

The search is over

Camp Neringa appoints a New Executive Director



Mushroom foraging at Camp Neringa – one of many alumni events at the West Brattleboro, Vermont, campsite.



Neringa's new Executive Director, Liana Pike.

All photos by Dana Vainauskienė

Liana Pike (Bielkevičiūtė) was recently appointed Executive Director of Neringa, a Lithuanian camp in West Brattleboro, Vermont, founded by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in 1969. For 50 years, Neringa served thousands of children and families, offering them summer camps anchored in Lithuanian heritage and Christian faith. Today, the sisters have passed the Camp Neringa tradition to Camp Neringa, Inc., which looks forward to many more years of enriching Lithuanian American youth and their families.

Liana Pike, who has enthusiastically taken the helm of Camp Neringa, talks candidly about her childhood experiences at camp and her vision for this institution's future.

Liana, what are some of your favorite memories of Neringa as a camper?

There are so many! In addition to Family Camp, as a young girl, I attended the Lithuanian-speaking summer children's sessions every year. During that time, Aldona Lingertat was the program coordinator.

I have so many fond memories from Neringa! I remember the excitement of getting a hand-written letter from home. I can still hear Mrs. Aldona coming into our cabin each morning and (in her most angelic voice) saying, "Labas rytas mergaitės... laikas atsikelti... paukščiai čiulba ir bus nuostabi diena!" ("Good morning girls... Time to wake up... the birds are singing and it is going to be a wonderful day!"). I also vividly remember Sister Laimutė and always thought Neringa had the "coolest nuns" in the world because they played soccer and sang as loud as the rest of us!

Overall, however, I would say that my best Neringa memories will always revolve around music. I learned how to harmonize at camp, and it honestly changed the way I listen to music for the rest of my life.

In my last year as a camper, I led a song at the Putnam picnic over the microphone. I recall writing the lyrics on the back of my hand on the bus ride from Neringa. I will never forget how everyone in the audience joined in, and we all sang together as a community! It was absolutely thrilling!

How has Neringa shaped you as a young person?

By showing me how to live and co-exist with different types of people and personalities. When you are in close quarters with the same group of people, you learn patience, compromise, and how to be a team player.

As we all know, campers are their own leaders from day one of camp, directing plays and making up slogans! As a young person, I developed leadership skills (while having fun) that one really wouldn't get in a regular setting.

I would also say that I believe Neringa is the reason I have always treated adults with more respect than many of my friends growing up. Being around so many thoughtful and caring counselors and nuns made it easy to be respectful and kind to adults in return. It is something for which I am forever grateful.

You've lived in several different places since growing up on Cape Cod and being part of the Boston Lithuanian community. Where do you live now, and where was a favorite place you've lived in the past?

Yes! I have lived in quite a few places but have settled down in central Massachusetts, just an hour and 20 minutes from Neringa! My Lithuanian community ties in Boston have always been strong. My grand-



Neringa year-round staff team: (from left) Dana Vainauskienė – Summer Camp Director, Viktorija Galkutė – Business Manager, and Liana Pike – Executive Director

parents and father, Jonas Bielkevičius, grew up in Brockton, Massachusetts. I attended Lithuanian Saturday school, danced at Lithuanian folk dance festivals, received my blue tie from Lithuanian scout camp, was confirmed at the South Boston Lithuanian church, and ate countless dollops of sour cream and loads of bacon bits! I was very fortunate to have such a close community in Boston.

In 2011 I graduated from Suffolk University, Boston, and met my future husband, Dan. We decided to move to Seattle on a whim and then later to Los Angeles for some adventure. After getting married in 2015, we returned to Cape Cod and had our first daughter, Veya, in 2017. To be closer to my mom and her hometown up north, we decided to buy our first family home and settle down in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. The end? Nope! Because in 2018, we learned that we were expecting identical twin boys! We outgrew our first home overnight when Romas and Kazys were born in 2019. You guessed it – we moved again!

After seven moves in eight years, we are happy to say that our current home is our final stop, and we couldn't be happier! Being near mountains, lakes and nature has been the best place we have ever lived by far! Plus, we now have completed our family with a yellow lab puppy named, Pūga (or Blizzard). Life is perfect!

What is your favorite place at Neringa, and why?

Beržų šventovė (the Birch Sanctuary) has always felt like a sacred place to me. Being in nature, with your closest friends in the world, while praying and connecting with God was such a gift growing up and so special to me.

Tell us about some of your professional work and relevant experience you'll bring into the role of Neringa's Executive Director.

After college, I was a therapeutic mentor for troubled teens and later cared for a special needs child. I have always known that helping and serving young people would be in my future. I just never knew how or when!

Later, I was lucky to work for Health-Ade Kombucha in Los Angeles, owned by a fellow Neringa alumna, Daina Šlekys-Trout. I was their second hire and helped the company grow from farmers' market booths to almost every grocery store in the US. Be sure to look for the "Vytis" symbol hidden on their label!

Working for a busy startup taught me how to be resourceful, flexible and ready for anything. I was proud to be a part of the early development stages at Health-Ade. I had an almost three-page job description, which meant I did a little bit of everything as long as it was helping the company grow. Eventually, I transitioned into a leadership role and onboarded hundreds of employees and showed them the ropes! It will always be one of the best experiences of my life, and it made me a more confident and well-rounded leader.

Working at another startup – Health Yoga Life – was another wonderful experience that

taught me to be more patient and well-grounded. Its CEO, Laisvyda Bielkus (Neringa alumna and my cousin!), introduced me to new ways of getting things done efficiently.

I knew that working at Neringa would have similarities to working for companies like Health-Ade or Health Yoga Life. Being ready to help the community at the drop of a hat excites me about the new Executive Director role! I expect that at Neringa, one minute I'll be taking out the trash, and the next minute I'll be in a board meeting. It's all the same to me, and I honestly can't wait to see what the future holds!

You've been away from the Neringa community for some time. Is there anything that has surprised you as you "re-acquaint yourself" with Neringa?

After "graduating" as a 16-year-old at Neringa, I attended a few winter camps for college students. I then did some traveling and have now started a family. I always knew I would make my way back to New England.

As I re-acquainted with camp this year, what surprised me most was how it felt like nothing had changed at Neringa. It was almost like I had stepped back in time, and Neringa was precisely where I had left it. It was so nostalgic and spiritually grounding.

Yes, there have been significant improvements on the grounds, such as the shower houses, the 1st-3rd cabin renovations, a new apple tree (and well, Bennett's hair is a bit longer). Still, all in all, Neringa, as we all know and love it, has remained intact, and that is what surprised me most!

Your eagerness and enthusiasm for the job are palpable. What makes you so excited?

I am certain that my cousin, Aida, and God had a hand in all of this. When my beautiful cousin Aida Bielkus passed away in 2019, I began to feel something shift in me spiritually. I now see that it was all just the start of my journey towards Neringa and this role. Aida was at one time on the Neringa Board of Directors and an inspiration to the Lithuanian community. Sister Ignė and I sang together at her memorial as if to start rebuilding the Neringa bond even back then. Her children, Daniel and Emilija, continue to be campers and counselors at the English summer sessions. Aida is walking by my side every step of the way.

When I heard about the Executive Director job opening this summer, my first thought was: "Dream Job!" To think that I could do all of my favorite things and at my favorite place in the world felt too good to be true. I decided to go for it and sent in my resume. As soon as I applied, many things started falling into place beautifully in my life. There was absolutely nothing standing in my way and zero apprehension. I knew in my heart that I was exactly where I was meant to be, at exactly the right time.

Where do you feel like you will need the most help? Reframing my mindset to go from "camper" to



Liana Pike (Bielkevičiūtė) and Interim Executive Director Dana Grajauskaitė.

"leader" at Neringa may take some getting used to. Still, it will be such a refreshing experience, and I feel so honored to get the opportunity to usher Neringa into the next 50 years!

Although I am conversational in Lithuanian, I think it is only fair to say that I may stumble over some words from time to time. I grew up with separated parents who were good friends and co-parented beautifully all my life. My Tėtis (father) worked tirelessly to teach my brother Jonas and me Lithuanian from a young age, while my mom, who is English-speaking only, is my best friend and a traditional American soccer mom. Although my Lithuanian may have some imperfections, I look forward to getting the opportunity to practice and improve. I do, however, feel that my multi-cultural background is an asset to this role at Neringa. I already know from experience that I can relate to all types of families and people in our community. I feel lucky to have such a balance!

What role do you see Neringa playing in the broader North American Lithuanian community?

Making sure that we constantly ask ourselves why we are doing something and what we envision for the future has always motivated me professionally. By keeping Neringa alive and continuing with its legacy, we are promoting our rich Lithuanian heritage to our younger generations by making it a "real" experience for campers.

Neringa has always been a place for people in Lithuanian communities from all over North America to come together and honor their heritage as one group. With smaller local Lithuanian neighborhoods, shops, churches, and schools dwindling, the local sense of community may not be as easily accessible as it once was. Neringa is now more than ever a "hub" for Lithuanians. If Lithuanians can come together at Neringa, it means that our heritage and strong sense of community will never fade!

What do you feel is the greatest challenge for Neringa as we move into the next 50 years?

Finding the best ways to serve the wide range of Lithuanian language abilities will likely be a challenge. Learning how to balance our Lithuanian-speaking and non-Lithuanian speaking members of the Neringa Community will be of utmost importance as we evolve over the next 50 years. Even with these language differences, it has always been evident that we are all motivated to stay connected and be a part of this amazing community.

Do you prefer kugelis or koldūnai and why?

Koldūnai! because they will always remind me of my močiūtė (grandmother).

Is there anything else you would like to add?

As I settle into this role as the Executive Camp Director of Camp Neringa, Inc, I would like to express my gratitude to the Lithuanian community and Neringa Board of Directors for entrusting me with this great responsibility. It is one that I will not take lightly. I am committed to honoring the incredible past directors and their years of tireless hard work. I have big shoes to fill, but I am so grateful for the opportunity! Ačiū!

The Academy meets

The 2021 annual meeting of the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences (LCAS) took place on Sunday, September 12, at the offices of the Academy in Putnam, Connecticut. The meeting was virtual, utilizing the ZOOM platform.

The first presentation was made from Lithuania jointly by Ieva Gaižauskaitė and Kristė Skaudaitė. Both are students at the Kaunas Technological University. Kristė is studying engineering and design, and Ieva is studying architecture. They gave a detailed report on the programs and volunteer activities of the John Paul II Community of Pilgrims. Their topic was: "Šiluva – a Vibrant Center for Pilgrims."

An extensive lecture about the life of the Lithuanian no-



View of the American Lithuanian Cultural Archives.

bleman Mikalojus Kristupas Radvila Našlaitėlis followed. Eleonora Buožytė, who is completing her doctoral studies at Vilnius University in the Department of Philology, spoke on the long-term impact this progressive XVI Century nobleman had on Lithuania. Buožytė's chosen field is multi-disciplinary, combining studies of ancient writings, literature, and history. She utilizes contemporary documents and archival records to delve into the lives and events of past centuries, thus providing a contextual understanding of past eras.

The final lecture was presented in English by Dr. Mėta Landytė-Ciannelli. Her topic was "Equitably Improving Student Success in Higher Education Stem Courses Through Increased Exam Access." Dr. Landytė-Ciannelli teaches biology at Oregon State University. She is currently involved in a research project with instructors from other universities attempting to determine if there is a way to improve student learning by adjusting testing methods.

Meeting attendees included: four from Lithuania; two from California; two from Oregon; six from Mas-



President of LCAS, Mirga Girniuvienė, Ph.D.

sachusetts; one from Connecticut; two from New York; and two from Illinois.

LCAS organizes member meetings annually, inviting young academicians to present their academic work and ongoing research. LCAS also maintains the American Lithuanian Cultural Archives (ALKA) in Putnam, Connecticut and assists scholars in researching subjects relevant to the Lithuanian American community. Read more about the organization at www.lkma.org.

Mirga Girniuvienė