



Serendipity-Russia ~ The American Home

At work in the historic city of Vladimir since 1992

On the 4th of July, 2012 the American Home celebrated its 20th anniversary. Designed as a typical American single-family home, in 1992 it was unique in Russia in a variety of ways. Passersby who saw the wood-frame structure under construction were sure its occupants would freeze during the Russian winter. They had no conception of how energy efficient such a house could be. The interior also differed substantially from the existing pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era housing, especially the spacious kitchen with its standard American appliances.

Today, not far down the street from the American Home and elsewhere throughout Vladimir, there are much grander Russian-built houses. But the American Home's neatly mowed lawn and carefully tended flowers are still recognized by passersby as something special.

The Home was built specifically to showcase American building materials, tools, and construction techniques – and, in general, to provide a "grassroots" link between Russia and America.

Most valuable for the latter has been the Home's highly respected English program. Initiated in the fall of 1992 with three American teachers and 70 students, that program has grown to approximately 500 students each regular term. And the 6-week summer term has seen attendance increase by 50% in the last two years. The classes are taught by eight Americans under the immediate direction of two Russian Teacher Supervisors, both of whom also teach the very beginning course.

The American Home, July 2012



Discussing curriculum ideas

In August 2012 the program's first Lead Teacher, Alison Kitzman, returned to Vladimir. Her AH experience led to her earning a Master's in TESL from the University of Illinois, and from there to teaching and administrative positions at Kinki University in Osaka Japan. (See the Facebook album on Alison's visit.)

While she was in Vladimir, Alison consulted with the AH English program staff and gave several "workshops" – all of which were very well received.

In addition to the regular classes, the English program presents lectures by the American teachers on different aspects of U.S. history politics, and culture, and shows Saturday movies. Other activities include organizing the celebration of American holidays and special activities such as game nights. The program also provides workshops for area English teachers at least twice a year.

In addition to English, the American Home is licensed to teach Russian to foreigners. Thanks especially to the efforts of David Johnson, who taught at the American Home for three years and is currently an instructor of Russian at Vanderbilt University, there are a growing number of students studying with our excellent native-speaking tutors in the center of the Russian heartland.

Teacher Supervisors – First Trip to the States

Beginning with their arrival in Chicago on April 24, the AH's two Russian staff members who work directly with the American teachers, Lena Belova and Olya Solovkina, spent a little over two weeks divided between central Illinois, Chicago, and Kansas. They observed ESL classes, met with ESL teachers and TESL professors, checked off items on a "must-do" list prepared by the 2012-13 American teachers, taught the Russian alphabet to and answered questions from a 4th grade class, and shopped for teaching aids at a school supply store – among other things. Overall, it was clearly a very worthwhile trip. (See the Facebook album on their "great adventure.")

Lena & Olya's Arrival in Chicago



SPECIAL PROJECTS

Helping Where We Can

We attempt to use our resources to do more than teach English and Russian. Our first special project involved the setup of donated playground equipment at an orphanage and at a boarding school for hearing impaired children in 1993. Since then we have initiated and made a major contribution to a law enforcement exchange program; organized excellent special interest tours; provided substantial assistance to the regional basketball program; assisted talented individuals seeking training in the U.S. – and more.

Kids from the boarding school checking out the new playground equipment



Educational Programs



In 2004, 2007, and 2008 the AH made all the in-country arrangements for three very successful Fulbright programs for a total of 43 American K-12 educators through the University of Illinois and the University of Chicago. Since then, we have helped initiate several high school exchange programs based on the Fulbright programs. We hope that these will grow and ultimately make a significant contribution to engaging Russian and American young people (and their teachers) in on-going direct communication—with the assistance of the AH and the Internet.

Participants in the 2004 Fulbright group questioning Dr. Alexei Altonen, Director of the AH's Special Projects

We have developed a special relationship with the English program at the Murom Institute, a branch of Vladimir State University. This historic city, which is even older than Vladimir, was completely closed to foreigners during the Soviet period – and is still not a part of the regular tourist route. As a result, it has had relatively few foreign visitors. We have helped the Murom English program acquire teaching materials and equipment, and have provided them with native speakers. For example, we arranged for a retired American attorney, Karen Porter, to spend the better part of two months interacting with students and faculty. (See the link to her detailed diary on our blog and website.)



Karen Porter between the two lead Murom English Teachers

Tourism Promotion



Beginning in 2004 with the support of a Sister Cities International grant, we have been making an ongoing effort to encourage the promotion of tourism in the Vladimir region. This has included the design and printing of a Vladimir city map in English, the writing of a brief interesting history of the region, a video walking tour of Vladimir, and the development of an English-language website—all of which can be accessed from our main website. In addition, we provide translation and editing services for restaurant menus, the English language pages of hotel and other tourist oriented websites, and other printed and recorded materials.

Basketball

Donated uniforms



Summer sports camp tournament



Starting with arranging for the donation of used uniforms and inexpensive basketballs right after the breakup of the Soviet Union when local resources were substantially reduced, we have made an ongoing effort to support the Vladimir Region basketball program. We now sponsor Street Ball tournaments for boys and girls at a summer basketball camp, and we co-sponsor a fall tournament for older girls' teams. In October 2010, we made arrangements for Alexander Vlasov, a Russian professor of "physical training," to collect information in the U.S. for his *doktorat* dissertation comparing Russian and American approaches to teaching physical education and sports. We helped him arrange a return trip to continue work on this project in June 2012. On his second trip he was accompanied by one of his players who attended three basketball camps and worked on improving her English. In April 2000 and March 2011 we helped organize very successful basketball clinics in Vladimir presented by two American coaches. The Russian coaches and players would very much like to have more frequent clinics. (For more on all of the above, see our Facebook page and website.)



The Arts

Other specific projects have involved providing assistance to members of the Vladimir-area arts community. For example, we helped arrange for a very gifted young jazz singer, Yuliana Rogacheva, to receive training in the U.S. at the Stanford Jazz Workshop in 2004 and 2005. Yuliana won acclaim at the 2010 Montreux Jazz Festival where she was awarded second place by the panel of judges chaired by Quincy Jones and was voted the most popular vocalist by the audience. We are continuing to provide this remarkable young talent with assistance. (For one of the best of her YouTube videos, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gseUd4IwqNU>)

Yuliana performing at the American Home's 20th Anniversary Celebration

Criminal Justice Tours

In 2011 we organized a Criminal Justice tour for Texas State University. They are planning their next trip for May 2014. See our Facebook page and an article by one of the participants in the 2011 trip on our website. (To date, we have organized a total of 9 Criminal Justice tours.)

Writing Exchange

In an effort to go beyond the teaching of language classes in Vladimir, in the fall of 2011 we initiated a writing exchange program that involves Russian students of English and American students of Russian writing essays in their second language which their Russian or English partner corrects and comments on. There are now more than 40 pairs of participants in this well regarded program.

Some of the TSU Criminal Justice group at the Regional Court



Alternative Spring Break & Customized Study Programs

TCNJ group taking part in a Maslanitsa (Mardi Gras) celebration



In March 2012, our first Alternative Spring Break project involved remodeling a multipurpose room for an organization that helps students, parents, teachers, and school administrators deal with a variety of "coping" issues. (See our Facebook page--and a very interesting essay by one of the participants and additional comments on our blog.)

Thanks in part to the success of the first ASB program, the College of New Jersey received a U.S. Department of Education grant that is making it possible for TCNJ history education students to participate in this program through 2015! These students will learn about the Russian perspective on a specific aspect of American history. The goal is to make the American (and Russian) students aware of the fact that the culture you are raised in influences the way you perceive the world around you. There were two additional ASB programs in 2013. One group assisted the Association of

families with handicapped children, and three American students traveled to Murom where they provided practice with communicating with native speakers for students at the Murom Institute.

May 20 a group from Drew University began a customized three-week study trip. According to Prof. Carol Ueland, they could not have had a better organized program. She indicated that the students especially appreciated the opportunity to interact with their Russian peers and to do some volunteer work. She wrote that their "...visit to the church being restored [in the village of] Chernish was especially memorable."

Staff

The excellent Russian staff and the American teachers in Vladimir are managed by the American Home's Director, Galya Altonen. Her husband, Dr. Alexei Altonen, is Director of our Special Projects—and a professor of English at Vladimir State University. His AH responsibilities include managing the Writing Exchange, Alternative Spring Break and customized group study programs on the Russian side. The AH Assistant Director, Oxana Ustinova, and Senior Manager, Natasha Yudina, are the main contact people in Vladimir.

Drew group at the church where they did some volunteer work



On the American side, former AH teachers David Johnson, Jane Keeler, and Brooke Ricker are making special contributions. As noted above, David coordinates the AH's growing Intensive Russian program and manages, on the American side, both the Writing Exchange and Alternative Spring Break programs--among other contributions. Jane, who is now enrolled in the TESL Masters program at Central Florida University, is our webmaster; and Brooke assists with parts of the English program – while working on her PhD in Applied Linguistics at Penn State. Other former teachers have also made valuable – and much appreciated – contributions. Straddling the two sides, Katya Lakshtanova, who was born in Russia but is now a U.S. citizen, has done a good deal of work on the tourism development project and regularly contributes to website projects.

Conclusion: A good deal has been accomplished since the doors of the American Home were opened to the first students in our English program in the fall of 1992. We will continue to work to improve our existing programs and pursue new opportunities as they present themselves. In this connection, we would very much like to build a new, much larger and more appropriately designed American Home – more than 40% of our current students have to take class in a separate building. We would also like to build a "Russia House" to better accommodate the growing number of individual students and groups who want to take advantage of our resources.

Main website: www.serendipity-russia.com

English program website (partially in Russian): ah33.ru

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-American-Home-in-Vladimir-Russia/184076861289>

Blog: <http://theamericanhome.blogspot.com>

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American Home music video: <http://youtu.be/3bwEBE2koLs>

English program video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBYa_6FQxmw&feature=youtu.be (in Russian--see Facebook for translation)