



Returning Home

LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" (Returned) is not yet officially a couple of years old, but has already achieved a lot as an organization. After being incorporated in February 2007, the *Lietuvių, gyvenusių Amerikoje, visuomeninė organizacija* "SUGRIŽUS" (LGAVO - a Public Organization of Lithuanians - Ex-Residents of the USA) originated unofficially the August of 2006, when a small group of 19 Lithuanians, mostly friends, met for the first time in a Lithuanian restaurant "Čili Kaimas" in Vilnius. Everyone was brought together by the idea of sharing experiences, including the great joy and relief of being back in their native land. The small group was united by the idea of building a bridge to Lithuania for those who dreamt of returning home, but for some reason were a bit scared. The 'godfather' of LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" was Mindaugas Kazlauskas, who has since also returned to Lithuania. He was on his way home after 12 years in the United States and felt there were many others thinking of doing the same thing. He started an internet chat site on www.yahoo.com after a peaceful Thanksgiving evening in 2005 in Chicago when he was thinking of home. Giedrė Šipailaitė, vice-president and PR coordinator of LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS", was the first member of that online group. "It started as just a circle of friends helping each other," Giedrė said, "and since then we have been maintaining links with our friends and Lithuanian communities in the US, and our organization has grown to about 83 members currently. LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" is a non-political, non-profit organization initiated by Lithuanians who have returned from the USA. It is open to Lithuanians from all over the world. We know exactly what it means to come back from America. You find yourself in the situation where you have to start from the very beginning again - to create a whole new life, circle of friends, daily routines, new job, new interests and even new rules. You feel a

bit like a baby, especially if you have been away for 10 years or more. The friends you left behind might have moved away and made new lives. And you have to understand a whole new way of living as well, which is not the same as in the US. "After first just meeting as a group of friends, we then found ourselves having to address the real problems that were affecting us all, and step-by-step we gained the competence to support those who followed us home." Giedrė is keen to point out that the biggest mistake would be trying to stop those who want to leave for other countries. This is not an option. "Our organization is not about making people stay. In fact we think that it is very important to have a look at the world and see what it is like, to broaden your outlook. It is completely senseless to be scared of letting people go, because the harder you make it for them to leave, the harder it will be for them to return. What you have to do is to wait until they are ready to come home and then welcome them. Then they are bringing international experience and knowledge, improved social and communication skills, they are full of optimism because they know how to build a better quality of life. Voluntary returnees are the perfect tools for creating energy in our economy. Exploring the world gives you the precious chance to review your own system of values. And if you are then ready to come back, there is no doubt about sincere will and motivation to be there for your own country's sake. Still there are people who look at us as if we are aliens: 'What would you want to come back here for?' they ask. But I strongly believe this attitude will slowly disappear, it is just a matter of time. The more people see, the more clearly they understand that there is only one motherland."

Another returnee is Dr. Daumantas Matulis, the President of LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" (and also a former president of the LAC Philadelphia, PA chapter before leaving this country), Laboratory Head at Biothermodynamics and Drug Design at the Institute



LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" members enjoy themselves in Antalākaja

of Biotechnology and an advisor to the President of Lithuania on emigration. Daumantas' story is a bit different. He had been living and working in the US for 10 years and came back in 2005. "Two of us left but four returned", he said of his wife Jurgita as well as two sons, eight and three years old, who were born in the USA. "I am happy they went through the adaptation process smoothly." I asked Daumantas what it is that he found best about being back home. "Parents, family, friends, but it is not any one thing in particular. The history of our country, the fact that so many people gave their lives for our freedom. For me the work here is also more interesting and challenging, with more responsibility and greater variety. While in the US I was overseeing teams of two to five, here we have a staff of nineteen. I have to say I like America and its people a lot, but you are in their country, and you have to fit in with them. Here you can have a hand in shaping the future. I got to re-evaluate Lithuania and I saw what our country had managed to achieve in a few short years of independence. We complain about the constantly changing government and the economic climate, but if you look beyond that, you see the great advances that were made here. And then I saw that there were many foreigners living here, and they liked it, so what was I complaining about? Of course there is still a lot that needs to be improved, but when you sit back and rethink that since 1991 we have emerged as a free nation after almost 50 years of dictatorship, and then managed to join the EU and NATO, then you realize that it is actually an incredible achievement. We have to remember that every country has its own problems, and there will always be room for improvement. Just as there are people who go away and will never

return for any number of reasons," Daumantas said.

Giedrė's motivation for returning was a little bit different. "I felt as if I had been living on credit or for somebody else, not for myself. And it was true. As the wife of a green card holder I had no right to work or even live in the United States as a permanent resident. All I had was the status of a tourist and I had to apply for a visa extension in order to be with my husband. Later on, when our marriage failed, I saw my situation in a completely new light. I finally understood that I was terribly tired of trying to prove to myself that this was a normal life. Feeling frustrated and seeing all my dreams left so far behind woke me up. I wanted to be home. Lithuania is rich in art and culture, nature's beauty and it was what I was longing for so badly during those three years in the US. When I returned I saw that it was much more beautiful than the image I'd kept in my memory, the people were smiling more. Lithuania is a beautiful country and not only because it is home. It truly is, and I'm proud I am Lithuanian. And ironically, I discovered my passion for Lithuanian national dancing in the USA! I was involved in cultural, public, education and communication activities over there and now I can't stop. I feel I am in the right place now, as part of LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" folk dance group – I am dancing in it, working as a project manager at the Institute of Biotechnology, and living in my own apartment in "Šiaurės miestelis" (Northern village) makes me



Members enjoy sun and fun at the Baltic seashore

**Photos: Courtesy of LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS"*