

AccessAbility.

**Beyond
physical
environments**

Matīss Markovskis (Latvia) photography

Human rights of persons with disabilities are still not fully reflected in society. These fourteen Latvians have been interviewed and photographed in order for their individual stories to be heard. They are portrayed in connection with AccessAbility, a Swedish exhibition that tours the world with the aim to raise questions of accessibility and inclusion in society for people with physical or mental disabilities.

AccessAbility.

Beyond physical environments

This exhibition can be summed up
in one word – dignity. To live with
dignity, regardless of disability, is a
human right according to the United
Nations Conventions on the Rights
or Persons with Disabilities.

The fight for equality certainly
has not been won. But giving
everyone a chance to be seen and
heard is a step along the way.

"It is awesome only for the light keeper! And I am the one."

Kristaps Kanuks

Kristaps is 23 and for ten years he writes poetry and expresses his feelings and emotional experience about life. He hears rep music in his head and he writes verses accompanied by this kind of music. He says: "It is a unique music rhythm in which I feel well!"

Kristaps would like to have more individualized general education so that despite the illness or some kind of disability, everybody could be able to learn and develop oneself. Educational opportunities with an individualized approach in Latvia are not available. This is to be improved, so that other children and young people can take part in public life.

The biggest dream for Kristaps is to be able to stand on his legs. "I know and believe that cerebral palsy can be fully cured." Every day Kristaps is doing his exercises and aikido meditation. He dreams of becoming a master in martial arts. "You have to learn to heal instead of attacking," Kristaps says. He would like to share his experience with other young people, who are in a similar situation, motivate and inspire them.

Kristaps wants to become a psychologist and help others. He reads a lot of books about history, psychology, geography, oriental martial arts and encyclopaedias. Encouraging other young people with disabilities and special needs who mainly spend their time sitting at home Kristaps says: “Be the way you are, don’t be ashamed of yourself! Don’t worry what others think about you! Feel it in your heart that you are better. You don’t need to show it to the rest of the world. It is not important if you can move around or not. Be aware that you are the one who is “the King’s carrier!”

Kristaps says: “Stop complaining. You have both arms and legs, you can walk! But where is your brain left,” he exclaims and points to his head. “Those who think that not everything is possible, those can make it become possible,” Kristaps adds. Kristaps is emotional, open, sincere and a life-wise person. “Everyone is the master of one’s mind,” he says.

Kristaps is in need of a full time assistant. He admits that accessibility of public spaces is not good enough. Without help and support from his mother or younger brother he cannot get out to public places. Although wheelchair ramps are built, a wheelchair person with weaker arms is not able to get into many places as things are not thought-out well or done properly – there are stairs and steps in many concert halls, theatre buildings, exhibition halls, health care organizations, old towns and other places. He strongly criticizes public transport – it is impossible for disabled people to use public transport – busses and trains. “Young people with special needs have rights to live a fulfilled life!” says Kristaps.

**"I have never laughed
at illness and I do not
understand anecdotes
and jokes about it."**

Anna Kristīne Briede

Anna has been dancing since she was 4 years old. She dances not only folk dances in the folk dance group "Gauja", but she also is a cheerleader for the basketball club "Valmiera/ORDO". Anna has completed an eight-year programme of the piano playing at the Children's Music school in Valmiera. She is 17. She is outgoing, open and friendly.

Anna's favourite lesson at school is Latvian and especially she enjoys Latvian grammar. She loves putting commas and writing compositions and essays. "I would really like to study abroad, but the Latvian language cannot be studied there," she laughs.

Anna loves Latvia very much but she wants to see the world. I want to travel around the world because living at the same place all life can be boring!" Anna's dream is to travel around the world describing places where she stays and explores. Anna really hopes that there will never be war in Latvia.

Three years ago Anna was diagnosed with diabetes and therefore everything changed. „Nobody knows when some disease can appear”, Anna says. “You have to pull yourself together psychologically and manage yourself and the situation. It is incredibly difficult but there is no choice. I have to make injections and keep on living. I want to live.” Anna says smiling.

“I was shocked when I was told that I am a disabled child. I do not feel as disabled but equal with others!” Anna has best friends who support her and keeps an eye on if she has taken care of herself. “They are very emphatic. All my relatives are worried about me, especially my mom and dad, of course,” adds Anna.

Anna likes searching for new adventures. “I enjoy all kinds of water sports. Now I’m into the wakeboard but I have also tried windsurfing and riding a water motorcycle. I love extreme feelings,” Anna says.

What Anna bothers about is that diabetes affects metabolism. Because of diabetes it is much more difficult to do sports. It’s hard to bear higher physical intensity than it was before but Anna is determined. “I love to do sports, but after physical activities I have problems with sugar level and I’m not feeling well. This year there were at least 25 athletes with diabetes participating in the Olympic Games. They are my role models,” Anna motivates herself.

“I will have a family and children in the future. I’m sentimental and get attached to things which are valuable to me. I will certainly come back to Latvia because there is my home and my family.”

"We need to have a mind full of light. We need to live lightly and beautifully."

Arnis Blazevics

Arnis loves singing. He sings in a local folk group. "Singing is something that I really enjoy," he says about singing. Every performance is a little celebration and possibility to visit other rural municipalities.

Admiringly Arnis speaks about Latvian annual traditions and festivities. He loves all the songs that are traditionally sung at annual solstice and equinox celebrations. "It gives you such energy," he says.

Arnis is sincere and smiling. He always has a talk with village people he meets. He is responsive and generously helps others as much as he can. One can often see him sitting on a bench by his home thinking good thoughts about life and loved ones. With greatest responsibility Arnis speaks about his family – his wife and son. His son

currently works in the Netherlands. Arnis cannot do a regular work because his wife needs a full time care. “Works around home are my main occupation,” but he would like to work a regular job. The biggest wish for Arnis is to improve the condition of the living place so that they could live in better conditions, not in this slum. However he is very grateful that the municipality helps them and supports within its capacity.

Arnis likes taking part in different projects because this is how to get to know some news, meet people and get out of everyday routine. “It fills you up,” says Arnis.

Arnis likes to travel and see Latvia. He would love to go to the classical music concert in Liepaja and Cesis.

“Years ago I was often drinking heavily. It was awful. I needed alcohol so badly – as bread, as medicine,” adds Arnis and admits that life in a sober state is much more interesting and fulfilling. Arnis goes to Valmiera St. Simon’s church. In his free time he watches television together with his wife.

“I have nothing to complain about although we live a simple life,” says Arnis.

"Everybody has to have an opportunity to do sports despite one's capabilities."

Natalia Novikova

Natalia started to play tennis professionally three years ago. This year she takes the 89th position in the world's tennis rankings and often she has to compete with twice as younger players. Natalia plays tennis in the wheelchair.

She is an economist by her profession. She has worked as a finance director and chief accountant in big production companies in Latvia. Now Natalia works part time as a chief accountant and finance consultant. During last three years sports has taken a serious place in her life. "Some time ago I was very busy running around and wanted to manage everything. Now I understand that it is not possible. I have to set priorities and save my energy for what is more important for me," says Natalia.

Natalia lives on the fifth floor of the apartment house. There is no lift in the building. Every day she does a strenuous exercise – she climbs up and down the stairs.

The other passion she has is taking photographs. Natalia is proud of the fact that her picture has been included

among 100 best photographs in Latvia and exhibited in public exhibition on the train station square in Riga. Natalia tells about her own project “Kaleidoscope studio” with great enthusiasm.” It is a series of charity events at Vaivari rehabilitation centre and senior home “Liepa”, where Natalia together with her helpmates organize events and festivities for people in wheelchairs. She emphatically tells about mothers who forget about everything around and dance with their sons in wheelchairs. Natalia is telling about mothers who are happy about photographs together with their children because they don’t have such pictures. ”If children have a serious illness parents and children usually cannot get anywhere, therefore we organize photo sessions and celebrations here in the rehabilitation centre,” tells Natalia.

Natalia has two children. She is afraid of thinking about what might be going on in Latvia 50 years later. “If children go away, then there is nothing to talk about. I have travelled a lot and seen many countries but I always come back home happily. I don’t think that children who are gone away will be coming back one day,” she sadly says.

Natalia respectfully remembers the words somebody said to her: “Probably you’ll want to focus all your energy on one thing and that is to be able to walk. It may turn out to be the biggest mistake because you may succeed or maybe not. However you may lose all the rest at the same time. Try to keep as much as you can in your life you had till you were forced into the wheelchair,” Natalia admits that this was the best advice.

"I feel special among my classmates when I have learned something and know more than others."

Roberts Erglis

Since his childhood Roberts knows that all classes help him develop. Both speech and language development lessons and art school, dancing, sports, chess and checkers – all classes are meant for improving his intellect and brainwork. Roberts is fully aware that if you have good grades at school now you may study at a good university later.

Roberts is self-sufficient, sincere and curious. He is creative, intellectual and self-confident. Roberts's thoughts are faster than his speech. He feels well everywhere.

Roberts is 15. When he was diagnosed with hearing impairment, his parents who are fully hearing decided to do everything they could to integrate him within a hearing society.

Since childhood Roberts was directed to do arts and take part in dance classes. At school Roberts studies at general education programme. Teachers at all

schools where Roberts studies are responsive and there is always support from school administration.

Roberts tells happily about his grades at the primary school and art school. “At art school I have the best grades – all tens that is the highest mark and mean an outstanding work! I think I’ll be finishing the art school with excellence”, confidently says Roberts.

Most of all Robert likes to build and construct things. His favourite game is Minecraft. He enjoys reading fantasy books and builds up the story in a game.

In the future Roberts wants to become an architect or a construction engineer. He already knows that he is going to build a log house according to the Latvian traditions. “My dream is to build a house where all the family could live,” says Roberts. Roberts is fond of Latvian traditions.

During his school day Roberts has a hard study load at school and he feels tired in the evenings. He regains energy being with his family - having a family dinner and talks.

Roberts is bothered about the fact that there will be even more people on the planet Earth in the future. “I don’t want to live in overpopulation. I hope that we will be able to enjoy our beautiful and clean nature here in Latvia and celebrate our Latvian traditions,” contemplates Roberts. He thinks that some years later Latvia will be the country of fantasy. “May be I will build a flying private house. I also like girls and two kids would be enough for me,” says Roberts.

"If I could walk I would be very happy!"

Annia Boluza

Annia was born premature very tiny at seven month of pregnancy. When she was 6 month old she was diagnosed with child cerebral palsy. Annia needs assistance 24 hours a day.

She is 16 now and she actively participates in different culture related projects such as playing theatre, drawing, singing and dancing. Together with the drama group she has travelled to various countries – to Spain, France, Lithuania. The best travelling experience she had Anna links with the time after operations when she could travel around Germany, the Check Republic and Lichtenstein thanks to accessible location and infrastructure. “Honestly speaking, that is why I’d like to live in Germany,” says Annia, but her mother adds, that despite the fact that it is like the struggle against windmills, we will do all everything by ourselves and we’re going to live in Latvia countryside.

This is the last year for Annia at the special primary school where children with mental and functional disabilities can attend. Annia has this big unknown ahead of her and she is anxious of what is going to happen after finishing the 9th grade next year. There is no possibility to go to a special secondary school and study at the next level of education near her home and family as she needs special help every day. Education and required rehabilitation services are not available for children with mental and

functional disabilities in the regions and rural areas.

At school Annia's favourite class is home economics. The teacher is responsive and knowing. Annia enjoys making nice greeting cards. She would love to study something related to arts.

Annia's mother tells that school environment is not suitable for the girl and integrated education is not available for children in wheelchairs with physical disorders. Also teachers are not trained how to teach children with special needs.

Annia's wish is that children in wheelchairs could have access to various education and health equipment. The family would love to have more support, understanding and more favourable attitude from the self-government and state institutions.

Also our society knows little about children with special needs in wheelchairs. "Many stares at us as if there were some zoo animals taken out for walk or on a playground," Annia's mother comments.

The aim of Annia's family is to build an ecological family home in countryside which is suitable for Annia so that we don't need to ask anybody to build a wheelchair ramp. "I hope that my brother can ride a bike and jump across the puddles," adds Annia. She loves her brother very much. He is patiently waiting for her big sister while she is doing her exercises. "I had been waiting for him for a very long time – 16 years," Annia says. She can't wait for a moment when she will hold him in her lap and mom will be pushing only one wheelchair."

Annia would love to have her own family in the future.

"I still have a long way to go to become an outstanding programmer, as far as to achieve the mastery of Pavarotti, but others have a long way to go to reach my level."

Alexandrs Jevdokimovs

At least four times a week Alexander goes out of his home to practice singing in the men's quartet, he goes to the sports club and to the church. His flat is on the third floor and he can get out of it by himself, but he needs help from his friends when returning back home. He became a wheelchair user after an accident.

He was already an adult when he started learning classic vocal singing and he has been performing in churches in Latvia both as a solo singer and with the quartet showing programmes in German, Italian and Latvian languages. Another beloved pastime activity of Alexander, already for 37 years, is building ship models. Alexander is showing historic fine plywood made ships and armoured vehicles.

Alexander learned how to program a computer when he was already a wheelchair user and now designs web pages successfully. "It's commonly said that men love to relax on a sofa after work, but I love to work on my computer. If I did more exercises and I didn't enjoy

doing what I do so much, I would probably be able to walk long time ago. I'm really fascinated by the result and an outcome of what I'm doing," says Alexander.

Alexander is an expert in wheelchair accessibility at public places. He's been often invited to test the completed infrastructure. Alexander has never faced discrimination against him. Thanks to his persistence and determination, he has got where he wanted to go. However there are disabled persons, who are not so insistent, so they don't get out of their homes and don't get integrated in society because of negative attitude from society and inaccessibility of public places.

Alexander believes that disabled persons have to be invited for discussion before any infrastructure is being built, at the stage of planning and designing, so to make places – streets, pavements, public transport stops and buildings more accessible and convenient for wheelchair people. Alexander cannot understand the way of thinking when building infrastructure is being done without thinking properly. "This must be set by the law that disabled persons are to be involved in the process of planning and designing otherwise, he says, what is not fixed by the law is done carelessly with no real practical outcome."

"It's been more than 20 years since I don't use alcohol of any kind. In my pre-Christian life there was quite a lot of violence. I do not search for conflicts any longer. I have had them enough in my life," says Alexander.

"I keep myself busy and I go to many places although most of all I enjoy myself when I don't need to go anywhere," Alexander adds.

"Two years are not enough to become integrated in a hearing society."

Diana Grenēvica

Diana gained her secondary level education far away from home, at the other corner of Latvia." Being far away from my family was the most difficult thing", remembers Diana. She says that it would be better to integrate hard of hearing children into general education system so that they are not separated from their families, thus they would feel safer and feel integrated in society. "Every day I was counting silently how many days still left till going home and the last school day before summer was the happiest day of the year as sometimes it was also my birthday," remembers Diana.

In future Diana would like to have an inclusive education system and children could be closer to their homes and parents.

Diana is sincere and shy. For her to be more self-confident she needs a friend or a family member nearby. By herself she still feels insecure.

Diana is telling that in her childhood she was fixing bikes together with her brother. "I was helping him handling different bolts and parts. My brother made a big modern tricycle although I could not really ride on it because he couldn't fix the chain. I was pushed or rolling down a small hill."

Diana has an inborn hard of hearing since both of her parents are deaf. She is 21 years old. This year she finished the study programme in textile design at Liepaja Secondary Art and Design school. The school offers both general education and special art education. After completion of the four-year programme students receive a diploma of the chosen professional qualification. At school she had a surdo interpreter assisting her to study theoretical subjects. Diana says a tremendous thank you to responsive teachers and course mates who were very helpful to her to become more confident and independent.

Diana is going to continue her education at Riga Technical University. If she feels more confident about herself after graduating from the University, she would like to set up her own business and design her collections. Diana admits that she needs to gain more self-confidence to be able to accomplish her intention.

Diana enjoys sewing and she is very good at other handicraft things, too. She gives her handmade pieces as gifts to others and this way she brings joy to others. "If anybody needs something to be sewn, I do it with pleasure, but I usually don't make it for myself," Diana admits shyly.

Diana likes playing volleyball. She enjoys dancing and singing in melodeclamation technique. She would like to get to know other nationalities, cultures and travel around, but she needs to overcome her insecurity and fear from being in public.

Diana dreams about her own family and have at least three children.

"You must go out of home. You cannot live and stay only indoors!"

Arturs Livmanis

For the last four years Arturs is a guide in Liepaja (the third largest city in Latvia) and guides a walk "Let's meet at the Rose square".

This year he has planned another route. He apologizes and turns off the signal of his mobile phone, saying that it is not polite to be interrupted by a loud ringer tone during our walk. He does it at the beginning of each tour.

During his walking tour he tells about the city's history alongside with the architects who have designed the buildings. Arturs moves around streets of Liepaja very confidently. "I have to create trust for the tourist group," Arturs says. He is a person with impaired eyesight and has been blind since his birth. To feel safe on streets in Liepaja was taught by his grandmother.

Arturs has studied at the teacher program of history and social sciences and graduated from the Liepaja University. At the Master level he has also studied to become a career consultant. For a year he has worked as a volunteer in Ommen city in the Netherlands. It gave him self-reliance and let him appreciate the value of working.

Arturs has very sensitive hands and fingers that was well-used by his employer in the Netherlands. He had to check whether the old paint from renewable wooden parts was removed properly. During his volunteer year Arturs was travelling a lot in Europe. He went to the Czech Republic, Spain, the Great Britain, and Sweden. He would love to travel more but it is not so easy from Latvia.

Arturs is collecting Latvian films as well as model toy cars from the Soviet Union times. He renews audio books and practices in bow shooting.

In the nearest future Arturs' dream is to sail in the sea by the sailing ship and be one of its crew members. However in ten years' time Arturs wishes to have more routes and more tactile maps to be available for visually impaired tourists in Latvia.

“Although there are many good things done already, there is always room for improvement. Liepaja needs trams where number of a tram is spelled out loudly,” Arturs suggests.

“It is not an easy life in Latvia,” Artur continues, “it is difficult to survive and more work places must be created for disabled people, too.”

"Never in my life have I drunk alcohol or smoked a cigarette."

Valdis Budahs

Since the age of seven Valdis has had one leg. Due to poor medical health care a leg amputation was the easiest solution in the case of inflammation and overall blood poisoning. Valdis had been fighting for his life.

For all his life Valdis has relied only on himself. He has invented and adjusted all his technical aids and a car by himself. If I didn't have a car and was not able to drive to town from my remote countryside, I would have already been dead long time ago. I like driving a car," says Valdis.

Valdis has got an excellent memory. He remembers years, dates, and events and without hesitation he mentions names of all people and how they relate with the events in his life. Valdis is 77 years old. By his profession he is a tool locksmith. After Latvia regained its independence he was working at an agrarian cooperation in a sewing workshop and later he was sewing special work clothing as ordered. He shows around his workshop saying "when life becomes so hard I come here and sit for while. .

What gives joy to Valdis is working in his greenhouse. He has a nicely arranged flower bed near his house. “I do things in the garden sliding on a plastic covering on the ground. I do it in an early morning while neighbours are still sleeping. Life is very difficult. I have adjusted to it.”

In his life Valdis has had an opportunity to travel all around the Soviet Union. He joyfully remembers impressions and adventures he had together with the friendly group of colleagues.

Valdis lives in his little home in the far corner of forests. He cannot subscribe for any newspapers or magazines because mail is not delivered to the door. Valdis cannot get to the mailboxes as the road is too bumpy and in bad condition. He tells with regret that he should have a state paid assistant helping him, but he hires a helper himself.

Most of all Valdis would wish to have the other leg. An artificial limb cannot be fixed because the limb hasn't got enough flesh on it. In his childhood he faced violence from his mates. It is still difficult for him to talk about it.

"Public accessibility has been a long battle. We have been speaking about it for 15 years and finally now we are heard."

Jurgis Briedis

This year Jurgis set off on a challenge bike ride from Riga to the most remote point in Europe - North cape (Nordkapp) in Norway thus bringing up issue about accessibility of education for everybody. He has travelled on a bike like this all around Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

Jurgis is a public accessibility expert for the State Construction office and non-governmental organization "Apeiron". He is visually impaired since his childhood. He has 10 percent of vision left.

Jurgis family has put a strong emphasis on education therefore parents decided to send Jurgis to a regular school. He has attended the Children's Music school for the piano classes and the Art school. He has learned how to take photographs. Now he is learning how to play the guitar by himself.

This year Jurgis has intended to finish studies at the faculty of construction engineering at Riga Technical University. I wanted to become an architect. In order to enter this study program one has to draw a capital, but I cannot do it because of my poor vision. "I like to be on the construction site, but

if I have to climb on the scaffolding I cannot do it as it is not safe.”

Jurgis is smiling all the time and merrily tells about his life, he sometimes feels sad a bit because vision impairment prevents him from achieving more. “Always I have to count on the public transport, sometimes it is quite complicated. Also travelling alone is not easy as well as taking up some courses to study something new. On the whole all this puts you down a bit,” says Jurgis.

Nowadays there are technologies that help visually impaired people to be integrated in society. “At school I didn’t see what’s written on the board. I hate that feeling when I have to ask for explanation once again on what’s written on the board. And realizing that you become disturbing to others is quite unpleasant. Technologies could help solve this problem if schools wanted to do that.”

Jurgis concludes that many people rely on eyesight. He is asking: “How well do you need to see to be able to move around? If I have my glasses dimmed I keep on driving, but people who can see well get worried when their glasses are dimmed.”

Jurgis is pleased when he has managed to do something good for other visually impaired people. By his active involvement, for example, new trolleybuses in Riga now have big number signs on the sides of a vehicle and a number of a transport is spelled out loudly

There are still lots of things to be done because oftentimes things have been done just formally. “Why are you building this house - for people or to follow some norms and regulations?” he asks rhetorically. “Likewise, client line organizers at banks, or post offices, for example, are not usable – I cannot see there anything. It sometimes makes me feel so helpless,” sadly says Jurgis.

"Educational institutions in Latvia are neither accessible nor integrating."

Arta Teivane

Arta is 24 years old and she has completed the distance learning course graduated from Savannah Art and Design school in the USA. Arta wanted to study art and design in Latvia but there is no Art school or college suitable for people with special needs and distance learning opportunities are not being offered in Latvia. "If I had an opportunity to study in Latvia, I'd definitely study here," says Arta.

Arta managed to get an elementary and primary level education via home-teaching. She calls education opportunities for children with special needs in Latvia to be a big chaos.

In order to live an independent life, Arta would need a full-time assistant. Meanwhile Arta's main emotional and physical support person is her mom, but her dad is her strong back. Arta says that "independent life is very important and it is very necessary to appreciate the work of a good assistant."

She hasn't used public transport in Latvia for ten years since the moment she got in the wheelchair. Arta has got muscle weakness anxiety that is gradually progressing and prevents her from moving around. The disease also lessens muscle strength and also mimics.

Arta thinks that it is important to improve infrastructure in Latvia and it must be done wisely. "Many details and nuances are very important: pavements, curbs, public transport stops," Arta knows what she says. There is no information about accessibility of the culture institutions. "People in Latvia are not informed about ways how to help people with special needs. It is not so difficult to give a helping hand to a wheelchair person when changing seats or in other situations. There are also more encouraging cases but on the whole I'd like to live in a more supportive society," Arta says.

Travelling is what Arta most dreams about. She would like to travel together with her family and her friend who now studies in Australia.

Arta would love to work at a company that could employ her as a graphic designer. However most of all she would like to set up her own company or gallery offering graphic design services.

"In the future I am going to introduce the experience from the advanced countries to Latvia."

Georgs Barda

After finishing Vaivari Primary school this year, now he studies in Minnesota, the USA. Georgs won this study opportunity in a big competition. After finishing the secondary school, he plans to study marketing and management in the United Kingdom. "There are more opportunities in Latvia than in Europe, however, to be able to run a business, you need to study not only English but also other foreign languages," Georgs says.

He wants to have his life to be related with work in non-governmental organizations that would help provide people who have vision impairment with various technical aids including robot machines that would help blind people to be integrated in society.

Georgs rides a horse, goes water skiing, enjoys listening audio books, goes on walks with his companion dog Hera and spend time with his friends. He is a good dancer, singer and also plays drums. This year he together with his friends took part in a Strong men race.

Georgs is very creative, technically oriented and has a patience. "If I have tin for soldering, I do it! I made a device that allows me orientate when riding a horse in a

classical dressage. The device is in demo version now. It responds to a sensor and an infrared ray," Georgs adds.

Georgs loves speed. He rides around his native town Jurmala on his bike and also on a motorbike Delta he has fixed by himself. Georgs is a big help for his mom when she needs to fix a car. His interest in technical things came up by attending programming and electronic classes after school. In the future he would love to drive a robot car.

With his mother's selfless assistance Georgs attended a general primary school for regular children without any mental or functional disabilities where he successfully studied all through a nine-year primary school program and passed all the exams with excellence.

To find a place at a regular school for a blind child is not an easy fight for his mother. It is still an ongoing struggle. They are to create inclusive educational programmes in Latvia. Georg's mother continues: "Schools are not ready to have ambitious, smart children with vision impairment and a dog companion who are interested in math, physics and chemistry."

Georgs was born healthy. "One morning at breakfast a five-year old boy accidentally hit himself by a tip of the fork. Doctors didn't discover an infection right away and after progressing it turned into a rare disease that affected also the other eye irreversibly," tells Georgs mom.

"I wish the road structure would be arranged so that also people with vision impairments could move around comfortably. Especially during road repairs, it is very hard to find the way to the railway station," says Georgs.

"A human being as an individual needs a job and spiritual manifestation."

Gunars Grabinskis

Gunars hasn't had an easy life. For fourteen years he has been selling newspapers on streets because one needs to make living. For some time Gunars was working at the organization for the disabled "Apeiron" sponsored by the state program and now he acts as a volunteer. Gunars would like to have and work a regular work. He is 55. Motivated by his parents, he has paid much attention to learning. Gunars has also acquired computer skills and worked with information gathering and processing. Computer is his main tool because he cannot write using his hand. Gunars is a disabled person of the 1st group according the classification in Latvia.

After her mother's hard delivery he has to cope with consequences caused by the child's cerebral palsy. Gunars has spent his childhood and school years in countryside therefore he feels spiritually close to the ancient Latvian religion- Dievturiba - spiritual heritage of our ancestors. He strongly believes that we in Latvia must officially renew this ancient Latvian religion in its full splendour. Latvian folk songs are true spiritual and moral source.

“Due to urbanization these days people have become strangers with nature and don't feel themselves as part of nature. In order to learn this we should study our ancient folk culture. In my mind our folk songs, fairy tales and proverbs clearly contain messages about our true values of Latvian nation, our Gods - Laima and Mara,” Gunars explains.

However the biggest part in his life is taken up by playing checkers. Now he is going to gain a Master's qualification in checkers. Gunars strong belief is that it was a wrong move to terminate a sport movement for disabled persons.

“It gave a great motivation and opportunity for many disabled people to meet with other people like them. Now the only goal for disabled sport is to participate in Paralympics games, but those who haven't got this intention, they have no other possibilities to do sports,” says Gunars.

Gunars says that we speak a lot about integrating disabled persons in society. He regards himself to be fully integrated among checker players who are mostly fully healthy people.

Gunars has some speaking difficulties but has found ways to express his thoughts. He keeps a blog where he shares his reflections about Latvian annual traditions and festivities, seminars and dedicates remembrance words for Great Latvian people.

“Most of all I would love to have my own family,” asked about future, says Gunars.

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Graphic design by Kidler

Poster design: Matīss Zvaigzne