

VAIKO VARTAI Į MOKSLĄ / CHILD'S GATE TO LEARNING

P.O. Box 381, Downers Grove, IL 60515

e-mail: vvm@childgate.org

Web site: <http://www.childgate.org>



Dear benefactors,

Happy New Year! It's hard to believe it's already February 2006! To better keep you informed, we're providing you with highlights of this past year's activities. We continue our mission of ensuring that children and adolescents in Lithuania attend school and grow towards being productive future citizens, regardless of their social and economic circumstances. We thank you for your past support and hope you continue to keep our organization in your thoughts. Please keep in touch.

Sincerely, "Child's Gate to Learning"

HIGHLIGHTS

February 2006

Newly supported centers

"Child's Gate to Learning" now works with and supports a total of 10 centers throughout Lithuania: Vilnius (3); Kaunas; Kazlu Ruda; Marijampole; Naujoji Akmene; Obeliai; Rumbonys; Uzpaliai. The newest centers are: the sv. Kryžiaus (*Holy Cross*) Center in Vilnius, added in late 2004, and the *Zaliakalnis Center* in Kaunas, added in late 2005. Additional centers are added very selectively and are approved by the board of directors. In order to receive continuing financial support, centers must all agree to follow "Child's Gate to Learning" guidelines: regular reports of progress; documentation of funding expenditures, and the documented utilization of "Child's Gate to Learning" developed character building programs in the work with the youth attending the centers.

In 2005, officers and members in the Chicago area, as well as fund-raising centers in other cities, sent packages of school and craft supplies, as well as clothing and toiletries. Priority is given to sending supplies and materials that are difficult to locate or expensive to purchase in Lithuania. Additionally, financial support was provided to the centers to help directors pay for food supplies, ensuring that the children were provided with nutritious meals after school. Often, "Child's Gate to Learning" financial support provided needed matching or supplemental funds to what the centers obtained through other sources, from local government agencies, grant funding, etc.

Documentary film

"Child's Gate to Learning" commissioned documentary filmmaker Agne Marcinkeviciute to create a film that would visually depict the work done with the youth at the supported centers. Agne visited, filmed, and conducted short interviews at about half of the supported centers, accompanied by our representative in Lithuania, Zydrune Liobikaite. Agne's film, entitled "*Dievo vaikai*" (*God's Children*) is a twenty-five minute visual tour of the centers, with Lithuanian language narration. The film has been shown in Chicago and is being sent for showings to the organization's support groups beyond Chicago, in Ohio, Florida, and elsewhere. To date, the response has been positive, and "Child's Gate to Learning" officers have discussed various possible future project scenarios, such as preparing English language text or narration for this film, as well as what themes for other short documentary films would best continue to illustrate the work and progress at the centers.

Seminar

On April 23 – 24, 2005, 40 directors, staff, and volunteers attended a two-day seminar, sponsored in Kaunas by “Child’s Gate to Learning”. The seminars have become a tradition among attendees in recent years. Staff and volunteers at the centers often don’t have other opportunities to meet, since they live in different cities, and the centers at which they work were founded by different organizations. Each center is unique, but the “Child’s Gate to Learning” organization and its support is a common thread that links the centers. The 2005 seminar focused on the crucial role that volunteerism plays in society, and the importance of lovingly and respectfully caring for children from difficult home situations. Attendees also had the opportunity to learn more about “Child’s Gate to Learning” fund-raising activities that are so important on this side of the Atlantic, in order to support their work and their centers in Lithuania. Invited speakers were all professionals in their fields. Participants actively participated in discussions and skits of both a serious and lighthearted nature.

“Child’s Gate to Learning” officers had agreed that it was important to sponsor the annual seminar, even when there was no new character building program to present to the attendees. The primary seminar organizers were Rita Venclovas, one of our *Projects for Lithuania* coordinators, and the Chair of our Board of Directors, and Zdrune Liobikaite, the representative in Lithuania. Board members, Ramune Kubilius and dr. Regina Padleckas, also attended the seminar, participated as much as possible, and all met with the centers’ directors or representatives to discuss with them what other character building program themes were most in demand.

(Articles about the seminar, written by Ramune Kubilius, were published in Lithuania’s Internet newspaper, “Bernardinai”, www.bernardinai.lt, the Lithuanian language daily newspaper, “Draugas”, published in Chicago, and the English language newsletter, “Bridges”, published by the Lithuanian-American Community).

Volunteers

Marius Pakalniskis, a new college graduate from the Chicago area, went to Lithuania as a youth volunteer for three months in late spring and early summer of 2005. He joined other youth volunteers at the “Vilties Angelo” (*Angel of Hope*) Center in Vilnius in their daily after-school work with children, and he participated in one of the summer camps organized for the youths. One day a week he served as a “big brother” to one of the adolescents who attends the center, providing one-on-one attention, friendship, and companionship on bicycle rides and outings on foot.

(A Sept. 2005 interview with Marius, accompanied by his photographs, was printed in the Lithuanian language weekly, “Amerikos Lietuvis”, published in Chicago.)

New character building program

In late 2005, a specially formed editorial committee began work on the fourth character building program, tentatively called “Zingsniai i prasminga gyvenima” (*Steps Towards a Meaningful Life*). Earlier programs had been: the introductory character building program; D.R.A.S.A. (*Dare to Resist Alcohol and Substance Abuse*); and S.A.U. (*Self-Awareness and Understanding*). The committee, comprised of “Child’s Gate to Learning” members who are professional psychologists, social workers, and educators, hopes to complete work on the program by March 2006 and present the themes, going through some of the role-playing exercises and games, during the 2006 seminar in Kaunas. All of the programs have been designed to provide the centers with methodologies for working with older children and adolescent youths. The role-playing games and scenarios revolve around themes and are designed to instill confidence, self-respect and respect for others in the young people, who are the future of Lithuania...

Fund-raising

"Child's Gate to Learning" had a successful fund-raising year in 2005.

The distribution of packets of blank notecards, decorated with illustrations by a Lithuanian artist, yielded donations from members and supporters. In the Chicago area, the annual presentation of projects to the Chicago-area Lithuanian American public took place January 2005; the annual fall harvest luncheon took place in September, as did a fund-raising evening in a private home. Officers and members baked tortes and sold coffee as well as Lithuanian goods during the annual two day Christmas bazaar at the Lithuanian World Center in December. Supporters in other cities organized fund-raising lunches and staffed information tables at annual spring Lithuanian scout St. Casimir bazaars (*Kaziuko mugės*) in their communities.

Each individual donation is appreciated. "Child's Gate to Learning" is very appreciative for the large donations made in 2005, by an anonymous benefactor, and by Mr. and Mrs. R. K. Collings. The first large donation helped fund the badly needed addition to the small house of the "Saltinelis" temporary shelter center in Marijampole ("Saltinelio" laikinosios globos namai). The second donation enabled "Child's Gate to Learning" to distribute and transfer funds (totaling \$8600) to each center's bank account so that before Christmas, center directors could purchase depleted food supplies for the children. The sum transferred to each center was determined by the size of the center and its supported youth population.

Project funding was received from the Lithuanian Foundation (*Lietuvių Fondas*), which has also been generous to "Child's to Learning" in the past. Funding enabled us to support various projects: start-up support for a newly formed after-school center in Vilnius (mentioned earlier) and provided a funding base for the 2005 seminar (rental of the facility, travel support for attendees, speaker fees, although some speakers generously waived fees).

Plans for 2006:

The cycle began in Fall 2005 and continues after the New Year- meetings, fund-raising activities, and completion of the new character building program. The premier of the new documentary film, mentioned earlier, took place in January. About a half-dozen Lithuanian American young people have already applied to be volunteers at various "Child's Gate to Learning" supported centers in Lithuania, each for at least one month, during the summer of 2006. "Child's Gate to Learning" *Programs for Lithuania* coordinators here in the Chicago area, Rita Venclovas and Aldona Kamantas, are screening, selecting, and preparing young volunteers, matching them up with the centers that could most use their assistance in Lithuania. All of the youths speak Lithuanian, which helps center directors more effectively coordinate their work in Lithuania. Each youth volunteer will be asked to keep a diary during the stay in Lithuania, in preparation for writing a short report of the experience, upon returning to the United States.