

# AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

## Number 11 – June 2007

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## 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration—July 4, 2007

### SOME NOTES FROM RON

A number of things have happened since the last newsletter. These include the birth of Lena Belova's second son and the "arrival home" of Olya Solovkina's daughter. Both families are doing well—as are Lena's and Olya's replacements, Jenya and Natasha; see their essays below. In addition, some work has been done on the AH; there were some visitor's from Carleton College (see Diane Ignashev's note); an émigré has "returned home" with her American family (see Olga Cote's essay below); the seventh Illinois State University Criminal Justice and Politics trip took place (I'll try to get some comments on this for the next issue); a more "professional" and convenient way to communicate between the secretary/receptionist and the teachers' office has been provided; some experimental changes have been made in the A level; seven new teachers have been hired; we are once again involved with a major Fulbright Group Program Abroad grant; planning is well under way for the 15<sup>th</sup>

anniversary celebration on July 4<sup>th</sup>; and two of the three “outside” members of the tourism development team will be back in Vladimir the beginning of August.

And these are just the things I can remember.

Both Lena and Olya have stopped by the AH with the new additions to their families. (See Britt’s note below about his and Alyona’s “addition.”) It is good to know that all are doing well.

I’d like to make a comment about the Russian staff. Everyone who “reports” to me after visiting the American Home comments on the staff’s professionalism and hospitality. Galya, Alexei, Oxana, and all the rest of the staff never seem to hesitate to go above and beyond the call of duty—if that is what it takes to get the job done. I am very proud of the work they do.

A case in point: At the urging of his Russian émigré wife, an American builder, Mat Cote and his family have temporarily moved to Vladimir—with a lot of help from the AH. (See Olga Cote’s comments below.) Among other things, Mat made a complete inspection of the AH—during which he found and fixed a small gas leak. We will definitely implement a number of his suggestions as resources permit. The first major project was the addition of a small room in the attic at the front of the garage. It can be used for things like Russian lessons and meeting with students during office hours. The last remaining space in the attic is now “occupied.”

After discovering that extending the basement will cost more than we can afford, Alexei suggested that we build an attractive “storage shed” for the lawn mower, garden hoses, and other items that are now being stored in the front part of what used to be the garage. We could then convert this space to another classroom—if we can keep Jenya from claiming it for an expanded library. We really do need more space for the books and magazines that have been—and still are being—generously donated. (See Jenya’s essay below.) But we also need more classroom space to help generate the income that is needed to keep the AH running.

We need one—or more—generous patrons....!

Another case in point re the staff’s hospitality. On short notice, a group of Carleton College students and faculty member Diane Ignashev were, as Diane notes below, very well provided for. (Diane has offered to return to Vladimir and present a “master class” for English-speaking guides. We very much hope that the logistics for this can be worked out.)

The ISU Criminal Justice and Politics group returned May 28. Donna Vandiver, the group’s faculty leader, provided me with an extended account of the trip—and a list of good suggestions for future trips. It’s clear that it was an excellent experience. Donna—and most of the students want to return

Among the things I sent to the AH with the ISU group was a pair of Radio Shack wireless intercom units. One unit is now in the teachers’ attic office and one is at the receptionist’s desk on the first floor. When a student arrives for office hours or one of the teachers has a phone call, no longer does someone have to go to the foot of the spiral stairs and loudly call, “Meghan, you have a student here who needs to take the makeup quiz”.... Besides saving time, we will now appear to be even more “professional” than before.

Clearly more important than getting an intercom was the decision to experiment with adding a third semester to level A. The staff concluded that two semesters didn’t provide enough time to cover—and

practice—all the grammar the students need to learn before moving on to level B. It will be interesting to see how this works out. (I'm always glad to see efforts to make improvements—and a willingness to engage in significant experiments.)

Seven new teachers have been hired for the new academic year. One teacher from this year, Sara Beach, is returning as the Lead Teacher. For photos and info on the new gang, go to:

[www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm](http://www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm).

The new teachers—and Jenya—are hard at work on the ICAL online TESOL course. (We've added a second tutor this year. This different perspective should further enrich the advice the new teachers are receiving.) Everyone has finished the first module, and they are on schedule to complete the course before the teachers leave for Vladimir. This should help enhance the effectiveness of the intensive orientation program that is being prepared for the new group.

Alexei is hard at work putting the finishing touches on the program for the new group of Fulbright teachers—with some input from me. We're going to include more interaction this time with the help of some roundtable discussions. For background, I've put together a substantial collection of current articles on more than two dozen topics. This collection of readings, along with the U of I workshop just before the June 25 departure for Russia, should help this group get the maximum possible benefit from this program.

Regularly updated information on the program will be available at:

<http://www.reec.uiuc.edu/outreach/fulbright.htm>

The Fulbright teachers will be able to help us celebrate the American Home's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary on July 4. I know that Alexei, Galya, and the rest of the staff are putting together what will be a memorable event. (I've tried to make sure that they have plenty of "4<sup>th</sup> of July" decorations—and prizes.)

After the Fulbright group returns to the States July 23, we'll have some time to catch our breath—and discuss future plans—before Bruce Wicks and Katya Lakshanova come to town to continue work on the tourism development program. Bruce is planning on offering several workshops, including a repeat of the very well received "hospitality" program he presented last year. (Not everyone who wanted to attend last summer was able to do so.) Katya is going to give a workshop on "effective website design." We hope that she will also be able to work with someone on the database project. Management changes at the Oblast Tourist Information Center have put that on hold.

This year the Zolotoe Koltso ("Golden Ring") hotel has offered to host the tourism workshops. Millions of dollars have been invested in remodeling this Soviet-era former "Intourist" hotel. They are particularly well prepared to host conferences and other meetings—at a fraction of the cost in Moscow or St. Petersburg. (Vladimir has a lot more to offer visitors than most people realize.)

A new addition of the tourist map is out—in both Russian and English; we are working on converting the "historic center" part of the map into a poster; and we hope to soon finish adding illustrations to the Vladimir, Bogolubovo, and Suzdal sections of the "history for tourists." When the latter is ready, we'll put it on the Serendipity website. This is still the most complete—and interesting—tourist-oriented history available. In addition to the above, we are continuing to provide edited English language text for restaurant menus—and, occasionally, other documents. Recently, for example, we edited the

translation of the voice over for a Suzdal tourism video. (As I did the final editing, I noted that video emphasized the churches and “kremlins” that tourists can see almost everywhere in Russia. It clearly should have focused on what makes Suzdal “special.” This includes, especially in comparison to Moscow, comfortable, reasonably priced hotels; interesting and relatively low cost restaurants; and the quiet ambiance of “old Russia.” The ISU Criminal Justice and Politics group wanted to spend more time there.

On a less positive note (no pun intended), I wasn’t able to come up with enough money to get the young jazz singer, Yuliana Rogachova, to the States this summer. Everything was in place for her to study with an excellent vocal jazz teacher, Dena DeRose, and then perform in the San Jose Jazz Festival—but I wasn’t able to line up the more than \$4,000 needed to make this possible. I’m hoping for better luck next year. Help will be appreciated.

A lot has been accomplished in the 15 years since the American Home was built. And there is a good deal more that we can do in the years to come—with the application of some creative thinking, hard work, and a little help from our friends.

## **COMMENTS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHERS**

### **A New Habit**

Joanna Greenlee, 2005-07

**NOTE:** Joanna is finishing her second year at the AH. She’s done a very good job as the Lead Teacher this year.

Over the past few days I’ve been pondering how my life has changed since coming to Russia almost 2 years ago. How is my life different here than in America? How is my second year different from my first year? Maybe I’ve picked up a new hobby – belly dancing or playing the balalaika. Other teachers have done these things, but not me. Maybe now that I live alone and cook for myself I’ve become an expert chef specializing in Russian cuisine. No, unless you count heating up frozen pelmeni. Maybe I’ve come up with a revolutionary new teaching method that keeps the hooligans involved and learning complicated grammar with ease? Unfortunately, no.

Then it came to me. This year I have discovered the joys of Russian television. In America and last year here in Russia I hardly ever watched TV, but living alone in one room with a TV that gets over 50 channels has changed that. I started watching (and continue to do so) under the guise of learning Russian. Watching TV really does help my listening skills and my vocabulary. But what began as an attempt to improve my Russian led to an appreciation for, and maybe even a little attachment to, the wonders of Russian TV.

The Western press loves to rant about the lack of press freedoms in Putin’s Russia. While I agree that there are problems, I see quite a bit of objective reporting and political dialogue on TV. I often watch programs that feature debates on different social and political issues. There are usually opportunities for viewers to call in to indicate which side they agree with. It’s true that if a liberal, pro-Western guest is pitted against a conservative, nationalistic one, the vote will come down strongly on the side of the latter. But there is real debate over the issues.

Besides the wealth of news and political programs, my cable package includes a lot of channels showing music, movies, cultural and religious programs, and sports. My late-night choice is usually “Good News,” the channel of the Orthodox Church. The chants and prayers are perfect for relaxing and going to sleep to. A fairly recent addition to my collection of channels is North American Sports Network, which appeared just in time for the NCAA basketball tournament. Other than the annoyance of the Russian announcer, who talks over the already often stupid comments of the American sports announcers with gems like “good throw!” and “simply fantastic!” it’s a great place to watch American sports like baseball and hockey. As for movies, if you ever have a desire to see a film starring Jackie Chan or Jean Claude Van Damme, it should only take a little time flipping through the channels to find one.

I’m now more of a TV expert than I’ve ever been in my life. News anchors seem like old friends, I’ve developed a strong desire to visit Belarus because of time spent watching the Belarusian news and “National Parks of Belarus,” and I’m no longer surprised when I see the eccentric politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky on yet another show (he has sung and rapped on “Sing with the Stars,” talked about sushi on a morning show, yelled to emphasize his ideas on numerous political programs, and doubtless made lots of other appearances). So let the Western media say what they will, I enjoy watching state-controlled Russian TV and I’m going to miss it when I return to America.

**NOTE:** At least some of what Joanna has enjoyed watching should be available through one or more satellite television services.

### **On Becoming a Teacher**

Sara Beach, 2006-08

**NOTE:** Sara will be returning for her second year at the AH. She’ll be the new Lead Teacher.

In high school history we learned the battle cry of 19<sup>th</sup> century labor: “*Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will!*”

In college we allotted *4 hours for class, 4 hours for the library, 10 hours for procrastination, and 6 hours for sleep* – unless of course it was the night before your term paper was due. In this case you shifted to *16 hours for procrastination, 6 hours for work* (beginning around 11 pm) *and 2 hours for sleep*. (Your friends find you drooling in your library carrel at 7 am.)

Friends in America tell me that they’ve joined the rat race; they work 9 to 5, try to kick back in the evenings, and, reluctantly, get a full night’s sleep in order to do it all again the next day. But here at the AH, no such 8-8-8 rule exists.

And it’s not for lack of labor reform. My day here starts just barely before noon. That is humane, if not downright indulgent. If I happen to come in a little earlier, there’s no need to get down to work right away. Actually, there’s an inescapable pull toward the kitchen table, tea, and snacks. And it’s not a break I have to hide from my boss. It’s my boss (Galya) who invites me to join them. Relations between labor and management are quite good. In fact, I think management would even like us to take a few more tea breaks. (Among other things, these contribute to the best possible relations between the Russian and American staff.)

Between noon and four I go back and forth between lesson planning, grading, and reading the *New York Times* most-emailed list. And then, with a cup of coffee in hand, I do the real work from four to nine in the evening. This is the part of the day when I really feel alive, when I have to be ON for ninety minutes in a row, answering unanticipated questions about modals with grace under fire; acting out the difference between past simple and past continuous; doing a little interpretative dance to demonstrate tag questions – and then – in the fifteen minute break – try to rewind the movie, clean up all the scraps of paper, schedule extra office hours for Masha, find vocab list #7 for Pasha, discuss the quiz with Sasha, look at photos from Natasha’s trip, and make a date for coffee with Dasha.

These supposed *8 hours for what we will* should begin around 9:15, once we’ve cleaned up after the last class. But even when I make it to Joanna’s (see her essay in this issue) by 10 pm and collapse on her couch with a cup of tea, I seem to keep working. For one thing, Joanna and I are A2 (fourth-level) colleagues. We’re allies in the valiant struggle for more conversation-based grammar, and we’re comrades-in-arms in the march towards the proper – though restrained – use of the passive voice. We are united in the fact that, having seen it 13 times, we know every single word of *Father of the Bride*.

We’ve spent more evenings than I can count lamenting dry grammar and thinking of ways to make it relevant. Our students’ mistakes come up in conversation not because they’re funny (“My mom needs to be done”) – well, OK, they sometimes are pretty funny – but because we spend a lot of time thinking about how to do our job better. Most students confuse past modals for real and unreal situations – so what can we do about this? Are there any new speaking activities that will get them talking? What bombed last semester, and what can we do to achieve success this term? Joanna usually reminds me a few days early – sometimes when we’re out on a Saturday night – that we’ve got to remember to write that quiz for Monday, and do I happen to have any good ideas for it?

Like gas in a container, the AH expands to fill the available time, and often it takes as much as being in a different country to prevent me from coming in to work every single day of the week. That’s OK. If I didn’t have my students, I probably wouldn’t have any Russian friends here. And if I didn’t like my students, respect them, and know them as good friends, I wouldn’t have quite as much motivation to help them learn English.

Here is how my days break down. If you subtract tea breaks from my *8 hours for work*, then I suppose I clock in at slightly over 6 hours at the AH. I closely guard my *8 hours for sleep*. And those for *what I will*? As much as I thought it was essential for good mental health to keep this part of my life separate from work (and here’s a shout-out to A2 Unit 2A - Gerund Phrases as Subjects and Objects), *working as a teacher* is slowly but surely turning into *being a teacher*.

### **What It’s Like Being a “Professional American” in Vladimir**

Eric Leiken, 2006-07

The past month I have judged a regional talent show, been a guest of honor at an educational conference in Murom, spoke at an International Judicial Conference in Vladimir, had my profile in multiple newspapers and been photographed more times than I can remember. I can honestly say that I am somewhat of a local celebrity. I can also honestly say that I am not particularly personable, good looking, funny, talented or cool. Why, then, am I so popular? It’s because of what I do for a living. My name is Eric – and I am a Professional American. (True, I also work part time as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, but even for that position, my major qualification is being an American, and the hours are only from 11-9 five days a week.) In contrast, the services of a

Professional American are in constant demand, so my seven colleagues and I are always being invited here and there and fed and feted. Of course, it is nice that people pay attention to you, and think you are interesting, but it is also disconcerting to know that the basis of your appeal has little to do with who you are and everything to do with where your from.

I came to Russia with the goal of getting to know Russians and trying to understand this country whose history, politics, culture and language have always fascinated me. And while I am not leaving as a bitter, jaded ex-pat (I don't think), I am leaving as someone that will not miss answering the questions "So, why did you come to Russia?" "What do you think are the differences between Russia and America?" and "Honestly, what you think about Murom?" I will, however, miss many things. Having truly intellectual and interesting conversations with my D classes, seeing the genuine amusement of my grownup Z1 students after being able to say, "A cold beer, please" on day 3 of the semester, hanging out and playing cards at Joanna's, eating shashlik in the woods, running from a steaming hot banya and jumping into a freezing cold lake at a friend's dacha, and talking about Russian politics in Russian with Russians in Russia. As I am writing this, the Green Day song, "Time of Your Life," is playing (I swear to God). But it is not only that making me nostalgic right now. It is also the fact that despite the weather and the service at the post office, I have really enjoyed my time working at the American Home and have come to love both this place and all the people that have made it feel like home for me.

## **A FEW WORDS FROM THE RUSSIAN STAFF**

### **Library Update**

Jenya Kislyakova.

**NOTE:** Jenya is continuing to do an excellent job while Lena Belova is on maternity leave. Lena's second son, Matvey, was born January 3.

A lot is being done to make the library more user-friendly. For example, the most useful and popular holdings (such as novels, classics, short stories, and recent magazines) have been moved to be more accessible even to those who enter the library for the first time.

Reorganizing the library does take time, to tell the truth. And it was difficult to work there alone. Starting with the spring semester, my sister and AH student, Yulya, has been helping me as an intern.

The library database currently comprises more than 2500 books and magazines. Thanks to numerous donations we have large collections of *National Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. We have numerous novels; some of which can be found nowhere else in Vladimir. Although it's mostly high-intermediate and advanced learners of English who can read most of the books we have, there's no strict determination that the students of this or that level only can check out certain books.

There is a problem, though, because students and their teachers sometimes fail to find a book to fit their actual stage of learning English. They need help from the librarian. Since I'm not available in the library all the time, it was suggested that we develop a list of books arranged according to their level of difficulty. That's my long-term goal, and Yulya and I are going to start working on this after we've finished reorganizing the shelves. (Most of the books in the computer database have been at least roughly categorized according to their level of difficulty.)

Our library is not totally unfriendly to beginners and low-intermediate learners. We have a decent collection for low-level ESL reading, including several Great Illustrated Classics books.

The American Home program exposes its students to the most famous books in the English language—and some that have been translated into English. Basically, it's great to find oneself in a room full of treasures (all of these books are really precious).

Our biggest problem is how to make room for all these treasures. We need someone to donate enough money, so that we can expand the AH and include room for a much bigger library.

Speaking about treasures, I found one for myself. I recently discovered several Harry Potter books that I hadn't read in English! (I'm a big Harry Potter fan!) We have the first movie. If anyone wants to donate the rest of the series, I—and many others—will be most grateful.

Speaking of donated movies, we have more than 400 VHS tapes and DVDs in our current collection. These include *Forrest Gump*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Father of the Bride*, all of which are used in different classes. In fact, almost every level of our program has a movie which the teachers show in full—with the help of printed dialogue, vocabulary lists, and discussion questions. We've decided to use *Pay it Forward* in the new A3 course. (See Ron's comments above.)

Working in the library has been a new kind of experience for me, as well as for my sister. We have no problem finding different things to do to keep the work interesting.

### **The New Kid on the Block**

Natasha Yudina

**NOTE:** Natasha is substituting for Olya Solovkina who is on maternity leave. Her daughter, Viktoria (Vika), was born October 23.

When I came to the AH for the first time last fall everything was new and interesting—the people, the environment, my responsibilities, etc. Day-after-day I tried to get used to everything. This wasn't hard to do because all the Russian staff were very kind and helpful—and I'm very grateful to them. But it took me some time of course to completely settle in. It's natural to feel a bit uncomfortable around people you don't know very well, who have established rules to follow and many different habits and traditions to keep. As a new “team member” I tried to learn everything quickly. I wanted to become a full member of the AH “family” as soon as possible.

It was also important to come to an understanding with the American teachers. I think that they and I had something in common. Everything here was new for them too—even the country. Most of them could not speak Russian very well. But that was in October... Now it's May. The teachers have greatly improved their Russian; and, I hope, my English has improved.

Sometimes it now seems to me that I've been working here not since October but for several years. Although I have never met the teachers who worked here before, I often have a feeling that I know them personally because I have been told so many stories about them.

In addition to the Russian and American staff, I'd like to say something about those students who study English at the AH. At first I thought that it would be impossible to know every student by name. After

all, there were more than 400 of them. But within just a few weeks I found that I was learning—and remembering—their names. I now know almost all of them—and not just their names but what level they are studying and what class they are in.

Once I was asked if the students at the AH were average citizens of our country and of our city. I don't know the answer to this question, but I know for sure that they are different in age (from teenagers to “senior citizens”) and that they have different positions in the society. But they have one thing is common—their interest in English.

There is something special about the atmosphere at the AH that attracts students. They can communicate with other students and with the American teachers and learn a lot about American culture. Some of them have been studying here for years. What do they like about studying at the AH? I think that if they were asked that question they couldn't answer it; because if you really like something you usually can't say why, you can't find the right words to explain—you just like it!

One important contribution to the positive feelings about our program is the fact that everyone at the AH tries to make the process of learning and communication enjoyable. The people here do a very good job, which our students appreciate. And I'm very glad that I can be considered a part of it.

### **Some New Technology**

Oxana Ustinova, Assistant Director

Although the American Home has a very limited budget, improvements that make work at the AH more convenient and efficient are constantly being introduced.

We've been able to switch from dial-up Internet access to DSL broadband. And we've been able to add WiFi (wireless) access to our local network. These changes has provided us with quite a number of new opportunities.

First of all, the AH teachers can now get connected to our wireless LAN and use their laptops for lesson preparation and Internet access in any convenient place in the Home. (Hopefully, sooner or later Vladimir Internet providers will offer unlimited traffic plans. Meanwhile we have to limit our Internet usage to 3 Gigabytes a month).

When introducing “new technologies” we always have the interests of our students at heart. We want to make learning the English language at the American Home more efficient and more fun. For example, now, whenever necessary, teachers can use a laptop with the TV in any classroom to give PowerPoint presentations or access the Internet for teaching purposes.

PowerPoint presentations make it possible to add visual aids when teachers want to make their presentations about, for example, some aspect of American society more vivid and interesting for their students. It is a very convenient way to illustrate their talks with pictures and other illustrations and share their personal experience.

Some of the current teachers have already used the new big-screen plasma TV in the meeting room in the basement when giving their “lectures” on American life and culture.

## SOME “WORDS OF WISDOM” FROM PREVIOUS TEACHERS

### **My Frustrating Eight-Month Job Search**

Liz Bird Malinkin, 2001-03

Ron has asked me to write something about my job search, and while part of me would like to purge those eight painful months from my memory, perhaps what I learned will be helpful for fellow American Home alumni when they go looking for suitable employment.

Well, to say the least, it was an upsetting experience because I thought getting a Masters degree would finally open the door to many jobs. That was one of the main reasons I decided to get a Masters in the first place: many of the jobs I was interested in when I returned from Vladimir required an advanced degree. So once I had my MA in Russian and Eastern European Studies in hand (in April 2006), plus three years of “boots on the ground” living experience in Russia after college, I thought it would not be so hard to find an interesting and suitable job in my field. But my application for every job I applied for was rejected—or simply ignored.

Granted, three of those months I was largely occupied by wedding preparations and then my actual wedding in July. But from August through mid December all I did was look for a job – so that is almost five months of solid job hunting before something came through.

I should also add my search was fairly narrowly focused. I did not apply for anything that was not at least remotely related to Russia. It was depressing though, and I began to question the choice I had made to get a Masters in Russian Studies. (For any of you about to embark on a Masters program in Russian studies or something comparable, I strongly encourage you to combine it with something more practical and marketable like Public Policy, Public Health, Government, Urban Studies, etc. My peers who completed combination Masters degrees seemed to have better luck with finding jobs in a reasonable amount of time)

My story does have a happy ending. I did eventually succeed in finding a job! My luck changed when I inquired about positions at the Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C. just when they happened to have an opening! It also probably helped that the professor I was working for at Michigan was collaborating on a project with the Kennan Institute, and he gave me a referral to the director. For some reason I had originally been hesitant to request help from my professors with my job search. I only took this approach late in the game...in December.

The lesson from my experience is that obtaining a great job where you will be able to use your Russian or being engaged in research or outreach involving Russia *is* possible, but you have to be willing to search long and hard and use every connection you have as there are few positions for “Russian specialists” who are in between a BA and a PhD.

Just to briefly describe the job I found, I am now a Program Assistant at the Kennan Institute which is part of the Wilson International Center for Scholars. We have fascinating events every week, and we host scholars from the former Soviet Union (and from all over the world) who want to do research in Washington. My job is largely administrative, but I am very lucky that my supervisors have recognized my Russian, writing, editing and research skills and have put them to good use. I hope to take on more and more responsibilities and work on programming at some time in the future. Anyway, if you would like to know more about my work or the Kennan Institute, please feel free to email me at [MEBMalinkin@gmail.com](mailto:MEBMalinkin@gmail.com)

I will be happy to give advice to any jobseekers. I know how frustrating the process is—and I know that many AH alumni will want something stimulating and Russia-related.

I hope everyone is well and I look forward to hearing everyone else's news!

### **Serendipity Led Me Back to Teaching**

Sarah Rorimer, 2003-05

When embarking on a job hunt at the beginning of 2007, my primary concern was not to find a job, but to be found by a job. AH teachers and students alike will immediately recognize the linguistic difference between these two phrases: the former is active and the latter is passive. I wanted to find a niche that needed me – a calling. I had generated a list of qualities that characterized my ideal job, but I just could not seem to define it in terms of a profession or title. For example, I knew that I wanted a civic-minded position with an international connection that would allow me to express creativity, enthusiasm and caring—while positively influencing the lives of others. I had also found through a series of administrative internships that I did not want to spend my days sitting in front of a computer screen.

One snowy February evening, after a lecture at the Metropolitan Opera on Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin," I ran into a fellow opera enthusiast and high school principal whom I had met through one of my internships. In a brief exchange, he informed me of an unexpected opening in his ESL department and encouraged me to apply. At the time, I was about to accept a job fundraising for a musical organization, but following the advice of my aunt, I decided not to leave any stone unturned. When I visited the school, I surprised myself by accepting the job on the spot. The opportunity was too good to refuse! That very day, the New York Times ran an article about the great need for ESL teachers in New York City. Within a week, I was certified as a substitute teacher (a process which normally takes 2-4 months) and began working at my new post. Every day, I walk to school and find myself working in an international community that includes recent immigrants from Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nepal and Pakistan. In June, I will begin the New York City Teaching Fellows program, which will allow me to earn a subsidized Masters degree in education while teaching full-time.

I am so grateful for this fortuitous development—even though there is much work to be done! Teaching ESL in the nation's largest public school system offers a major set of challenges (e.g., classroom management, motivating teenagers and teaching students with completely different first languages). I am realizing more and more what a privilege it was to teach at the American Home, where students were eager and dedicated—and where we could focus on understanding just one culture.

I can say without a doubt that I would not be where I am today if it were not for Serendipity!

### **On Being a Russian-American Family in North Carolina**

Britt Newman, 2004-06

Russian teacher Tanya Akimova put it best when she said that I had gotten the American Home's "full package." During my two years in Vladimir I met my wife, Alyona, we got married, and our first son,

Alexander, was born. Now that we've returned to the US, we're having another unusual experience – that of being a Russian-American family in Dixie.

Dixie? Well, sort of. We're in Chapel Hill, NC, which is a far cry from the Dukes of Hazard. It's a college town with lots of graduate students, and about once every month we'll pass somebody on the street speaking Russian. That's about where the Russian influence in Chapel Hill stops. If we drive 40 minutes to Raleigh we can go to a Russian grocery store that's stocked with familiar items, including smoked fish (the kind that goes perfectly with a bottle of Sibirskaya Korona), and more types of oatmeal than most Americans know exist. Initially we went there about once a month to stock up on food and to have some Russian contact, but those trips have tapered off. Most of the Russian-style food that we make (soups, blini, certain types of cakes) use ingredients that you can find in a normal grocery store, but the combinations may be unusual for Americans. Taking blini with sardines to our neighbors' party was a case in point. Those who were adventurous enough to try them thought they were great, but there were definitely some who preferred to stay with the Chex mix. (“Why are they rolling up the pancakes? And do those fish still have the tails on them?!?”)

Being a bilingual household has its advantages. You can be pretty sure that nobody around you is going to know Russian. It's like having a secret code that you can use in public when otherwise you would have to whisper or just bite your tongue. Alyona and I both speak our native languages with Alex. We really want him to grow up knowing both languages. Both of our parents have taken a lot of interest in the other culture and language. My parents are studying Russian on their own and get lessons from Alyona from time to time. Alyona's dad is about to finish level B1 at the American Home, and her mom wants to start studying there in the future. During my in-laws' recent visit to the US, the four parents sat together without Alyona or me and managed to communicate. Of course, sometimes it took five minutes to get across one sentence, but with a few words in Russian and a few in English they were able to converse, and I think they surprised themselves.

Aside from the food and the language, there are some other Russian customs that we keep up. Taking off your shoes inside the house is a great idea, and none of our American guests have had a problem doing this. Alex is always dressed more warmly than our neighbors' kids. We drink hot tea with sweets, jam or honey. There's nothing exclusively Russian about these things, and maybe people in other parts of the US do them as well, but they're not things that I experienced growing up in South Carolina.

Of course, there are plenty of American customs that we have, too. Green salads, for one. And Alyona has become a big fan of homemade chocolate chip cookies and brownies, and (perhaps the one leading to the other) the pilates exercise program. We have family pictures up all around the apartment. Finally, there are some aspects of life in America that you have no practical choice about, like driving everywhere you need to go vs. taking public transportation or walking.

All in all, we are trying to take the best from both cultures. The combination seems pretty good to us.

## COMMENTS FROM SOME GRATEFUL GUESTS

### Visit to Vladimir

Diane Ignashev, Professor of Russian, Carleton College

NOTE: To date four Carleton graduates have taught at the AH, one has done an internship, and one, a PhD candidate at UC Berkeley, has studied in our Intensive Russian Program. Diane contacted me with a request for assistance in arranging for her and nine students to make a two-day visit to Vladimir and Suzdal—on a very limited budget.

Ron:

Thank you so much for putting me in touch with Alexsei and Galina and for allowing them to host us at the American Home. We had an amazing 24 hours in Vladimir that none of the students will forget.

In addition to all the history, the *pamyatniki* (monuments), and other *dostoprimechatel'nosti* (sights), the kids took full note of the clean air, good-tasting water, and wonderful views, so maybe someone will consider applying to come back to teach. In any case, I gave the AH a big talk-up. And Galina and the staff made a profound impression with their efficiency and helpfulness. (If only everyone we worked with on these trips were as reliable and efficient as your staff.)

One more noteworthy moment about the trip: in advanced Russian, before they come to Moscow, my colleague videotapes the students two or three times over the term. One of the taping sessions involves an interview, in Russian, of course, for a position at the American Home. So when this group arrived they finally got to see what they had been applying for. It was a great connection.

### Returning “Home”

Olga Cote

I had been nursing a plan to take my family to Russia for over a year. But it involved such drastic changes in our lifestyle and routines that sometimes it felt like a dream that would never come true—until one day when I called a man from Illinois and my dream seemed like it might in fact become reality.

I was born in Moscow, but left Russia when I was 16. I worked so thoroughly at becoming an American that I thought I would never want to go back. But when I had my children I understood that I would be seriously short-changing them if they could not share any part of the great culture that molded me into the person I am. I made a major effort to teach them Russian when we were alone—but this had major limitations. Without any Russian playmates and constant exposure to Russian at home (my husband Mat did not speak Russian), they were doomed to understanding what I said to them at best.

I became a woman obsessed. They must learn to speak Russian even if it costs me my sanity. And since no amount of Russian tutoring and cartoons were turning them into true bilinguals, my only option was to take them to Russia and totally immerse them in that culture. My friends, and even my family tried to dissuade me. I owe my husband a great debt for supporting me and sharing my wish to enrich our children's worldview and open their horizons even though it entailed completely uprooting his own existence.

I stumbled upon Ron's website while aimlessly surfing the net. Now I know it was meant to be, but at the time I briefly looked over the Serendipity website and moved on. However, I was drawn back to it over the next couple of days. I thought that maybe the person who had enough courage and determination to do the unthinkable in Russia of 1992—build a model American Home and start an English school—just might want to help me out. Finally I made a phone call.

I spoke to Ron on a dusky Saturday evening. I told him about my wish—fully aware that helping Russian expats and their children was not a part of Serendipity's direct mission. But Ron opened his heart and mind to me and gave me hope that the logistical nightmare of moving to a foreign country could be solved.

Since then Ron and the American Home staff have trudged tirelessly through the legal paperwork and exhaustive footwork of preparing and processing documents, arranging daycare, locating an apartment and generally creating that safety network that makes the American Home much more than a language school.

Mat went to Vladimir first to prepare things for us—and to get started on learning my native language. It was the middle of a real Russian winter when Mat arrived in Vladimir, and he started every letter and conversation with me with a very emphatic and not always complementary report on the bone-chilling weather. It was a rough start for him, in part because he did not speak any Russian. Both Tanya and Nelli, the American Home's excellent Russian tutors, had their job cut out for them. When he arrived Mat didn't even know the complete Russian alphabet. However, learning a language by total immersion is the fastest way to success, and very soon Mat was able to communicate with the people he was dealing with who didn't speak English—and to begin to understand the Russian that was all around him. He told me: "I remember the first time I read the word 'bread' on the side of the truck and got so excited that I actually understood my first Russian sign."

Our children and I soon followed Mat to Vladimir. Thanks to Galina's, the AH director's "kontakty," our two boys were immediately enrolled in a "detskiy sad" (a daycare center). They were very worried about their first day and did not want to go despite all our assurances that they would eventually love it. Galina accompanied us on that first day. She wisely offered the kids chocolate—and that solved the problem! After that I think they would have followed her to the moon! Now, several months later, we cannot get them to leave the school at the end of the day. We frequently have to sit on a bench waiting while they bargain for "five more minutes." Their Russian has improved dramatically. It's very gratifying to hear them talk effortlessly with their friends and teachers.

For me it has been wonderful to get acquainted with Vladimir. My father was born and raised here, and I have been able to reconnect with his whole family, including my cousin whom I had not seen for over 20 years. I've walked by the house where my Dad grew up and talked to people who remembered him as a boy. My only regret is that I did not do this earlier.

In addition to reconnecting with my roots, I was looking for ways to make a contribution to the community. As a first step, I'm attempting to assist the Youth Health and Education Center, an organization that tries to help teenagers "deal with life," identify and apply for some grants. Mat is contributing his construction skills. Among other things, he is converting the last available space in the attic from storage to small "study room." Mat commented that "it's been challenging working here in Russia without my usual tools, but it's amazing what one can still get done with a hammer and a saw."

Thank you, American Home staff, from the bottom of our hearts for helping make possible this wondrous opportunity for our family.

## **SPECIAL NOTE**

### **Volunteer Opportunity in Siberia**

**NOTE:** This might be of interest to some of you. Sarah taught at the AH 2003-05. Contact her for more information.

From: "Sarah Rorimer" <[srorimer@gmail.com](mailto:srorimer@gmail.com)>  
Sent: Wednesday, May 09, 2007 3:22 PM  
Subject: Volunteer with the Great Baikal Trail

Hello!

The Great Baikal Trail in Siberia needs more volunteers for summer trail-work! Pass this along if you know of anyone who might be interested! I would highly recommend this organization and would LOVE to sign up again... perhaps another summer.

**For complete information go to:** [www.greatbaikaltrail.org](http://www.greatbaikaltrail.org)