

## A second Lithuanian year full of gifts

My second year in Lithuania working as a teachers' and language assistant in Versmės Catholic High School, Vilnius, has again been full of gifts, including my 30th birthday, my very first Christmas away from home, more and different responsibilities at school, as well as a visit from a Lithuanian friend to me (and my generous parents) in the UK during the summer holidays.

Firstly, the visit of my friend Laima in August was a wonderful time and very important to me in unexpected ways. We went for a walking holiday of a few days in the Lake District. I was really happy to rediscover that, although it is very different from Lithuania, parts of the UK are really very beautiful too! It was lovely to have such an open-minded and enthusiastic guest who wanted to understand and try everything and generously admired the different landscape. Among other things we decided that not only is the landscape quite different, but also that Lithuanian and English grass is quite a different shade of green! Laima even helped me to enjoy London again.



After such a nice long holiday, the idea of returning to school and Lithuania in September was a bit nerve-racking, but the volunteer preparation week really helped to get over the back-to-school nerves, and once back it felt like I hadn't been away. However, life at school has been quite different this year. I have taken on some individual lessons with students who want to take the IELTS English language exam, which will allow them to study abroad, as well as getting involved in helping students apply for a school exchange project in the US. Tutoring for IELTS has been interesting and challenging for me. It has meant a bit of research into what IELTS actually involves, and being more disciplined about lesson planning – not really something I naturally enjoy! Overall though, it has been really nice to be

involved in the next big step in someone's life; applying to university or their first school exchange, and getting to know some of the students better.

Another change this year is that I have been asked to cover some lessons alone with both primary and secondary pupils, when the class teacher is off work. As someone who deliberately applied for a teacher's assistant rather than a teaching volunteer position, that is something I never thought I'd be brave enough to do! I certainly wouldn't say that every lesson went perfectly (especially the first couple of lessons with one particular class of teenagers!) but I think I learnt a lot about keeping on trying, asking for help and not giving up. It helped a lot that the English teachers were always ready to give practical advice, and I was amazed to see that things improved such a lot over the cover period that I enjoyed the last few lessons with the most difficult class. I also really enjoyed working with the primary school children.

Like last year, there have also been plenty of celebrations here, in fact too many to mention! One which was very important to me was my first Christmas away from home, here in Vilnius with the sisters. I felt very included in everything that happened here, and especially had a great time crushing poppy seeds and kneading dough with Sister Danguole for the Lithuanian Christmas cake, so I felt very at home! (Of course, I also phoned home on Christmas Day, just in time to join my family trying on false moustaches from the Christmas crackers.)

Back in Lithuania on Christmas Eve, it was great for me to finally see all the Christmas traditions and food in context which I had heard the children write and talk so much about at



school, including the twelve meatless dishes on the Christmas Eve table, like poppy seed milk (my favourite) with Christmas biscuits, a cranberry juice drink thickened with starch, and plenty of herring and salads. I was very full and content after our fasting meal! Nonetheless, the atmosphere of the Christmas Eve meal was quite different to Christmas Day; more reflective, perhaps because of the tradition of breaking Angel bread/Christmas wafers together and greeting each other for Christmas. There is also a feeling of anticipation as you know it isn't quite Christmas yet, and that soon you will go out to the "Shepherd's Mass", the first Mass of Christmas.