

A burst of Sunshine

Balzekas Museum Lithuanian Culture Honors Sunlight Children's Aid – Saulutė and its founder Indrė Tijūnėlis

The Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture bestowed its 2022 "Award of Excellence" on the charitable organization Sunlight Children's Aid for Lithuania – Saulutė and its late founder Indrė Tijūnėlis. The award was presented at the museum's 56th Annual Gala on December 3, 2022.

Over a hundred guests, well-wishers and scions of the Lithuanian American community gathered at the Amber Ballroom of the Balzekas Museum to pay tribute to the organization, which has brought light to hundreds of Lithuania's neediest children, including orphans and children with special needs.

Next year Saulutė (which means Little Sun) will celebrate its 30th anniversary. Sadly, its founder and long-time chairwoman, Indrė Tijūnėlis, died on September 15, 2022. The banquet was a tribute to her life's accomplishments and to the organization that she developed and nurtured.

The gala began with a short film created by documentarian Arvydas Reneckis 20 years ago of Indrė Tijūnėlis talking about her childhood and the founding of Saulutė. Mrs. Tijūnėlis related that the idea to establish Saulutė arose at the suggestion of Bronius Nainys, the chairman of the World Lithuanian Community, after Lithuania re-



Daina Tijūnėlis-Siliūnas accepted the 2022 Balzekas Museum Award for Excellence in honor of Saulutė and its founder, her mother, the late Indrė Tijūnėlis. Photos by Balzekas Museum Lithuanian Culture

gained its independence. In January 1993, Mrs. Tijūnėlis traveled to Lithuania and visited several children's homes. Seeing they were in dire need of help, she and her like-minded friends founded Saulutė. The organization's volunteers started collecting and sending gently used clothing and household goods to an orphanage in Lithuania. Soon they were packing and transporting over 2000 boxes a year. Next, the charity initiated its well-received Sponsor-a-Child program that allowed patrons to choose a specific child in Lithuania and support their family. By 2003, Saulutė had about 300 such sponsored children. In the video, Mrs. Tijūnėlis also remembered her childhood, which was spent in a displaced persons' camp in Germany. She, her sister Austė and their parents were war refugees who left Lithuania, fleeing the terrible fate of deportation to Siberia. Since Mrs. Tijūnėlis's mother was born in Chicago, her family was allowed to emigrate to the U.S. in 1947.

A Charitable Legacy

Saulutė's current Chairwoman, Daina Tijūnėlis-Siliūnas, is the daughter of Indrė Tijūnėlis. She accepted the Balzekas Award of Excellence and spoke about her mother's legacy. Daina recounted a poignant example of her mother's dedication to helping the less fortunate. Once, Indrė's car was rear-ended at an intersection. Indrė appeared unconcerned about the damage; instead, she noticed that the children in the offending vehicle were scantily dressed,

even though it was winter. She discovered they were recent immigrants, obviously struggling to make ends meet. When Indrė returned home, she asked her children to collect jackets and coats they were no longer wearing and deliver them to this immigrant family. Indrė decided to help them as much as she could.

Daina recalled her mother as caring, sensitive, gentle, yet tenacious in pursuing her goals. She remained steadfast in her decision to help the children of Lithuania. She had decided if she could not support all of them, she would help several, keeping to St. Mother Teresa's maxim: if you can't help a hundred, help one. Indrė never sought recognition or praise. She couldn't help but help others.

Daina further recounted how her mother chose to name the organization Saulutė. She wanted a simple and friendly name that would be understandable to children. Yet, like the actual sun, the organization became a potent force powered by an army of stalwart volunteers. Among the original members were Raminta Marchertienė, Aušra Saulienė, Ramunė Račkauskienė, Irena Grigaitienė, Birutė Nalienė, Laima Braune, Jūratė Maurukienė and many, many others who worked diligently since its establishment.

Indrė was a tireless promoter of her organization. She fearlessly approached government officials and celebrities for support. The "rays" of Saulutė reached Illinois Governor Jim Edgar, Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Senator Dick Durbin, and basketball stars Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, and Phil Jackson. After concerts in Lithuania, Indrė boldly and confidently went backstage to talk to such Lithuanian stars as Vytautas Kernagis, pianist Edvinas Minkštė, tenor Virgilijus Norėika and ask them to organize benefit concerts. In 30 years, Saulutė collected more than four million dollars to support the children of Lithuania.

The Work Continues

Saulutė has now begun a new chapter in its work to support Lithuania's children. Daina reported that Lithuania's Parliament decided that by 2024 all children, regardless of their disability, must attend school. Saulutė has begun a campaign to help underfunded village schools meet this challenge. Donations have been collected for motorized wheelchairs, specialized medical equipment, and even school buses and computers for rural schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Saulutė purchased 71 computers for financially challenged students in Lithuania to continue their education from home. Saulutė works closely with regional so-



Indrė Tijūnėlis with Basketball Hall of Famer Arvydas Sabonis.

cial workers and local children's advocates in Lithuania to identify areas that need more support.

Daina was proud to announce that Saulutė's volunteer network is growing. In addition to the tireless volunteers of her mother's generation, the organization is being bolstered by many new younger volunteers representing all waves of Lithuanian immigrants.

The banquet was attended by the Consul General of the Republic of Lithuania in Chicago Sigrida Mulevičienė, attache Julijonas Matukas, Honorary Vice Consul of the Republic of Estonia Siim Soot, Honorary Consul of the Republic of Lithuania in Cleveland Ingrida Bublienė, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1987–1991) Jack Matlock, director of the Latvian Cultural Museum Dace Kezbers, former Balzekas Museum "Man of the Year" awardees Dr. Linas Sidrys, Dr. Audrius Plioplys, Al Domanskis, opera soloist Arnoldas Vokėtaitis, as well as representatives of the Lithuanian Foundation, Knights of Lithuania, the Women's Guild of the Balzekas Museum and, of course, a large community of volunteers of the Saulutė organization. The gathered guests were greeted by the museum's president Joseph Katauskas and board member, Stanley Balzekas III. The museum's vice-chairwoman Sigita Bersėnas-Balzekas hosted the evening.

The Balzekas Museum staff will soon hang a photograph of the Saulutė board on the museum's "Wall of Excellence" next to the Amber Ballroom. It will be the latest in a long line of honorees spanning over 50 years that include such persons as Ambassador Stasys Lozoraitis (1979), Simas Kudirka (1975), President Valdas Adamkus (1984), Senator Richard Durbin (2010), historian Timothy Snyder (2020), Archbishop Gintaras Grušas (2022) and many others, who have selflessly served Lithuania in various ways.

DRAUGAS



Balzekas Museum Board of Directors with honored guests (l. to r.): Rita Janz, Sigita Bersėnasė-Balzekas, Joseph Katauskas, Donatas Tijūnėlis, Daina Tijūnėlis-Siliūnas, Consul General of Lithuania in Chicago Sigrida Mulevičienė, Attache Julijonas Matukas, Ingrida Bublienė, Marius Kasniūnas, Stanley Balzekas III. Seated is Elli Katauskas.