

VAIKO VARTAI Į MOKSLĄ / CHILD'S GATE TO LEARNING

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Dear benefactors,

Happy New Year! To keep you informed, we're providing you with highlights of this past year's activities and accomplishments. We continue our mission of helping children from disadvantaged families in Lithuania. Along with our colleagues in Lithuania, we want these children, regardless of their families' social and economic circumstances, to become educated, morally responsible, and productive adults. After all, they are the future citizens of Lithuania and of the world.

We thank you for your past support and we hope you will continue to keep our organization in your thoughts.

Sincerely, "Child's Gate to Learning"

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2006 HIGHLIGHTS

- *The annual update meeting for Chicagoland supporters was held in January 2006.*
- *"Child's Gate to Learning" voted to support a 10th center, the „Vilties vėrinėliai" (Strings of Hope) center in Žemaičių Kalvarija.*
- *Officers visited a number of the supported centers in Lithuania—one spent several months, volunteering at a Vilnius center and completing various projects.*
- *A seminar was sponsored again in Kaunas for supported center directors, staff, and volunteers. A new film was made by documentary filmmaker Agnė Marcinkevičiūtė to show highlights from the seminar and features short interviews with some of the organizers and attendees.*
- *Three Lithuanian-speaking young Americans worked as volunteers in Lithuania at two different "Child's Gate to Learning" supported centers. Two worked in Marijampolė and one worked in Vilnius.*
- *An editorial committee completed the fourth character building program.*
- *Financial support for special projects was sought and received from various associations.*
- *Fund-raising events were held throughout the year.*
- *Officers' elections were held.*
- *There were 4 members' meetings, 6 officers' meetings, 1 Board of Directors' meeting and a number of special project meetings.*

IN LITHUANIA

Centers

"Child's Gate to Learning" supports and maintains contact with 10 after school centers and temporary shelters (*dienos centrai & laikinosios globos namai*) in various cities and towns of Lithuania: Vilnius (2), Kazlų Rūda, Marijampolė, Naujoji Akmenė, Obeliai, Rumbonys, Užpaliai, and the two most recently supported- in Kaunas and Žemaičių Kalvarija.

"Child's Gate to Learning" has great admiration for the work of center directors, staff, and volunteers at all 10 supported centers. Most of the children who attend the centers are from socially and economically disadvantaged families. At the centers, children: find respite from their chaotic family lives, are treated with respect, are supervised as they do homework, are provided with meals and school supplies, are taken on field trips, go to summer camp, celebrate birthdays and holidays, and learn life skills they perhaps are not learning at home. Some centers have established programs to work with the mothers of the children, or with younger preschool siblings. Center directors train staff, recruit, and prepare volunteers to effectively work with the children.

Several officers visited the *Žaliakalnis* center in Kaunas (support began in late 2005) where the Franciscan sisters work with regular center attendees, needy children from the neighborhood. The center is open during the school year and during summer afternoons.

"Child's Gate to Learning" voted to support the "*Vilties vėrinėliai*" (*Strings of hope*) center in Žemaičių Kalvarija, located in the northwestern corner of Lithuania (not far from Plungė). The center co-directors successfully recruited their colleagues from the nearby school, to help out after school during the school year and at weeklong summer day camps organized for the children. The center's facilities can only accommodate about 25 children at one time. In order to work with the children who have need of the center's services, some children attend on alternate days. A center-based Lithuanian ethnographic ensemble is being formed (and we helped find funding for musical instruments). The center celebrated its 1st birthday in the fall of 2006. Happy Birthday!

Supported center directors, staff, and volunteers from 9 of the 10 supported centers gathered in Kaunas once again for a weekend seminar in May 2006. They were introduced to the new program, attended talks given by psychology and social work professionals. They had the opportunity to network with colleagues, shared stories and experiences. A Lithuanian language documentary film, "*Žingsniai į prasmingą gyvenimą*" (*Steps Towards a Meaningful Life*) was produced by filmmaker *Agnė Marcinkevičiūtė* to record highlights of the seminar and its impact on attendees. (An earlier film, made in 2005 by A. Marcinkevičiūtė and called "*Dievo vaikai*" (*God's Children*), can be seen at: <http://www.bernardinai.lt/index.php?url=articles/40207>).

Volunteers

High-school age volunteers, *Lina Jarašius* (from Denver, CO) and *Nida Vidutis* (from Tacoma Park, Maryland) went to Lithuania in June and worked as volunteers at the "*Šaltinėlis*" (Little Fountain) center in Marijampolė. The center is a temporary shelter for children who were removed by police from chaotic family crises. The volunteers played with the children, went with them on outings, worked with them arts and crafts projects, planted a garden, and taught the children a bit of English as well!

In the fall of 2006, adult volunteer, educator, actress, and director, Chicagoan *Audré Budrys-Nakas* worked at the "*Vilties Angelas*" (Angel of Hope) center in Vilnius. Over the course of several months, she conducted acting exercises and drama workshops for the children, and she produced a Christmas play in which the children showed what they had learned.

ON THE HOME FRONT- IN THE U.S.

Character Building Program

In early 2006, a special editorial committee worked on the newest character building program "*Žingsniai į prasmingą gyvenimą*" (Steps Towards a Meaningful Life). The program, designed for 13-17 year olds, is the fourth organization-provided program developed by Lithuanian-American teachers and social workers for the supported centers in Lithuania. The new program emphasizes family life, positive personal and professional goals. Like the other programs, its techniques include the use of games, skits, discussions, plays, songs, stories, but not lectures!

SUPPORT

Financial Support

Child's Gate to Learning acknowledges the grants and special funding received from these foundations and organizations: *Lietuvių Fondas* (Lithuanian Foundation); *Seneca House*; *Lietuvos Dukterys* (Daughters of Lithuania, Seattle chapter); *Kanados Lietuvių Katalikių Moterų draugija* (Canadian Catholic Women's Society).

Some families of deceased family members have requested that relatives and friends earmark their donations to our organization. We greatly appreciate this living remembrance of departed loved ones and the support it provides for "Child's Gate to Learning" projects.

Fund-Raising Events

In the Chicagoland area, officers and supporters worked on events that have now become annual traditions: the January presentation of projects for Chicagoland supporters; the October "Derliaus pietūs" and the fall soirees (fund-raising evening) held in a private home; the December two-day holiday fair (where we sold tortes, cakes, coffee, and Lithuanian knickknacks)...

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of our volunteers who provide continuous support at various fund-raising functions and other projects! Here are a few examples of our special supporters in 2006:

- *Dr. Ona Daugirdas, Dr. Pranutė Domanskis, and Grasilda Reinys* in Fall 2006 organized a successful Christmas gift drive at the Lithuanian-American Blessed Bishop Matulaitis Roman Catholic Mission Church in Lemont, IL—the centers in Lithuania are most appreciative!
- The *Lithuanian Catholic Association "Ateitis"* chapter members and their advisor, *Marius Polikaitis*, again voluntarily served at the tables during the "Derliaus Pietūs" (Harvest Lunch) in Lemont, IL.
- *Lithuanian Consul, the Honorable Arvydas Daunoravičius*, with his family, have attended the Harvest Lunch for the past four years. His supportive words about the efforts of our organization were greatly appreciated.
- *Pranas Pranckevičius (voras.com)* donated time and Web skills to help maintain of our organization's Web site.
- Editors of the Chicagoland Lithuanian language newspapers, "*Draugas*", "*Amerikos Lietuvis*", and "*Bičiulystė*" printed our articles, photographs, and news items about our projects and events.
- The Karaitis family hosted the fall fundraising soiree at their residence.
- Fund-raising efforts of our organization were aided by our support groups in Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and two in Florida (Sunny Hills and St. Petersburg).
- Many others volunteered time and financial support...

The children of Žemaičių Kalvarija say "thank you".

