

## ACROSS CULTURES 2004

By Irena Blekys

In the last sunny days of October 2004 in Seattle, a delegation of 17 businesswomen from Estonia and Lithuania arrived for an intensive two-week business and cultural exchange between business leaders from the Baltic States and business leaders in Washington State.

The *Across Cultures* forum started as the brainchild of two young energetic business women, Christina Bruning in Seattle and Katrin Sulg in Tallinn, Estonia, who met each other in 2003 as participants in the *University of Washington Center for Women & Democracy delegation's visit to Sweden and the Baltics*.

Both Christina and Katrin are leaders in promoting women in business. Christina is the president of the *Women's Business Exchange* ([www.wbex.org](http://www.wbex.org)) in Seattle, and Katrin is president of *Young Business and Professional Women in Estonia*. Both organizations state that their goals are the promotion of women sharing business skills and resources in order to realize their potential for contributing to the economic and social development of their communities.

More information about this exchange, participants and their businesses can be found at the internet site: <http://www.wbex.org/acrosscultures/about.htm>

In addition to a very full program centered on business, the delegates had opportunities to hear issues requiring socially responsible leadership. The University of Washington School of Law and the UW Center for Human Rights and Justice co-sponsored a Human Rights forum to discuss reproductive health, the trafficking of women, and HIV.

One of the special guests to the Human Rights conference, Ambassador John R. Miller, Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking, was delighted to get reacquainted with one of the *Across Cultures* delegates, Aida Zigmantaviciene. Ambassador Miller served in the US Congress from 1986-1993, and was a good friend of the Lithuanian-American community during the days of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Aida Zigmantaviciene at that time was an exchange-student studying in the Business School at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, and met the Congressman when he observed Lithuanian elections in February of 1990. Ambassador Miller was very interested to hear about the progress of Lithuania's economy, and very pleased that such an exchange was occurring.

The Baltic delegation also spent several hours visiting the Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington. While the women lunched on pizza, Guntis Smidchens gave a half hour presentation and slide show

about the progress and goals of the Baltic Studies Program. Though not yet completely funded, this program has already had hundreds of students take the language, history or culture classes over the past ten years. The delegates had an opportunity to meet with Ieva Butkute, the current Lithuanian teaching assistant in the Baltic program, and Daila Taurite, a visiting Latvian businesswoman. After lunch, Michael Biggins, the Head of the Slavic and East European Section of the UW library, gave a tour of the library's extensive Baltic book collection. He spoke in Lithuanian to the delegation and amazed them with the fact that he had only recently learned the language.

The Baltic communities of Seattle welcomed the delegation both at the beginning of their visit and at the end. Paul and Katre Raidna of the Estonian community and Rimas and Donna Miksys hosted the delegations in their homes to meet various members of the Baltic community. On October 23, during the Baltic Fest 2004 fundraiser to support the Baltic Studies Program, the Across Cultures delegation was invited to celebrate folk songs and dances and food of all three Baltic communities. The delegation joined in the fun and had a chance to thank their American hosts as well get to know the Seattle-area Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians. Each delegation showed the unity and cohesiveness not only of their own delegation that they got to know over the two weeks but it was clear that there were many new friendships that developed.

Initially, Across Cultures focused on bringing over Estonian women, but in May 2004, at the "21 leaders for the 21st century" gala honoring Christina Bruning in New York City, this exchange came to the attention of writer and philanthropist, Jurate Kazickas. She recommended expanding the delegation to include Lithuanian women. This was accomplished quickly through her efforts taking a personal interest in the success of this program, and due to the support given by the Kazickas Family Foundation. In October, Jurate Kazickas came to Seattle to meet with the Lithuanian women and to participate in some of the Across Culture events with them. During her visit to Seattle, Jurate Kazickas' enthusiasm for promoting women and Lithuania was very much in evidence at the Women's Business Exchange breakfast as she encouraged a Seattle business woman to explore her Lithuanian heritage. Later upon visiting the Baltic Program at the University of Washington and hearing about its unique role for the study of Baltic languages and for spreading Baltic culture in the United States, she praised these accomplishments and voiced her strong support for the Program.

Everyone is looking forward to the next Across Cultures forum, which promises to include Latvian business women.