

Portrait

Zsuzsa Kálmán

By Márta Boros Horváth ©



Many in our community may not know her personally, yet her tall and slender figure can be spotted at the Hungarian American Association's gatherings. She is the principal of our Hungarian School.

Zsuzsa Kálmán was born in Szolnok, Hungary in 1975. Her parents still live in Szolnok, her sister in England and her husband's parents (1956 refugees) and brother in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Globalization is very much evident in their family.

Zsuzsa and Albert also started their American life in Pittsburgh. They met in Hungary where Albert taught English as a Peace Corps volunteer at the College of Eger. Zsuzsa was one of his students. She always aspired to be a teacher but on the urging of her parents she earned her diploma in English and commerce. She worked in the Hungarian TV's marketing department as an advertisement agent. She and Albert moved to the US as a young couple in 2001 and soon Zsuzsa began working for Blue Cross in her field of advertising.

With characteristic youthful curiosity they set out to explore unknown areas of the country and moved to Tacoma in 2007. From there Albert's company brought them to Seattle this year. Their home, a charming remodeled bungalow on Queen Ann Hill, is within walking distance of their children's schools and shopping and only a few bus stops away from Albert's work. "This neighborhood reminds us more of Europe than our home in Tacoma did, where we lived in typical American suburbs and had to go by car everywhere," said Zsuzsa.

"How do you like the Pacific Northwest?"

"It is a very beautiful region, but as with every new beginning, it was hard at first before we formed new friendships. We are starting to get used to this neighborhood, so close to the city," she said. She misses the closeness of their families, though, which is why they spend summers in Hungary and this Thanksgiving they'll fly to Pittsburgh.

On the morning when I visited her, a cold November wind was blowing outside, but in the house the glow of flickering candles made the dining room cozy. My eyes kept returning to the photos of their two blond daughters, three-year-old Sofie and five-and-a-half-year-old Abigail. They attend American preschool and kindergarten. However, Zsuzsa only speaks Hungarian to them, and the girls happily visit their grandparents in Hungary who do not speak English.

Zsuzsa has been one of the volunteer teachers at the Hungarian School for three years now. Two other colleagues, Anna Nemesszegi and Franciska Bikki-Seres, help with the work. Orsolya Homorodi leads the craft projects. When Zsuzsa and her family moved here, it was important to her to have Hungarian

school. Before coming to the West Coast she researched on the Internet and found that we run a Saturday school here. The second week after their arrival they sought us out, and Zsuzsa had very good impressions of our efforts. "Everything is organized on such a professional level," she said.

It is touching, how lovingly and with what concern she talks about the youngest students, her group of about a dozen children. She would enjoy working with one of the older groups also but she feels that it is important to pay attention to the youngest ones because they will carry on the school, the community. The



parents are in the classroom with their little ones, and so they represent a large group. However, if the parents are happy the school will continue, Zsuzsa feels.

She accepted the position of principal this year. It shows the level of her commitment that she's worried who would carry the torch if she takes a paid job in the future. This year the school has 39 registered pupils. Each teacher takes her role seriously, preparing lesson plans, that is why the school has so many

students and so many families. You can sense the commitment to the cause. Unfortunately, at a certain age many children drop out due to various extracurricular activities, including boys' and girls' soccer. It is difficult to fit in the Hungarian school, too.

"What do you like here in America?" I asked.

"I like it that the people, coming from a wide range of backgrounds, are more tolerant than in Hungary or Europe. They accept each other's differences and are more open. I also like it that things run according to the rules, the way they are written. Corruption is not so evident as in Hungary where people look for ways to avoid the law just to get ahead."

"I worry about the education system here," she said. "The elementary and high school education seem inferior to other countries' but higher education is good and difficult in America. It is hard to understand why American children, who learn the alphabet and simple reading in kindergarten, fall behind their Hungarian counterparts within a few years, even though those kids start reading later than the Americans."

I asked her about hobbies and she said that even though they enjoy hiking and traveling, and she used to do ceramics, motherhood takes all her time now.

I left with the satisfied impression that we are blessed here in the far corner of the world to have such a well-trained director for our school. Our little Hungarians are in the caring hands of loving teachers. We wish continued success to them with Zsuzsa Kalman as their lead teacher.