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Registered Charity Number 1089810



## Zippy joins Lithuania's year of celebrations



2009 is a landmark year in Lithuania. The country is celebrating its 1,000th anniversary, the capital city, Vilnius, is the current European Capital of Culture, and across the country kindergartens have been marking ten years of Zippy's Friends. The programme is running in all ten counties, and has already helped more than 63,000 young children, more than in any other country.

The tenth anniversary celebrations were conceived by Vaiko Labui, the agency which manages Zippy's Friends in Lithuania, and volunteers in Vilnius created a model of what kindergartens could do. Classes from different kindergartens exchanged visits, posters and congratulations,



(From left): Aurelija Okunauskienė, Ona Monkevicienė and Ieva Bieliauskienė from Vaiko Labui, with volunteers Audrone Ramonienė, Rolanda Talutienė and Jolanta Zukauskienė.



Vilnius, the Capital of Lithuania

and May 14 was a day of singing and dancing across the country. Many kindergartens used balloons in the celebrations, with children writing their names or messages before releasing them.

All these events were run by teachers working as unpaid volunteers, and Aurelija Okunauskienė, Vaiko Labui's Director, was surprised by the scale of the celebrations.

'I thought there might be some celebrations in the big cities – Vilnius, Siauliai and Klaipeda – but even there I was sceptical because the economic situation in Lithuania is really, really bad. But our teacher volunteers just caught the idea and arranged their own celebrations everywhere, and most of them had no financial support at all. There was no pushing from us – they did it because they wanted to. Fifty-five kindergartens joined the celebrations in Vilnius alone! I'm really happy with the results, and very proud of our volunteers.'

Aurelija said that the celebrations made many more people aware of Zippy's Friends.

'In most regions, the local School Boards were invited to join the



Zippy made of balloons at a kindergarten in Siauliai



Class of Zippy graduates at Alytus kindergarten

July 2009

### MISSION

To help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.



Class at Lentvaris kindergarten



'Welcome Little Zippies!'

celebrations, and parents came along or were even involved in helping to arrange things. It can be difficult to reach parents, but this was a chance to draw them in, and I think that was a real benefit.'

Partnership for Children Director Chris Bale said the tenth anniversary of Zippy's Friends in Lithuania was a milestone in the programme's global development.

'We're so proud of our Lithuanian colleagues,' he said. 'The programme started in Vilnius with just 312 children, and I don't think any of us imagined back then that it would expand as strongly as it has, with 15,725 children enrolled this year. There have been some tough times along the way, and at one stage the money almost ran out, but a few dedicated people at Vaiko Labui never



Tenth birthday emblem, Taurage kindergarten

lost faith in the programme and with sheer hard work and determination they've battled through.'

The next anniversary event will be a two-day



Children at Taurage kindergarten



Children in the coastal city of Klaipeda climbed a hill to release their balloons



Children at Mazeikiai kindergarten prepare to release their balloons



international Zippy's Friends conference in November. The first day of the conference will be held in Lithuania's Parliament Building, and Vaiko Labui hopes the event will convince more politicians and opinion leaders of the importance of helping young children to develop coping skills.

- To read more about Zippy's Friends in Lithuania go to [www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk](http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk)
- For Vaiko Labui's website (in Lithuanian) go to [www.vaikolabui.lt](http://www.vaikolabui.lt)
- To find out what's on in Vilnius, European Capital of Culture 2009 go to [www.culturelive.lt/en/main](http://www.culturelive.lt/en/main)

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