000 Native Americans live in Massachusetts, according to the 2010 census, she said, "There's a big problem with Native American invisibility today, where a lot of non-native people own narratives to native stories. So we need to be able to be more visible and allow our youths to have agency over our own narratives — strengthening our cultural ties to where we are, who we are, our languages, our stories."

Double Edge, which is working with the Ashfield Business Association, Franklin County Community Development Corp. and others in the community, plans to hire staff to oversee its new programs and to increase pay for ensemble members while honoring the agricultural and crafts traditions of the community, hiring local workers to carry out renovations and other projects.

"Creative place-making is a form of community development driven by arts culture, imagination and the cultivation of creativity and long-term human relations," said Glassman, pointing to the long-term effect of 10 years of sellout performances for the annual summer spectacle. Double Edge also brings actors, dancers and musicians from around the world to Ashfield for intensive training sessions and ensemble performances, like a world premiere planned for New Jersey's Peak Performances in March."

This grant is concrete and part of a larger vision that seeks to prove it's sustainable, with investment and large participation," said Glassman. "And that the impacts are important not just for art making, for the ecosystem around it. I really think this grant is the tip of the iceberg and reflects the work beneath the surface we've been doing for a long time, as well as something we're building in the future. This helps us kick off a larger campaign and vision, with a goal of putting our community and the idea of living culture on a sustainable footing for a long time."

Ashfield Lake House owner Dre Rawlings, one of the town residents who's worked with Double Edge in planning the grant, said creation of the new space and programming "for people to find a place in cultural community" will be "kind of a game changer. It's going very deep into human connectedness through art and culture. In these very challenging, unstable times, politically, creating diverse space for that kind of cultural work that's deeply about people in your town, I think that two, three, five years from now, it's going to be a cultural model that I think our country needs."

Rawlings credited Double Edge with "a lot of exciting experimentation" as well as involving residents in a community dialogue, "and then listening to them."

ArtPlace is a collaboration of 16 foundations, eight federal agencies and six financial institutions.