

BUILDING THE TOWERS OF TOLERANCE

This summer 2015 I had the amazing opportunity to participate in the Baltic States “Teaching Tolerance Through English” Camp held in “Dvarčėnų dvaras”, Alytus region, Lithuania from August 2 to August 8. The camp was organized by the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius and the Lithuanian Association of English Language Teachers (LAKMA) in cooperation with the U.S. Embassies in Tallinn and Riga. The aim of the week-long multicultural camp was to nurture tolerance, respect diversity and embrace human and civil rights. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian youngsters came together to discuss these vital topical concerns. It was the fifth Tolerance Camp and it united 30 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, 6 tutors and 2 volunteers who live in the Baltic countries.

The preparation for the camp started in June when 6 tutors from the three Baltic States arrived in Vilnius for a preparatory workshop held at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. At the two-day workshop the tutors put forward their ideas, shared experience, outlined the programme of the camp and met the U.S. alumni who also joined the camp in August as counsellors. After the workshop all tutors corresponded with each other via e-mails to elaborate the detailed program of the camp under the direct guidance of the representatives of LAKMA.

The Latvian team consisted of 2 tutors and 10 students. It was represented by Tutor Miks Kapsis and 5 students from Šķibe Primary School and me with 5 students from Riga Secondary School N95. I remember the first day, Sunday, August 2, very well since when our journey started, my students and I were very excited. It took approximately six hours to get from Riga to “Dvarčėnų dvaras” by bus. During the bus trip, the Latvian students from two schools got to know each other so that on arrival they felt as one team from Latvia. All teams arrived at “Dvarčėnų dvaras” at around five-six o'clock in the evening. At first the campers from different countries



were strangers. But soon there was a perfect opportunity for everyone to get to know each other as the tutors initiated different ice-breaking activities. I was glad to see that these games gave the children the chance to relax and get to know the participants from the other national teams. It was amazing to watch how 30 students from different towns and countries gradually became friends.

The campers play communication games on arrival at the camp

When we arrived at “Dvarčėnų dvaras” and looked at the beautiful scenery, we immediately fell in love with this wonderful place. I understood that this camp was going to be unique. Our

comfortable accommodation was by a lake. Waking up in the morning and watching a gorgeous sunrise over the lake was memorable. As the sun shone the whole week, the campers were able to enjoy sunbathing, swimming in the lake and playing outdoor sport games on the green lawns. The evening bonfires and small concerts given by the talented volunteers added a special charm to this place.



The next day, Monday, August 3, was devoted to countries, languages and traditions. In the morning session the campers took the quizzes on the Baltic States designed by each national team. In the afternoon the U.S. Alumnus Vytis Silius conducted a quiz on countries and languages. On this day the campers were busy with creating the camp rules, learning the most common words in Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian as well as designing the camp logo.

The students design the camp logos



Tuesday, August 4, came filled with many activities. The morning exercises, which were conducted every morning by two energetic volunteers, energised the children and prepared them for the whole day. On that day our community values such as friendship, respect and care were discussed. The campers were engaged watching videos, learning proverbs and creating dialogues about a real friendship. The U.S. Alumna Jelena Grigorjeva visited the camp to tell the students about the community service in America.

The campers create thank you gifts for the staff at "Dvarčėnų dvaras"

The theme of Wednesday, August 5, was Our Planet: We Love Nature! Sorting out waste, making recycling bins and watching videos about pollution were educational and thought provoking. These activities were helpful in teaching everyone the need to protect the environment and to keep our planet green. The most remarkable event of the day was the trip to Merkinė. The photo treasure hunt in the old capital left bright and lasting memories about

this small and quiet town and its historical sites of interest. The Hill of Crosses in Merkinė represents the unique Lithuanian art known as cross-crafting which is included in the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

On Thursday, August 6, the campers discussed the notion of rights and responsibilities, made posters about tolerance and wrote their speeches "I Have a Dream". The U.S. Alumna Dandulė Kiznienė conducted activities that helped the students to learn more about the civil rights activist Martin Luther King and his famous speech.

Friday, August 7, was also a very busy day. In the morning session the campers learnt about international organisations around the world. In the afternoon representatives from the U.S.



Embassy visited the camp. The campers had a great opportunity to act as journalists interviewing people in the street about tolerance. In the evening the campers were challenged to build the towers of tolerance using the following things: paper, scissors and scotch. This activity brought out the campers' creativity. I was delighted to see all the ideas that the students had. This team activity showed how tolerant and respectful to each other the campers were while building their towers.

The students act as journalists



The campers build the towers of Tolerance

Saturday, August 8, was the last day of the camp. After breakfast the students had to pack their suitcases and say their goodbyes. Although the campers had only known each other for one week, their friendship seemed firm and their leave-taking turned out to be hard. On that last



day, all participants of the camp appreciated the fun they had had together and the memorable moments they had shared. Thirty students who came to the camp a week ago with great interest and enthusiasm left it with knowledge, fun memories and new friends. By the end of the camp, all I could hear from everyone was how amazing the experience had been, how much knowledge they had gained from the non-stop English activities and how sad they were that the camp had concluded!

The fascinating scenery of the place, the enthusiastic campers, the educational games and wonderful food made my experience at the Tolerance Camp special, unforgettable and rewarding. After spending a wonderful time in "Dvarčēnu dvaras" I came home with bright ideas for the upcoming school year. During the first term of the school year 2015/2016 I conducted a series of activities at my school that were in the program of the Tolerance Camp. On the International Day of Tolerance, November 16, the students at Riga Secondary School N95 discussed the importance of tolerance nowadays and built the Towers of Tolerance for strengthening their friendship and fostering respect towards diversity.



The students of Riga Secondary School N95 build the towers of Tolerance

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