



# Bring our boys home

Text: Ray Vyšniauskas

**LGAVO "SUGRIŽUS" is not yet officially a year old, but has already achieved a lot as an organisation. After being incorporated in February 2007, the Lietuvių gyvenusių Amerikoje, visuomeninė organizacija "Sugrižus" (LGAVO or the Public Organisation of Lithuanians – Ex-Residents of the USA) originated unofficially the previous August, when a small group of 19 Lithuanians, mostly friends, met for the first time in Čili kaimas.**

Everyone was brought together by 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 too scared to.

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 USA, and felt there were lots of others thinking of doing the same thing, so he started an internet chat site on yahoo, after a peaceful Thanksgiving evening in 2005 in Chicago when he was thinking of home.

Giedrė Šipailaitė, PR Co-ordinator 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 maintaining links with our friends and Lithuanian communities in the US, and our organisation has grown to 83 members. LGAVO "Sugrižus" is a non-political, non-profit organisation 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 will never solve our emigration or reintegration problems. "Our organisation is not about making people stay here. 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 chance to review your own system of values. And if you are then ready to come back, then there is a sincere motivation that drives you in your own country as well.

"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", Laboratory Head at Biothermodynamics and Drug Design at the Institute 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 USA for 10 years and came back in 2005. "Two of us left but four returned", he said of his two sons, eight and three year, who were born in USA. I am happy they went through adaptation process really smoothly."

I ask Daumantas what it is that he found best about being back home. "Parents, family, friends, but it is not any one thing. 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 19. 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 realise 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 realise 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 bit different. "I felt as if I had been living on credit, in a rented room. It felt as if I was living 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 USA 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 completely new light. I finally understood that I was terribly tired of trying to prove to myself that this was normal. Feeling frustrating 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 "Sugrizus", dancing in the folk dances group Voruta, working as a project manager at the Institute of Biotechnology, and living in my own apartment in Šiaurės miestelis makes me truly happy. And most importantly, I am able to do what I truly want - helping other Lithuanian optimists to come home."

Apart from sitting around and discussing problems, the LGAVO "Sugrizus" have undertaken a variety of community activities. "In our first year LGAVO became acquainted with the activities of the Information Centre for Homecoming Lithuanians, the Department of Na-

tional Minorities and Lithuanians Living Abroad, organised a working bee to clean up litter near the Vilnelė River, participated in the conference 'Pasilik Lietuvoje' (Stay in Lithuania), presented two reports, 'Tarp netekties ir atradimo: pilietiškos asmenybės brandos kaina' (Between loss and discovery: the price of civil identity maturity) and 'LGAVO "Sugrizus"' at the conference 'Šiuolaikinės lietuvių migracijos ypatumai: pasaulio lietuviybės diskursai' (Peculiarities of contemporary Lithuanian migration: discourses of world Lithuanian-hood) organised by the Lithuanian Emigration Institute. We participated in the World Lithuanian Organisation conference in Kernavė where we had a chance to meet and communicate with Lithuanians from all over the world, listened to the lecture by Elona Vaišnienė 'Visuomeninis kapitalas' (Public Capital), took a tour of the Royal Palace that is being reconstructed, and met with representatives of the older generation of post-war Lithuanian emigrants.

LGAVO "Sugrizus" is now negotiating co-operative projects with the organisers of 'Vilnius - Europos kultūros sostinė 2009', the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science and the Lithuanian Youth Council. They meet regularly with Lithuanian MPs and organise musical, cultural and entertainment events.

"It is important for us to maintain ties with American communities, and remember that the new wave of migration can

also be of benefit to them because their organisations are generally older and the addition of new people from Lithuania helps rejuvenate them. In Philadelphia where I was we helped with the organisation of celebrations, dance events, and generated greater activity, which in turn gave the whole community a shot in the arm. So you can see that it can work both ways," said Daumantas.

Overall LGAVO "Sugrizus" are glad to see more and more people returning and being happy in Lithuania. There are still not nearly enough, but Daumantas added that there are less people leaving as well, and it is certainly a turn for the better.

"There is a real feeling of camaraderie between us, even though we are all from very different backgrounds. There are even members living in Kaunas and Klaipėda who organise their business and private commitments around attending our meetings in Vilnius.

"There are more well-paid jobs here now, which is always a strong incentive to stay or to return. And even though the standard of living is undoubtedly still better in the US, it is constantly getting better here as well, and if we keep working at it, before we notice it will be higher than any of us could ever have imagined. I believe this will happen very soon."

**For more info: [www.sugrizus.lt](http://www.sugrizus.lt)**

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