

# *AH Alumni Newsletter No. 1*

## *March 2002*

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Welcome to the first of what hopefully will be a regular series of newsletters for "alumni" of the American Home—and other interested parties. This enterprise is going to be quite informal. For one thing, if we try to make it too fancy, you won't be hearing from us very often.

This first issue is a bit of a grab bag. We've included some notes on the holiday celebrations from 1998 and a "statement" detailing our "ideal teacher" that we now send to all applicants. There are also some notes that I received from several former teachers in response to the e-mail check I did. Last, but definitely not least, there is a note from Anya, the AH's "first secretary"!

The biggest change this year, besides the hiring of a seventh teacher as noted below, involved significant progress on arrangements to continue the AH's programs beyond January 1, 2003 when the AH was originally scheduled to be turned over the City Administration. Everyone agrees that the English Program and the Home's other activities are great assets to the community. As a result, we now have a 49 year lease on the land and full "ownership" of the American Home. (The "ownership" is based on the fact that the City did not have to invest anything in this project. All the necessary financing was provided by Serendipity.) We now need to get the City Administration to "formally" acknowledge our continued use of the American Home beyond the end of this year.

When this has been accomplished, we will be able to plan for the future with confidence! (We aren't anticipating any major problems with getting this taken care of.)

Speaking of planning for the future, we are attempting to get funding for a large "curriculum development project." We would like to put together a complete set of curriculum materials "customized" for Russian speaking students. This year's co-Lead Teacher, Nina Zaragoza (in her second year at the AH—with her 12 year old son, Derek—see his note below), will take the lead in this project. She is a former specialist in teacher education at Florida International University, and she has had significant ESL teaching experience. This background, coupled with her two years of experience at the AH, make her the ideal person to prepare the materials—with help from other ESL specialists and, quite possibly, some of you former teachers. (If this works out, future teachers will no longer need to use *American Dimensions!*)

Once the materials are ready, the plan is to make them available on a web site for everyone teaching English to Russian speakers worldwide. We'll let you know what happens with this project. (If we don't get the current grant we've applied for, we'll keep trying!)

Finally, if you haven't looked at the Serendipity web site recently, you might want to check it out: [www.serendipity-russia.com](http://www.serendipity-russia.com) My wife, Susie, has put a lot of time and effort into making it informative and attractive. (The first page includes photos of most of the current teachers.) *Ron*

## NOTE FROM GALYA

Our dear teachers, dear friends:

It is difficult to believe that almost 10 years have passed since we had our first English classes at the American Home here in Vladimir. I remember very well our first year. We had only one computer and one pin printer, no textbooks, no Xerox machines. We had only enthusiasm--which is still our main moving force. We have been always eager to make the American Home the most informative and pleasant place, where people of Vladimir can learn everything about America.

A lot has changed during all these years. And mostly thanks to you, our teachers.

Every year you have added something to our program. I remember all of you and the things each of you suggested to make our school better.

But if I start to write about everybody, it will take forever to read.

Now we have 4 computers only for the teachers, 2 copy machines, and access to the Internet. In each classroom we have a TV and VCR. We also have a CD player for each classroom.

Do you remember the room which we used to call "Stinky"? It's gone! Well, it is still there, but it has an air conditioner in it. We also have another air conditioner in our Big Room, where we have our meetings and parties.

Our library is also growing little by little.

Starting this year we have 7 teachers and that is why the workload is a little bit easier. Each teacher has 4 groups and 2 preparations, except the teacher who works with conversation classes. But he works only 3 days a week.

What is most important is that we still have the creative and friendly spirit you brought which is especially appreciated by all our students. No wonder our Home is always full, even on Saturdays and especially when we have festive parties, presentations, or music and dance clubs. In February we celebrated for the first time Mardi Gras. It was fun!

You know that seeing you in Vladimir would be a great occasion for us.

Love from all the present day American Home staff and many thanks to you all! *Galya*

### ***Brief note about Alexei***

Alexei continues to teach Latin and English part time at the Vladimir State Pedagogical University. He completed his Russian "PhD"-  
-"candidatskaya stepen"--in the fall of 1998. See the Serendipity web site for the "special projects" that he continues to play a major role in making possible. He's *promised* to write something for the next issue....

## 10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

The AH will celebrate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary on July 4. While we don't know yet exactly how fancy of a celebration we are going to be able to spring for, if you can afford to come to Vladimir, you will be most welcome. Contact Oxana (the office manager) at [ah@amhome.elcom.ru](mailto:ah@amhome.elcom.ru) concerning visa arrangements--if you need help with this.

Please be sure to give us at least two months to get your visa invitation. Also, please let us know if you need help with housing arrangements. It may be necessary for us to make hotel reservations for some of you, especially if you haven't stayed in touch with your host family--or if they are not in a position to put you up in July.

## CURRENT DATA

We set an enrollment record this spring! 337 students in 24 regular classes and two children's classes, and 35 in three conversation classes. We've also added a class for staff at a candy factory that was recently purchased by Kraft Foods. The teachers trade off traveling there once a week. (It's approximately a three hour round trip--the factory sends a car and driver.) The extra classes were made possible by the hiring of a seventh teacher in the fall. As Galya notes, this also made it possible to cut the teaching load from a max of 5 classes to 4. This worked out so well that when the "extra" teacher was about to leave for the Peace Corps (we were just experimenting), everyone asked that we replace her. Fortunately, that was possible to do. (It's harder to find teachers able to start in January than in August....)

## STAFF NOTES

### ***Kot & Derek***

Note from Derek Zaragoza, 12 year old son of Nina Zaragoza.

Hi Everyone,

I'm writing from the American Home. We lost Kot. [He left the AH one day and didn't return. -Ron] A new cat came back the very next day. His name is Gosha. He is nice. Today he took a chicken head and ate it downstairs in class. One of the teacher's brought it upstairs and in five minutes Gosha was back downstairs. [There is a photo of Gosha on the American Home page of the web site. -Ron]

I go to School #1. You guys probably know where school #1 is--it's across the road from the American Home. I'm learning Russian, and right now I have a B in my Russian class. In literature I learned a poem that was one page long. I have lots of friends around the American Home. I'll probably come back and visit when I'm older and I might even be a teacher at the American home. *From, Derek*

NOTE: I think that Derek, who has helped keep the AH yard clean, and both Kot and Gosha qualify as "AH staff." *Ron*

### ***Secretaries***

*Following is the most recent info we have on the young women who have filled the vital position of secretary at the AH.*

**Anna Morozova**, July 1993 - September 3, 1999

Anya was the AH's first secretary. She quickly demonstrated that this was in fact a key staff position. (Secretaries generally were not seen as valuable staff during the Soviet period.) Anya is now working in Moscow. (See Alumni Notes.)

**Larisa Zanozina** August 1, 1996 - September 23, 1997

Larisa's husband, a militia officer, was transferred to Nizhnii Novgorod. Larisa is working there as a secretary for an office supply firm.

**Svetlana Zhukova** September 15, 1997 - November 01, 1999

Sveta is working in Vladimir.

**Oxana Ustinova** July 7, 1999 to the present

Oxana is very ably filling Anya's shoes as the Office Manager.

**Antonina Sergeeva** October 11, 1999 - June 30, 2001

Tonya is tutoring some individual students in English--and, reportedly, very much enjoying her free time.

**Elena Kuzmina** July 1, 2001 to the present

Lena is the new "receptionist." She is also working with the teachers. (See below. Lena, along with most of the rest of the people we've hired as secretaries, trained to teach English.)

### ***A Note from the "Office Manager"--Oxana***

I started working at the AH almost 3 years ago immediately after graduating from the Vladimir State Pedagogical University. I had never planned on becoming an English teacher. So taking into consideration my love of the English language and my eagerness to improve my knowledge, I could not have dreamt of a better position than work at the AH. It gave me a great opportunity to come in contact with the country and people I had been studying for 5 years at the University theoretically and to make progress in my English (I should say, American English).

The three years have passed by so quickly, I did not even notice. My work here has been such a great experience for me. Thanks to working at the AH, I have learned so many things and got to know a lot of different people, both Americans and Russians who to a great extent have changed my world outlook. I have learned a lot about American culture, and this practical knowledge has differed greatly from the things I have heard on TV or at the University based on all the stereotypes typical of Russian opinion of Americans. It turns out that the contacts on the "grassroots" level have proved to be much more sincere and useful than all the international summit conferences. And I notice with pleasure that every year the number of AH students grows (now we have about 340 students) and, of course, it is nice to hear from them that they greatly appreciate what they are learning here from the AH English school.

I have worked with three teams of American teachers. All of them have been extraordinary personalities, though I still consider them to be "crazy" because of their inexplicable wish to live and work in Russia. We really miss them all. *Oxana*

NOTE: For the next issue of the newsletter I have asked Oxana to try to provide some specific examples of the stereotypes of Americans and American society that she—and maybe some of the students—have had corrected as a result of their contact with the teachers. Hopefully at some point one or more of the teachers—or former teachers—will write about stereotypes of Russia and Russians that they managed to correct thanks to their experience in Vladimir. *Ron*

#### ***A Note from Lena, current “receptionist”***

In general, everything’s going well here at the American Home. Our ‘crazy’ team is becoming more intimate. Contributing to this are the holidays we have spent together in addition to working together every day. In addition to Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, this year we also celebrated Mardi Gras. These holidays are an unfailing source of joy and amiable cooperation. By the way, the teachers made another excellent lunch for the Russian staff the other day. It was an unusual but delicious meal. [See the note below.] As for work, the teachers are doing their best to teach the students English and about American culture, of course. I sit in on some classes, especially Jeremy’s A1 class. I have known most of these students since they were in Nina’s Z2 group. They have made real progress. This group is a good example of what can be accomplished with hard work and good teachers.

I had just graduated from the Pedagogical University, the faculty of foreign languages when I started working at the American Home this last July. It was a pleasantly unexpected turn in my life. The fact is that the choice I made 5 years ago when I entered the teachers’ training University was far from accidental. I had planned on becoming an English teacher. While I was studying I became a more practical person, but my dream didn’t die away.

Although I was hired as a secretary, to my pleasant surprise, working at the AH has become an excellent experience. Here I am learning more about teaching techniques and organizing the educational process. I am also inventorying the teaching materials. I couldn’t have dreamt of a more challenging opportunity. I am always in contact with our students and the teachers, and I am very pleased when they all seek advice or have a question for me. *Lena*

NOTE ON LUNCHESES: I believe it was two years ago that we started having the Russian and American staffs trade off fixing special lunches. The goal is to help develop more of a “team atmosphere” in the AH—and it seems to be working quite well. Maybe I can persuade someone to write more about this for a future issue. *Ron*

#### **SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM A CURRENT TEACHER**

Having spent five weeks studying in Vladimir in 1998 while an undergraduate at Colgate, I have witnessed some of the slow changes that have occurred in this provincial city over the past four years. My program spanned the entire month of August, so I was here in small town Russia during the major economic downturn that took place at that time. I remember well the ways in which the ruble crisis affected the city: banks were simply closed down for several days and babushkas began queuing at markets for the basics, resulting in a brief shortage of everything. I spent some of my free time sitting in front of the television trying to understand what was happening. There were rumors that Yeltsin had passed away because he hadn’t made a public appearance in several days—to which my newly-made Russian friends simply tossed up their hands with their standard response of “This is our Russia!” Eventually the problems stabilized, though not to the advantage of the Russian people. When I arrived at Sheremetevo on August 1<sup>st</sup>, the dollar-ruble exchange rate was 5R= \$1, two weeks later it had reached 19R.

With my first experience here having been far from boring, it was with a natural degree of curiosity that I returned here last August. I wondered how the stability that had come about, relative to the first time I was here, was changing Vladimir. In the first few weeks here at the American Home, I came to the following conclusion: not much had changed. Perhaps it was simply the renewed shock of moving from New York City to the leavings of Perestroika in Vladimir, but what I saw here was the perfect reminder of what things had looked like in 1998 because *nothing had changed*. [See note below. -Ron] Trolleybuses still broke down and were, in fact, the very same, unimproved transportation that I had grinned and borne before. The streets were still dirty and in need of paving. The frequent fall rains made me ponder the front windows of Valentina [new official name of the *univermag*], where knee-high boots were making a first tempting seasonal appearance.

But as the small details of my first visit came back to mind, I noticed the equally-subtle changes that had taken place. Here a building had been repainted, there the newly-opened *univermag* “Grand” seemed to be attracting its share of shoppers. Clocks had been installed at all the main trolleybus stops. The Golden Gates, even, were undergoing repairs. In all honesty, Vladimir seemed to have resumed, at a walking pace, the course begun in 1991. Now, with the scaffolding removed, the familiar outline of the Golden Gates is again the most prominent, familiar feature of Bolshoi Moskovskaya Ulitsa. *Laura Meany*

#### ***Comment on changes from Ron:***

My perspective is a bit different from Laura’s. To begin with transportation, while the trolley buses are more or less the same, at least one private company now operates buses and mini-buses. This means that, for generally a half a rouble more than the trolley fare, you can usually get to where you need to go in the main part of town more conveniently than before. Also, there are now more stores selling more things—and not just in comparison to what was available in 1992. From that perspective the situation has changed dramatically. While some specialty items still need to be brought from the States, cooking sauces, for example, pretty much all the “necessities” can be bought at the *univermag* or elsewhere in Vladimir. For example, we now buy all of our computers and other

office supplies in town. When I wanted to put a high quality sealer on the deck and paint the metal exterior doors with some high quality "gloss white" paint last summer, I had to check out a couple of stores, but I ultimately found everything I needed. (Paint, brushes, rollers—everything had to be shipped in '92!) What isn't available in Vladimir almost certainly can be found in Moscow. The few exceptions include dry erase markers and contact lens supplies. We could now build a duplicate of the AH without having to ship any materials from the U.S. In fact, Andrei may be doing just that this summer in Suzdal for their American Sister City. Finally, there are a lot more decent—in many cases even quite nice—places to eat in Vladimir (with clean restrooms!) and more things to do than before. (For example, you can now play pool in a number of places and the old Burevestnik theater on "Victory Square" was completely remodeled last year and is now the very high tech Kinomax theater. Unfortunately, the first run movies are pretty expensive: 50 rubles for a matinee and 150 for the best seats in the evenings.) While there is still plenty of room for improvement, Vladimir has come a long way since the AH was dedicated almost 10 years ago!

NOTE: Alexei has promised to write more about changes in Vladimir for the next issue.

## **HOLIDAYS AT THE AH**

*Following are some notes from 1998, plus info on the first ever celebration of Mardi Gras in Vladimir—and maybe all of Russia.*

### ***Halloween at the American Home, 1998***

Note from the Lead Teacher, Charity Trelease (now Charity Ryabinkin—see her comments under "Ideal Teacher")

I can say that, without a doubt, the Halloween party was a success on all fronts. Approximately 25 children showed up for the first party and took part in several games: bobbing for apples, trying to lower a pen, which was attached to a string tied to their backs, into a bottle (a lot more challenging--and entertaining!--than one would think), a follow-the-leader type of dancing game, and beating a pinata that was filled with candy. This last event was probably the highlight of the party--a collective cry of joy was heard in front of the American Home when the first pinata finally exploded.

Some local kids who were hanging around saw the excitement and ended up waiting around for the next party, just so they could compete for candy. The second party was equally fun. Everyone showed up in costume, impressing even us American Halloween veterans. Costumes ranged from the standard--vampire, witch, monster, devil (Jake)--to the unusual--swamp princess, Golden Gates (Sara), spider (Alan), human highway (Laneya), Michael Jackson, and the Spice Girls (who were all pregnant--thanks to Bill Clinton our students explained....). As with the first party, many different games were played.

In addition, students voted on their peers' costumes and Halloween drawings, all of which were on display in the meeting room. Brenda and Sara, with the help of a couple of students and Alexei, led students through the Haunted House. As I said before, all enjoyed a good time.

About 15 of my students were in attendance, and all had nothing but good things to say about the party. Just to ensure that they won't forget the party, Romka put together a photo\_poster, which is hanging on the bulletin board downstairs. Students have been excitedly gathering around this poster before classes during the last week.

### ***Added Note from Charity:***

You asked about the Haunted House: Brenda and Sara decorated one of the classrooms with cobwebs, candles, and sheets. Small groups of students were led into the room, at which time one of the students working the HH told them a scary story about how a student had died at the hands (or fangs) of Brenda, the resident vampire. Just as the story was finishing, the "dead" student would rise up from a hidden casket, scaring the unsuspecting students. This tended to elicit some screams. More scary, however, was the sudden appearance of Alexei, who had an unidentifiable red gook smeared all over his face and chest. He usually jumped out at students from the closet and appeared to be holding a bowl of human organs. This invariably elicited some screams. At this point, students were led into the "Presidential Suite" [presumably the master bedroom --R.P.] where they were blindfolded and told to put their hands in various bowls on the table. Each bowl contained a body part (they used olives for eyes, a water balloon coated in oil for a stomach, big seeds for teeth, spaghetti for brains, and dried apricots for ears. This effectively "grossed out" the students. Just to underscore the eery atmosphere, we had your Sounds of Terror CD playing in the back ground. [I managed to send this CD just in time.... R.P.] It worked quite well.

The next step, of course, is to start planning for the Christmas Party. The teachers have decided that Jake will be Santa Clause--the rest of us are thinking about dressing up as elves. Initial ideas for party activities include a giant gift exchange (each student brings one present to the party and leaves with another) and lots of Christmas carols. Many of my students have already started asking about the Christmas Party, so it seems that we'll have an equally good turnout for this one.

**Note from Sveta** (Russian secretary; left the AH in 1999):

The Halloween party was awesome. Everyone was wearing a costume and almost every costume was interesting and distinguished. You know it's not common to wear funny costumes in Russia even on holidays which include a costume carnival. It seems that our students had fun and enjoyed everything, including their costume. I was an "office vampire" and was surprised and astonished that I was hardly recognized by students and the AH staff.

**Note from Roman on the Xmas Party, 1998:**

The Christmas party was definitely great. All the students and teachers loved it. I've heard from some of the students that this party was one of the best ever. Everyone wanted to participate, mostly because of how much they like the teachers. I didn't hear any Russian being spoken during the party which was kind of unusual, but which also was fun. So, in conclusion, I have to admit that the party went very well, and I myself enjoyed it very much.

#### **Cast of Characters**

Jake Chizzo, St. Olaf College (Minnesota), B.A., Russian Language & Area Studies

Laney McCullough, University of Washington, B.A., History

Alan Moseley, Grinnell College (Iowa), B.A. English

Brenda Rogowski, Wellesley College, BA, Russian Studies

Sara Simpson, Wittenberg University (Ohio), B.A., Russian Area Studies

Charity Trelease, Carleton College (Minnesota), B.A., Russian Culture & Language

Roman (Romka) Ryabinkin (assisted with computers--and everything else that needed to be done; started working at the AH in 1995; married Charity, summer 1999; currently working as a computer specialist for a DC law firm)

#### **A New Tradition? – Mardi Gras in Vladimir, 2002!**

This year we decided to replace the traditional Valentine's Day party with a Mardi Gras celebration. No Russians we spoke with were familiar with this holiday. We did some research ourselves to find out what traditions are associated with Mardi Gras other than drinking, eating, trading beads, and contemplating what you will give up for Lent. In fact, we found a number of traditions that made for this crew's best party yet.

We began a week earlier making masks with the English Club--using feathers, sequins, glitter, and glue generously sent over by the parents of a current teacher. We also made nametags for each guest, creating such entities as the Baron of Baltika and the Princess of Present Perfect Progressive. At the party two students were elected King and Queen, and beads were given and taken away on the basis of the English spoken by each guest. Music combined the jazz theme of Mardi Gras with American disco favorites, current Russian hits and Europop. This was all collected on two discs prior to the party using our brand-new CD burner – eliminating the need for a DJ. Instead of King Cakes, we ordered 200 *ponchiki*, which students decorated with homemade icing in the traditional Mardi Gras colors of yellow, green and purple. We also sponsored a baking contest, with prizes for the Best, Most Creative, Most Attractive, and Worst entries. (The Worst entry was won by the *ponchiki*.) In addition to eating, dancing, and drinking, students put on several skits and the King commissioned a contest to see who could best make use of the centrally-located basement pole as a dance partner. At the end, we all promenaded to the Golden Gates where we gave a final salute to the King and Queen and shouted "HAPPY MARDI GRAS!", drawing a potentially dangerous amount of attention from drivers whizzing by in Ladas and Volgas. It remains to be seen whether Mardi Gras celebrations will become a fixture on the Russian holiday calendar, but there are at least 60 American Home students who know that it can be a fun time. *Julie Spears, Co-Lead Teacher, 2001-02*

#### **IDEAL TEACHER**

*Following is something we put together last year--as a part of our ongoing effort to minimize confusion over what is expected of the teachers. More comments are encouraged!*

#### **TEACHING AT THE AMERICAN HOME** *Ideal Teacher Qualities*

After more than nine years of administering our English Program in Vladimir we have identified some key characteristics that maximize our teachers' success as well as the success of the program.

American Home teachers who have excelled have been creative and hardworking, have worked closely and cooperatively with our Russian staff, and have been more than willing to go out of their way to do things that benefitted the program--even when that might have interfered with their personal agenda. It is also interesting that these teachers have all reaped considerable personal benefit from their experiences in Vladimir and have subsequently parlayed that experience into substantial success in the "real world."

Frequently, what helps the program benefits the individual more than might first be apparent. For example, community outreach activities, such as visiting local schools, give the teachers a perspective on Russian life that they don't get from the confines of the American Home, and that even their Russian friends can't provide. In this regard, one former teacher who spent two years in Vladimir noted that the "outside activities" both encouraged and helped her to improve her Russian. Additionally, when it comes time for us to write reference letters, we can obviously say some very positive things about those teachers who have been especially cooperative and worked especially hard for the benefit of the program. We know for a fact that our strongest references have played a significant role in helping our former teachers land very good positions. On the other hand, teachers who have complained the most and have been the least willing to do more than merely focus on their classes and learning Russian, seem to have gotten considerably less out of their time in Vladimir. This is not to say that their experience has been negative overall. In fact, we are not aware of a single former teacher who is dissatisfied with the opportunity they had to teach at the American Home and spend a year or more in Vladimir. However, there does seem to be a clear correlation between how much each individual gets out of the experience and how much they put into it for the good of the cause.

We clearly attempt to hire teachers who will work effectively as part of a Russian-American team, who enjoy "contributing to the cause," and who don't feel somehow seriously "cheated" when they don't have all the free time they would like, etc. Teachers with these characteristics aren't given to complaining often. Teachers who somehow feel "put upon" do tend to complain more—which generates friction that can easily undermine the overall work environment. Put another way, who would be the ideal job candidate—someone who made a very positive contribution to a program, even when that meant foregoing some personal plans, or someone who tended to put his or her agenda first? Prospective employers know very well that they will be more likely to have a "super employee" if they hire someone who has demonstrated a strong and effective work ethic even in an internship-like position. That is, someone who makes a positive contribution under demanding conditions, and who can be relied on to go the extra mile, even when they are being paid very little by American standards, is clearly a highly desirable employee.

### ***THE VALUE OF A YEAR IN VLADIMIR: Some Comments from Former Teachers***

My year in Vladimir affected my life in profound and unforeseen ways. Hoping to gain fluent Russian and a new perspective, I hopped on a plane to Russia fresh out of college. One year later, I emerged with an invaluable cultural experience, dozens of amazing new friends, and a Russian husband! Despite these many rewards, life in Vladimir is not a walk in the park—the winters are long, the work is demanding, and McDonalds is a three-hour busride away. My first two months there were particularly harrowing, in part because I had no prior teaching experience. Fortunately, the sense of fulfillment I derived from eventually connecting with my students more than compensated for any fatigue I may have felt. Equally satisfying were the many "extracurricular" activities I was able to participate in. Late in the fall, a few of the other teachers and I visited the local pedagogical institute to speak to students about higher education in America. We enjoyed a fruitful exchange with this very inquisitive bunch and, in the process, learned a lot about the Russian university system. On another occasion, I visited a local youth club and told them about my home town in the States. It was clear that many of these kids had never been outside of Vladimir, so they were eager to get the "inside story" on life in America. Once again it was a mutually educational experience. Life in Vladimir can be very demanding, and sometimes it was tempting to forego such opportunities for a nice, long nap. Looking back, however, I have no regrets. Spending extra time with students gave me a much broader understanding of life in Vladimir, a town that in many ways more closely resembles Soviet Russia than Westernized Moscow or St. Petersburg. Back in America, I've found that my experience in Russia invariably piques the interest of prospective employers. There's nothing more impressive in an interview than mentioning the fact that you spent a year working in a small Russian town. And there's nothing more exciting than maintaining the incredible friendships I made while I was there. Visiting Vladimir just last summer (and this coming summer, I hope) reminded me just how dear my time in Russia was to me.

**Charity (Trelease) Ryabinkin** --currently studying at the Georgetown Law Center (See Charity's article on working at the AH on our web site: [www.serendipity-russia.com](http://www.serendipity-russia.com) (Click on the "Articles" flag.)

After I read the intro paragraph to Dr. Pope's statement concerning the ideal qualities for teachers at the American Home in Vladimir, I stopped to consider what I would want to add for the benefit of people applying to work there. Interestingly, I decided that a vital trait is a willingness to volunteer. Volunteer to teach extra classes for children, visit schools or institutes and really give yourselves to the Vladimir community. Working in the American Home is not a nine-to-five type of job. It requires dedication and flexibility. Teachers need to be reminded that working for the American Home is a serious affair. You are a representative of American culture and the American Home at all times--whether you like it or not. Citizens of Vladimir are continually watching the teachers, and their behavior reflects on the School and our country. I know the above paragraph may sound a bit "too serious," but becoming an ambassador for a culture and a language is a serious matter. At the same time, it is also exceptionally rewarding.

**Holly Daugherty** --recently completed her MA in Social Work at Case Western Reserve University

I was hesitant at first to participate in some of the extra activities because I feared they would take time away from preparing to teach and studying Russian. However, when I look back on the things that I have participated in, especially this year, I view them as very worthwhile, and I'm very glad I was a part of them. Many of these extra activities gave me a chance to see a part of Russia that I didn't get to see just teaching in the America Home. I have visited schools, given television and radio interviews, helped organize and present workshops for local teachers, and participated in various other activities. I am certain that all this has helped me to gain a broader and deeper understanding of Russia.

**Jeff Long** --Lead Teacher 2000-01; currently applying to grad schools.

## ALUMNI NOTES

*Whenever the mood strikes you, please let us know what you are doing. Obviously, one of the things we are especially interested in knowing is the extent to which your experience in Vladimir has influenced your life subsequently..... In addition, reflections on your time in Vladimir will be of considerable interest. For example, I'm sure that the more recent teachers will enjoy tales of the "bad old days" (when, for example, all handouts had to be made with pin printers using carbon paper) and the earlier teachers will be insanely jealous of all the "comforts" subsequent teachers have been privileged to enjoy (e.g., no shortage of "goodies" in the stores and the new write-to CD drive). Finally, why not share a favorite story about a student or two, or your host family, especially if you've stayed in touch? Whatever you think might be of interest to others who have shared your "grand adventure" will be a welcome contribution to subsequent issues.*

### **Nicole Brun-Mercer, 1996-98 (Lead Teacher '97-98)**

For a quick update: Fred Brun and I got married Oct 13 last year (so I'm -- still unofficially -- Nicole Brun-Mercer now). We are living in a small town called La Roche sur Foron in the foothills of the Alps, across the border from Geneva. I've been teaching English and translating for a company called English Connection. My colleagues are fantastic and I'm still enjoying teaching. I recently met two Russian women, and it is wonderful to have people to talk to again -- I don't seem to be on the same wavelength as most of the French, but these women and I really hit it off. There's something about Americans and Russians -- we tend to view life in a similar fashion. I would greatly appreciate any news about you and about the American Home. Fred and I are hoping to visit Russia for our next vacation...

### **Laney McCullough, 1998-99**

I am still at MIR Corp, planning vacations to Russia and beyond. I have been there for almost two years now. I go back to Russia at least once a year with work, as a tour manager for our small group tours. You can see our website at: [www.mircorp.com](http://www.mircorp.com)

### **Anya Morozova, "First Secretary," 1993-99**

I am still working in this German company (in Moscow), doing very diverse stuff from office management to marketing and advertisement. There are a couple of other projects going on, so I've started (and hope to continue) to use my French more. By the way, last year I passed the exam and got the Advanced German Certificate from the Goethe Institute here in Moscow which means I can work and study in Germany and not have major language problems. :- ) I have to think about that... As for my current use of English, occasionally I have to write letters and speak on the phone with partners who don't know German. But these are rather short conversations. At the same time knowing English (which is my greatest reward from working in the AH) helps a lot in many other ways: to read the incoming mail, search for necessary information on the Internet, etc.

### **Liz Vladeck, 1999-00 (Lead Teacher second half of the year)**

I'm working as a Communications Associate (meaning I coordinate a lot of the media, advocacy and outreach work) for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, a non-profit organization in New York City. I've been here about a year and half, and I'm having a great time. We've been working on a lot of the civil liberties issues that have come up post 9/11, which has been really fascinating. I do get to use Russian on the job a little bit: we have a very international staff, and I occasionally interpret in intake interviews we do with Russian-speaking asylum-seekers.

## MAILING LIST

If you want to continue to receive this newsletter, please be sure to keep us informed of changes in your e-mail address. Also, if you are in touch with any of your former colleagues, please make sure that we have their current e-mail. (This is assuming that you and they want to keep up with the ongoing saga of the "first American home in Russia.")