

AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

Number 12 – December 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
SOME NOTES FROM RON & ALEXEI	
The Past, Present, and Future –Ron	2
Some Reflections on Time –Alexei	4
OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHERS	
The Challenge of Trying to Master Russian –Sara Beach	5
Was I Crazy to Come Here? –Dana Buckman	5
A Mushrooming Adventure –Duncan McCreery	6
COMMENTS FROM THE RUSSIAN STAFF	
Helping with Tourism Development –Oxana Ustinova	8
More Efficient Communication –Natasha Yudina	9
Learning Another Language –Jenya Kislyakova	10
NOTES FROM FORMER TEACHERS	
A Year that Really Made a Difference –Erika Boeckeler	11
Life After the American Home –Joanna Greenlee	12
TWO TOUR GROUPS	
Criminal Justice and Politics Trip –Donna Vandiver	13
Student Comments	14
The Fulbright Trip	
The American Home’s Role in Bridging the Cultural Gap –Carol Kirsch	16
Overwhelmed by Russian Hospitality –Kay Bale	17
Russian Memories –Audrey Lesondak	18
Our Common Humanity –Tom Holmes	19
ALUMNI NOTES	20

SOME NOTES FROM RON & ALEXEI

The Past, Present, and Future

Ron

Sixteen years ago when I announced that I was going to try to organize the construction of a “model American home” in our new Sister City of Vladimir, many people voiced skepticism and some had a negative reaction to the project. Among other things, there was concern that if the project fell through, its failure might damage efforts to develop the new Sister Cities relationship.

Many people—on both sides of the ocean—felt that in the midst of all the political, economic, and social turmoil Russia was experiencing, such a complicated project wasn’t feasible. They were undoubtedly right about the odds being against us. But most pioneering projects have to buck the odds.

Despite the obstacles, the American Home was built—and officially dedicated on the 4th of July 1992. Attesting to the difficulties we faced was the fact that, among several foreign-backed projects that were under discussion at the time, the American Home was the only one to actually be implemented in Vladimir.

Fifteen years later it is obvious that a great deal has been accomplished thanks to a very large number of people. Among these people are the Americans who built the AH (see the website for the complete list) and the Russians who provided assistance; the exactly 100 teachers to date (and their host families) who have made the English program possible; all the Americans and Russians who have contributed their time, energy, and talent to the “special projects;” the “intensive Russian” students and their excellent tutors; the members of the tour groups; those who have made special contributions ranging from books and magazines to funding for special needs; and many others.

In the center of all this—and without whom I don’t think anything would get done—are Alexei and Galya Altonen and the rest of the AH’s excellent Russian staff. (For some of the AH staff’s well deserved praise, see previous newsletters—and several of the comments below.)

The AH’s 15th anniversary celebration on the 4th of July was a memorable event. Thanks to the staff’s hard work and attention to detail—and Mother Nature who only “cried” for a relatively short period—a good time was had by all. It was nice to see so many of the Russians who have helped us over the years. And it was nice that the Fulbright teachers were there to help us celebrate.

I’m especially pleased with the success of this past summer’s Criminal Justice and Politics and Fulbright tours. A tremendous amount of work went into planning and implementing the Fulbright trip in particular. The success of the two Fulbright programs to date prompted us to try to arrange for a trip each year. Given the follow up required by the grant rules, it was clear that the University of Illinois’ Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center needed a break between grants.

It was very gratifying when the first three “Russian centers” I contacted all expressed a desire to work with us. The Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies at the University of Chicago has applied for a grant for this next summer. We hope to hear about funding by March. Recruitment of the participants is already under way. For more information, go to:
<http://ceeres.uchicago.edu/index.shtml>.

Alexei and I have already had extensive discussions concerning ways to improve the program. One of the things we should be able to do, thanks to the growing popularity of “wireless communications,” is provide each of the American teachers with a “mobile” phone—and a list of emergency phone numbers. (Used phones are readily available—and you now have to pay only for actual usage.)

Hopefully the phones will never need to be used in a real emergency. But they will provide the American teachers with some peace of mind—and they do come in handy. For example, one of last summer’s teachers forgot his passport at the AH. Thanks to our “mobilny,” it was easy to make the necessary arrangements to get the passport delivered to St. Petersburg the next day.

In addition to trying to host yearly Fulbright trips, we are going to continue to work on upgrading our English program. Hopefully the addition of a third semester at the A (“advanced beginning”) level will help solve the problem of “too much grammar in too little time.” We are also working on making some changes in the online TESOL course all the new teachers now have to take. We want to replace those parts of the current course that aren’t relevant to our program with material that does reflect what our teachers have to deal with. We hope to be able to experiment with some new lessons this next summer.

Some changes are relatively minor—but still useful. See Natasha’s discussion of the intercom link between her and the teachers’ office in the attic.

In an earlier issue I wrote that, after the remodeling work in the attic, every available corner in the AH was being used. I was mistaken. Thanks in part to the help of a visiting builder, Mat Cote, work was started on turning what was storage space at the front of the garage attic into a small office. This can be used by the teachers for office hours, for Russian lessons, and as a quiet place to work on lesson plans.

Finally, if we can manage to come up with the necessary funds, we can build a storage shed—and we can convert the front of the garage from storage space to a modest sized classroom. With the addition of one more teacher, we should be able to better meet the demand for our classes.

There are other possibilities, but I think I’ll defer to the Russian belief that it is bad luck to talk about future prospects over which you don’t have complete control.

It has been a very rewarding 15 years. I’m definitely looking forward to the next decade—and more.

Some Reflections on Time

Alexei

Anniversaries make you think about time. What an elusive thing it is. Something so precious and difficult to measure despite the supposedly universal scale of seconds, minutes, and hours.

Every person at different moments certainly experiences time differently. Our personal time is the measure of our lives. Even if it's shared with others, our "time" is unique to us.

Standing on the AH deck on July 4, as Ron looked back on the 15 years that had passed since the American Home was dedicated, he undoubtedly had a perspective that was different from everyone else present at the celebration. How could the numerous Russian and American guests—even old friends (and it does take shared years to make those)—possibly feel what Ron felt? No one else could match his view of what had transpired over this period of time. At that moment I imagined Ron's 15 years of memories associated with the AH were "larger" than mine.

It's also safe to assume that Ron's everyday perception of time is different from the rest of our perceptions. Years must seem too short for a person trying to come up with ways to "make improvements" in what we are already doing, and at the same time avidly looking for possible new projects. I'm sure that Ron never has enough time for everything he wants to do. His desire to try to do as much as possible—before time runs out—can, of course, make things challenging, even frustrating, for those of us here in Vladimir. But, at the same time, this approach does keep life interesting. Ron is fond of saying, "We make a good team." There just isn't enough time to do everything we would like to do.

While most often time seems to fly by much too quickly, there are situations when it seems to stand still. For example, the AH's "cat in residence," Gosha, was apparently hit by a car. The doctor told us that it would be 30 days before we would know if he would be okay. That time seemed to take forever. (Happily, Gosha seems to be doing okay!)

Unhappily, Mishka, a neighborhood dog with a very sweet disposition who had been a true AH friend for 15 years, didn't make it through this past winter. His time ran out.

It looks like time will go by very quickly for this year's new teachers. It does that for people who work hard and enjoy what they are doing. Good lesson planning and effective teaching unavoidably take a lot of time and effort, leaving them little time for recreation and exploration. We know that this will change as they gain experience—but it is understandable that they very much want more time now.

I'm sure that this summer's Fulbright group felt desperately short of time, too. Now that they are back home, when they reflect on their "great adventure," the members of this wonderful expedition must feel like the four weeks they were here in Russia lasted only an instant—that their time here went by too quickly for them to see and do, that is, to learn everything they wanted to learn. Thirty days don't seem nearly long enough to truly understand Russia—no matter how much time and effort we put into organizing the Fulbrighters' seminars and how much effort they put into learning as much as possible.

It seems to me that the truly thoughtful and insightful comments that you will find in this newsletter demonstrate that the American visitors and we made pretty effective use of the available time.

The future seems to hold a lot of promise. Among other things, as Ron mentions, another Fulbright grant has been applied for. Once again, if a grant is awarded, we will be honored to have the opportunity to work with such dedicated American teachers. We know that all the time and effort that it takes to prepare and implement this program will continue to be rewarded many times over.

Time will tell what new challenges and opportunities await us in the years to come.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHER

Trying to Master Russian—One Embarrassing Mistake at a Time

Sara Beach, Lead Teacher

With my second year at the American Home underway, I decided it was finally time to learn how to express this fact in Russian. I spend so much time teaching the present perfect ("I have lived in Vladimir for 14 months") that I was just a little disappointed to learn that I can use the regular old present tense to say this in Russian. Although I clearly have a long way to go, my Russian teacher, Nelli, has commented that my speech has improved significantly and, furthermore, that she can't get me to be quiet long enough to teach me anything during lessons. (I'm renting my own apartment this year, and I really miss having someone to talk to.)

Since I'm now much less afraid of making mistakes, I make a lot more of them. On the first day of my Z1 class this semester, I was asking the students about their professions. One woman told me that she was a manager of a "kadr" (a work collective/team), but from across the room I thought I heard "cadaver," and so I asked her how she liked cutting up dead bodies. In my A2 class, we were discussing horoscopes and instead of calling one of my older female students a Capricorn, I called her (in Russian) an "old goat." Recently a local TV station put together a feature on Galya and Alexei's lives and careers together, and they asked me for an interview. I struggled through it and was pretty worn out by the last question—which really caught me by surprise: "If you were married, would you like to work alongside your husband?" Having no good answer for this, I desperately and unthinkingly blurted out, "I am without a husband!" I sincerely hope that this will not be the only clip they air, although...if it brings in more students to the American Home, I suppose it won't be all bad.

Was I Crazy to Come Here?

Dana Buckman, Illinois State University

Having a chemistry background, knowing absolutely no Russian, and with no experience teaching English, I was obviously a good candidate for a teaching position at the American Home. I first heard about the American Home from Dr. Pope when I was one of his Student

Assistants at ISU. It always sounded like a very interesting place to work. Following college I spent a couple of years at a mindless job. Finally I decided that I would be happier working somewhere else. The offer to teach English in Russia was always in the back of my mind, and, after being assured that my lack of knowledge of Russian would not be a huge problem, I decided to quit my “factory job” and board the plane to Moscow.

When I stepped off the plane I couldn’t completely ignore the little voice in the back of my head that whispered, “What on earth were you thinking when you agreed to come here?” During our slow drive from Moscow to Vladimir, I sleepily watched as our bus rolled past small villages, crazy Russian drivers, and strange little fruit stands. I was struck with a lingering feeling that I had made a huge mistake when I boarded that Delta flight from Atlanta to Moscow. After I arrived in Vladimir and finally got off of that bus, I started to feel a little better. Certainly the hot meal provided by my host family and a refreshing 10 hours of sleep went a long way toward easing my mind. Still, I was unsure of how much I was going to enjoy my time in Russia.

I’ve now been here for two months. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t having any fun. I spend a lot of time with both Russians and Americans and the transition has been smooth so far, with only a small amount of culture shock. Sure, teaching is a lot of work and the hours are often long (though I have been assured that next semester will be easier), but the overall experience has been worthwhile so far.

For example, our day trip to Bogolyubovo brought the excitement of synchronized swimming by several of the teachers in a pond near the famous “Church on the Nerl” and an awkward exchange with a farmer holding a very large whip. The farmer was walking in the opposite direction and said something very quickly (or maybe he asked us for something, who knows). We responded by looking at each other, realizing we had no clue what the man had said, and walking away. He didn’t seem too happy about this, but we were quickly out of the reach of the whip so no harm done! The classes have been fun as well. On my first day teaching B2, I had the students write a story about a picture that I drew on the board. The picture had a man throwing a banana at a cat with a fish in its mouth, and I got some interesting stories about a “super banana grenade” and the cat being a spy with information in the fish.

Of course, time will tell whether or not I made the right decision. For now, though, I’m pretty confident that my choice to come to Vladimir was not a completely insane one. Of course, I fully expect to receive a good amount of cultural exposure during my time here. More than anything, though, I want to leave Vladimir with plenty of stories to tell. I think that is a goal that will be easily achieved during my year here.

A Mushrooming Adventure

Duncan McCreery

The third week after arriving in Vladimir, my host father and brother, Vladimir and Pavel, announced that they had plans to go mushrooming the following Saturday, and that I was invited. Feeling like this was both a gracious offer and an opportunity for quality bonding with my adopted family, I happily accepted the invitation. They said we would be leaving promptly at 7 am.

Having spent some time in Russia before coming to Vladimir, I knew about the looseness with which Russians tend to treat departure and arrival times. I was therefore skeptical about the specificity of our early morning plans. On the other hand, I had never been mushrooming before and thought that it was possible that this storied Russian tradition mandated a stricter schedule than the norm. I made, what turned out to be, an equally naïve assumption that our return time would be in the early afternoon (after all, how long can someone walk around the woods picking mushrooms?) and made plans to meet two of the other teachers for some exploration of Vladimir at 2 pm.

Saturday morning at 6:30 am the alarm on my cheap cell phone (if your number has a five in it, it can't be dialed) sounded, and I sprang up from bed ready to comb the forest floor for those fungal delights. Expecting damp ground and swarming mosquitoes, I chose to wear an old pair of sneakers, heavy duty painter's pants, and two layers of long-sleeved shirts. At 6:45 am I was ready to board the bus and hit the trail, but decided to continue reading Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* until there was stirring in the other room. I was able to read quite a few pages.

At 8:45 am we left the apartment and headed for the bus station equipped with insect repellent, a large purple basket, and a liter of pop. (Yes, in English it's properly called "pop" and not "soda" or "coke." Those readers who disagree are misinformed. This semester's D-level students have learned the correct name.)

We quickly purchased our tickets at the bus station and decided to peruse the various shops while waiting for the bus to leave. After purchasing a few snacks for the soon to be embarked on adventure, we boarded the bus and began our journey. It should be pointed out that my Russian was not advanced enough at the time for me to be able to understand the conversation about where the bus was going, which left me blindly trusting my host father and brother.

We headed east—I think—for about half an hour. We then departed the bus in seemingly the middle of nowhere. Guessing from the hand gestures of those who were making the decisions, "we" decided that the best mushroom hunting grounds were in the woods across a field. It's not terribly important which field and which woods. We were in the Russian countryside where, for the most part, there is nothing but fields, woods, and occasional abandoned buildings. In any case, I had the impression that these mushrooming grounds were a family secret, the location of which should not be revealed in an essay like this.

We traversed the field at a brisk pace, quickly arrived at the woods, and began our search. The advice Vladimir and Pavel gave me was to look around the base of birch trees. I was also informed that white mushrooms were the most prized.

Off we went, like a search party looking for evidence at a crime scene, stalking the elusive fungi. I don't think it is possible to overstate our team's lack of success. After finding almost entirely inedible varieties over the next 2 ½ hours, we decided to take a break. We found a fallen tree where we sat and rested our tired legs.

As we looked around, it simultaneously occurred to all of us that we were lost.

It was decided that we should end the mushrooming for the day and do our best to navigate our way toward civilization. After an additional two-plus hours of tromping through fields and forests, the faint sound of fast moving cars could be heard. Alas, our journey seemed to be coming to an end. We followed our ears until we found the road. At this point, I made my third error of the day by assuming that we would find a way to catch a ride back to the city. However, Vladimir decided that it would be lazy of us to flag down a bus or car. For the next 3 hours we followed the road toward Vladimir on foot, dodging manic Russian drivers as they sped by.

Our adventure ended when we arrived at an outlying transit station and boarded the next bus to the city, with four glorious mushrooms in our oversized basket—not nearly enough to satisfy our pride, which we had left somewhere among the ferns and birches.

COMMENTS FROM THE RUSSIAN STAFF

Helping with Tourism Development

Oxana Ustinova

Thanks to the dedicated American “tourism team,” Serendipity-Russia is continuing to make a contribution to tourism development efforts of the Vladimir region. Since 2004 the team, led by Dr. Bruce Wicks, a professor of Leisure Studies at the University of Illinois, has made a number of recommendations and provided concrete assistance. The latter has included producing and maintaining a City of Vladimir website for visitors (www.vladimir-russia.info), producing a map for visitors in both Russian and English, a database program for collecting and organizing tourist related information (on hotels, restaurants, events, etc.), and a poster of Vladimir’s historic center. Team member Karen Hasara, a former Illinois State legislator and former mayor of the State capital, Springfield, has led two very successful “fall tours” and is scheduled to lead a third tour this next fall. (See “tours” on the Serendipity-Russia website.) Karen has also arranged for the funding for this project since 2005. (The “start up” funding was provided by Sister Cities International.)

This past summer, in collaboration with the Hotel and Entertainment Complex “AMAKS Golden Ring,” the Vladimir Oblast Tourist Information Center, and the City of Vladimir Tourism Development Center, the American Home hosted a two-day series of “seminars.” The topics covered were tourism development, service quality, prioritizing tourism development tasks, and effective website design. The website topic was presented by Katya Lakshanova, team member and “information architecture” specialist.

The participants included representatives from the Vladimir City Administration, travel agencies, hotels, and the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve. One of the major goals of the seminars was encouraging collaboration between the tourism stakeholders to develop common goals and decide on priorities.

The second day’s priority generating exercise (the “Nominal Group Technique”) came up with the following suggestions: develop effective “brands” (slogans) for the City and the Oblast,

collaborate with local artists and craftsmen and develop high-quality unique souvenirs, and develop new tour themes

The participants provided very positive feedback on the programs. For example, two travel agencies informed us that, after attending Mrs. Lakshtnova's presentation, they had immediately begun work on improving their websites.

Hopefully funding can be found to bring the team back this next summer.

Note: Once again, Oxana provided invaluable assistance with the "seminars." Without Alexei and Oxana's hard work—and assistance from other AH staff—this program would not be possible. It would, of course, also not be possible without the contributions of the "tourism team": Dr. Bruce Wicks, Karen Hasara, and Katya Lakshtonova.

More Efficient Communication

Natasha Yudina

I've been working at the American Home for a year now. A lot has changed during this period of time. All the AH staff tries to find ways to make our work more efficient. From America Ron tries to send useful things, including books for the library and decorations for American holidays which lift our spirits.

Last year a group of Americans visiting Vladimir brought a suitcase full of more than just books and decorations. There was also a pair of intercom units—a truly great invention.

I know that when Ron first asked if we would like to have an intercom to communicate with the teachers' office in the attic, so that we wouldn't have to go to the foot of the stairs and shout or climb the stairs all the way to their office, the response was that we could easily continue to get along without this device.

I guess we have to admit that we were mistaken. Now if I need to let a teacher know that a student has come to see them, for example, all I have to do is press the "talk" button. This is especially convenient when I have to take a phone call or answer a visitor's questions. I don't have to decide between breaking off the conversation in order to go to the teachers' office or delaying the information meant for one of the teachers. In short, I no longer have to waste anyone's time.

However, every coin has two sides. It's wonderful that I can communicate with the teachers so quickly. The disadvantage is that when I use the intercom, I lose the opportunity to get some good exercise during my working day and get a bit thinner. Also, when I'm talking over the intercom I can't see our teachers' beautiful eyes. So, if I have a chance to go upstairs, I take it.

Note: There is also a pair of intercoms linking the library in the basement with the teachers' office—which, according to Jenya, is convenient.

Learning One More Language

Jenya Kislyakova

Tere! Saame tuttavaks! Minu nimi on Ženja. Ma elan Vladimirs, Venemaal. Ma räägin natuke eesti keelt. (Translation: Hello! Let's get to know each other! My name is Jenya. I live in Vladimir, Russia. I speak a little Estonian.)

That's about all I can say in Estonian now. This is approximately what I was able to say in English 12 years ago, in French 7 years ago, and in German 4 years ago.

Estonian is my fourth foreign language. Trying to learn it is a new, exciting and important experience. Estonia is the first foreign state I've visited. Some of my relatives live there (my aunt and her family) and I spent 2 weeks in Tallinn and Narva this past summer.

For many people my decision to learn Estonian seems strange – why learn the language of a country that has caused so many problems for Russia and for Russians living there? Well, I definitely didn't decide to learn Estonian in order to go there and fight for the rights of my former countrymen, though I often feel a strong desire to do that. I simply want to be better informed – to understand the people, why they do certain things this way and not another. And the best way to try to better understand them is by learning their language.

Another reason is to be able to communicate in Estonian with Estonians when I'm in their country – not only in English which not everyone knows and not in Russian which many pretend not to know. When in Estonia, I got into a couple of awkward situations when someone I was trying to communicate with didn't speak either Russian or English. Luckily, there was always a relative who spoke Estonian available. But I ended up not trying to talk with Estonians at all and, as a result, probably missed a lot.

So I took advantage of the first opportunity to go to a bookstore in Tallinn. That was one of the best days of my vacation. We had planned to see the new Harry Potter movie at the Coca-Cola Plaza Movie Theater and have a nice lunch at a café. I was planning to buy a textbook, a dictionary and a couple books about Estonia and Tallinn. I also bought the seventh Harry Potter book which was hot off the presses. I just couldn't resist the pile of books lying there on a special table not exactly out of reach and not really beyond my budget.

I also bought an Estonian language textbook with a CD and my Estonian cousin bought a dictionary and a book about Tallinn in Russian as a present for me.

So now I'm a beginning student of this language and it's a funny sensation. Because there are so many things to learn, you can't really communicate a lot of important information to anyone right away. I'd probably be able to introduce myself and ask how to get to the nearest currency exchange office, but I can't talk about the weather or discuss my favorite movie or band. Besides, I can't make heads or tails of any Estonian noun cases (of which there are 14) and there's no gender distinction at all (there aren't even separate pronouns for he and she).

This makes me feel like most Z1-Z2 students probably do at the American Home and my own private students who are also beginners. I wonder if our American teachers feel the same while learning Russian.

On the positive side, I have come to understand better what beginning language students might have difficulties with, and I can see some new ways of teaching certain things that I can try to apply in my own teaching—and, if they seem to work, pass on to the AH teachers.

The structure of the Estonian language is really foreign. The only other languages it is close to apparently are Finnish and Hungarian. This means that the other languages I've learned aren't of any help. Besides, the textbook doesn't have many lessons where I could use what I've learned (like "tell me about your hometown"). But I'll work it out.

I definitely know that I'm not going to say just "Tere!" (hello) to the security guards at the Estonian Embassy in Moscow the next time I go to get a visa.

Note: One of the major things we are working on is trying to make sure that the grammar and vocabulary we teach our students are what they need to know in order to communicate effectively.

NOTES FROM FORMER TEACHERS

A Year that Really Made a Difference

Erika Boeckeler, 1997-98; Assistant Professor of English, Kenyon College

Russians in the seventeenth century used a different word for the first person pronoun 'I' than contemporary Russians use today. *Az* (*Аз*), like the contemporary Russian *Ya* (*Я*), was also a letter, but it came at the beginning of the alphabet, instead of at the end. My year as an American Home teacher in Vladimir was like that shift from *A* to *Z*, from *Az* to *Ya*, from one kind of self to another kind of self—a self that is forever changed because of that experience.

I am now working as an assistant professor at Kenyon College, having recently received my PhD in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. My daily life often reminds me of how that year shaped my present life. I learned how to make friends and acquaintances in unexpected places, like the woman who invited me in for tea as I gazed at a church across the street from her home during my first week there. The generosity and kindness of strangers in Russia never ceased to amaze me, and I strive towards those qualities in my life. I developed friendships in Vladimir which carry into today—one of my Russian friends has asked me recently to be the godmother of her newborn daughter.

Academically, learning Cyrillic spurred the passion which has become my professional livelihood. My dissertation-turned-book-manuscript discusses the impact of the alphabet upon intellectual development in the early modern period, which saw the invention of movable type and printing press. I devote one long chapter to 17th century Cyrillic in which I discuss alphabetic phenomena during this odd time when the Cyrillic alphabet was still in flux. Some quirky

alphabet trivia with which you may wish to impress your friends at cocktail parties include a) alphabet books do not agree on the number or order of letters in the Cyrillic alphabet; b) Peter the Great personally cut out three letters, writing the order for this while he was leading the Russian army in a war against Sweden! c) the first extant poem written in a Slavic language is an alphabet acrostic, d) the most pedagogically advanced alphabet primer of its time appeared in Moscow, and you can see this quirky printed book on display in Suzdal.

Although I am a member of the English Department, Kenyon College prizes interdisciplinary dialogue, and I am able to integrate Russian literature into my teaching. Who knew that my first real experiences of teaching at the American Home ten years ago would lead me in this direction? Whatever the future holds, I (or Az', or Ya) have been forever "cyrillicized" by my year at the American Home.

Note: For another example of what a difference a year at the AH can make, see Brooke Ricker's comments under Alumni Notes

Life After the American Home

Joanna Greenlee, 2005-07 (Lead Teacher 2006-07)

After finishing the summer session at the AH, Eric, Sara and I spent about five weeks teaching English for the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation at their workshops for scientists in Rostov-on-Don and Chisinau, Moldova. The program is designed to prepare the participants to give presentations in English at conferences. Those of us from the American Home taught English classes (mine was called "Storytelling through Poetry and Song") and scientists from America taught classes related to their fields. At the end of the program, the students gave scientific presentations and we evaluated them.

Eric and I then traveled to Georgia and Turkey. We visited beautiful cities and historic places such as Tbilisi, Ani (the ancient capital of Armenia), Mount Ararat, Lake Van, Mount Nemrut, Ankara, and Istanbul. After that I returned home to the wonderful state of Minnesota and started working for my old summer stand-by, St. Paul Parks and Recreation, while looking for a more permanent job. My goal was to work for a nonprofit organization, preferably with immigrants, but I was open to other possibilities.

Fortunately, the one job I had applied for that met my ideal criteria was the first to call me for an interview, and about a week later I was offered a position. The organization is called Lifetrack Resources. I work as a job developer, helping immigrants and refugees with job training and placement. As I'm writing this, I've only been on the job for a couple weeks, but I'm already learning a lot. It promises to be an interesting and challenging job.

Unfortunately, there probably won't be any Russian-speaking immigrants coming through my specific program, but I was told that the organization deals with some Russians, and that I might be able to be of assistance occasionally, as no one else on staff speaks Russian.

Although I'm glad to be home, I miss Russia and the American Home. I'm thankful for my two years of experience in Vladimir and I'm confident that what I learned at the AH will be of benefit in this next phase of my life.

TWO TOUR GROUPS

Criminal Justice and Politics Trip—May15-28

NOTES: Donna Vandiver is now Associate Professor & Graduate Coordinator at Texas State University, San Marcos. This was the seventh CJ and Politics trip organized by the AH. By chance, all the students on this year's trip were Illinois State University Criminal Justice Sciences majors.

Experiencing Russia—Continuity and Change

Donna Vandiver, Trip Leader

It had been four years since my last trip to Russia. The first visit was fascinating, but this trip left me with memories for a lifetime. I took more than 700 pictures! I had the best group of students with me. I had so much fun seeing them experience Russia for the first time. I was so glad to see Nadya (the AH's tour escort) again, and I even ran into a few people I had met from my previous trip. In a meeting with the students and staff at the Juridical Institute, I met a young bright student (Svletlana) and realized that I knew her Mom, Anna, now a Lt. Colonel at the Institute. Several years before her mother taught at Illinois State University. It was nice to have this connection.

Vladimir looked the same in many ways, but there were also many changes. Not only was there a new hotel, but there was a new mall nearby. Many of the hard to find items from our previous trip were at our disposal here. All of us made regular trips to the mall for the items we forgot to pack.

I was also able to spend an afternoon at the American Home. I was able to visit with some of the teachers. I tried to catch up on the Internet as they were preparing to teach their next class. It's so nice to be around such bright young people. I can't imagine what feats they are going to accomplish in their classrooms and in their lives.

We also were able to take the train to St. Petersburg. The last time I was here that city was closed to "ordinary tourists" as it celebrated its 350th anniversary. The train ride was so much fun and we welcomed the change of scenery. It was really warm in Vladimir so we were able to cool off in St. Pete. We went to the Hermitage, Peter and Paul Fortress, and many cathedrals. Not only did we attend a ballet, but we also went to a Russian Folk Concert, where two of my students, Ellis and Kayla, were prevailed upon to join the dancers on stage. We all enjoyed this. When the time came to catch our next train, we weren't sure if we ready to leave, but when we arrived in Moscow we were glad to see more sites and do a little shopping.

None of the students wanted to leave Russia. Everyone was talking about how and when they were going to return. Our trip was incredible. I was glad to be a part of it.

Student Comments

I am so glad I made the choice to go to Russia. Our group was the best. We never stopped having fun! We also met some amazing people in Russia—one being Nadya [the group's Russian escort]! Without her the trip would not have been the same. Russia changed my life. I cannot wait to go back! **Beth Maher**, Senior

I really enjoyed the friendliness of the locals. I was in fact very pleasantly surprised by the reaction of the Russian people to me. The rest of the group and I were a little worried that I would be a target because I am African American; but that was the least of my troubles during the trip. Instead of being a target, I was sort of the center of attention—which I didn't mind.

I was very impressed by the American Home. It is an excellent setup for both Americans and Russians. I believe that everyone that attends the English school there is receiving the best possible education.

I also really appreciated the Russian students who took us out on the town and just hung out with us throughout our stay in Vladimir and Murom. One thing that I did not like was not being able to stay the night in Murom. I was looking forward to spending more time with my host family. As it was, our visit there felt rushed, and I didn't have a lot of time for one on-one interaction. However, overall this was a well planned and executed trip, and our guide, Nadya, was the best. She tried to meet everyone's needs and make us as comfortable as she could. She really knew how to interact with us "crazy" American kids.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I would not change for the world. I am so glad that I was able to participate in this study abroad program with this great group of students and especially with Dr. Donna Vandiver. **Ellis Bowers**, graduated last August

NOTE: An overnight stay in Murom had been scheduled—but there was a last minute change in plans.

I have had the privilege of traveling outside of the States a number of times. I can say without any hesitation that the Russian trip is my favorite. Going on this trip with a great group of fellow students was a really wonderful experience. I had the chance to do things that regular tourists never get the chance to do (visit prisons, attend a conference at a militia [police] academy, visit with law students, etc). In addition, the museums and the architecture are amazing, nothing like I have ever seen before.

Russia has a rich history, and the Russian people are some of the friendliest people I have ever met. I would go back anytime! **Melissa Parker**, Senior

The trip to Russia was my first time out of the United States and it was an experience that I will never forget. Beyond the normal sightseeing and tourist attractions (which were in and of

themselves worth the trip), I was given the opportunity to examine Russia's criminal justice system by meeting with law students, and visiting militia training schools and correctional institutions.

After taking a course on world criminal justice systems and learning about Russia in particular, visiting the country provided me with a whole new perspective on the country's relatively new "democratic" political and government structures. Speaking to Russians about the interpretation of our country's laws was also quite intriguing. For example, one girl I spoke with asked why we have sex offenders register publicly. I explained the rationale behind the policy. She then asked me whether or not it is effective. The fact that I couldn't answer her question made me stop and think.

I could not have asked for a better experience than studying abroad in Russia. With great pleasure, I anticipate traveling there again soon. *Jeremy Braithwaite*, Graduate Student

I absolutely loved Russia. Going into this trip I was so nervous. It was my first time leaving the country—and I was traveling with people I really did not know. However, after our 6 hour layover in Atlanta Georgia, we all became acquainted with each other. While in Vladimir I thoroughly enjoyed the different tours we and our time with a host family. I loved how small townish Vladimir felt!

I was happy to visit the American home. When we arrived there we got to play football with the Russians, and then they took us to a disco, which was an amazing experience! It was so awesome. Their clubs aren't totally different from clubs here in the U.S., but the music was different and the dancing was definitely not like here in the States. The Russians stand far apart when they dance. This is one of the experiences on the trip where I think I learned the most about culture because we got to hang out with the Russians outside of lectures and just chill out and have a good time with them.

One of my favorite trips was the one to Murom. Although our time there was short, the people there welcomed us with open arms and really talked to us about their culture and life. The students I got to talk to were some of the best people I met in Russia. I still hear from them once in a while.

Before we hopped on the train for St. Petersburg I was a bit nervous. I wondered how transportation worked in Russia and how our overnight on the train would be. But honestly it was a great learning experience. I loved the train ride. Our group was able to get closer to each other—aided by the close quarters—and we were able to learn more about Russian culture from the people we met on the train.

When we arrived in St. Petersburg I was happy to encounter cooler weather than we had in Vladimir. It was refreshing. St. Petersburg I think was the most beautiful city we visited. The architecture was amazing. I loved the riverboat ride!! It was one of my favorite parts of the entire trip! I also loved the ballet we saw there—Swan Lake. Although there wasn't much I could understand, it was awesome because I had never been to a ballet before in my life and it was an amazing experience.

The train ride to Moscow was as enjoyable as the ride to St. Petersburg. While in Moscow we visited a very big outdoor souvenir and flea market. I enjoyed this the most out of the things we did in Moscow. We got to interact with a wide variety of people, and it was the first time I could bargain for the items I wanted. It was an interesting experience. Also the circus that we attended was very interesting. Again I could not understand most of what was said, but both the human and the animal performers were impressive—especially the porcupines. [There is probably no other circus in the world that has trained porcupines—the Russian circus world strives for originality.—RP]

Before going to Russia we were warned that the hotels we would be staying at might not be up to American standards, but in all honestly none of them were terrible. They all had their own charming character. The St. Petersburg hotel was my favorite because it seemed to be so ritzy.

If I had the option of going to Russia again, I'd leave in a heart beat! It was an amazing trip, and I am so glad that I went. I think about it all the time and regularly look at the pictures I took to remind me of my memories. Everyone that I went with was great. I don't think I could have asked for better people to share my experience with. Some of us still stay in touch and get together once in a while.

It was an amazing trip that brought us all together and I loved EVERY second of it! *Samantha Strom*, Junior

For two web pages on the trip go to:

<http://www.cfkeep.org/html/snapshot.php?id=84365854025228>
<http://www.cfkeep.org/html/snapshot.php?id=80144485067711>

The Fulbright Trip—June 25-July 23

The American Home's Role in Bridging the Cultural Gap

Carol Kirsch, 7th grade social studies, Westview Junior-Senior High School, Topeka, Indiana

I do not know if the American Home staff realizes what an amazing comfort zone they provided for us American teachers while we were in Vladimir, but they truly were a wonderful safe harbor during the colorful, exciting, but somewhat unsettling experience of taking on a new land, language and customs. Our gracious host families did everything possible to tend to our needs. Transportation in Vladimir may have been crowded, but it was always reliable. Food was nearly always delicious. The weather was usually great. However, there was always a sense of relief when I walked through the door at the American Home—which in fact felt like “home.” Seeing the familiar furnishings (and American-style toilet!), the smiling faces (unlike Americans, Russians tend not to smile in public)—and even the air conditioning—was worth all the rubles I had in my wallet. Each morning when I entered the American Home, I felt a small weight fall off my shoulders, and I knew it would be a good day.

There was one time during our stay in Vladimir that I was particularly reminded of how much I had taken things for granted. After being in Russia for two weeks and eating many different kinds of unfamiliar food, I think many of us subconsciously yearned for some familiar American fare. Thus, when we returned from a scavenger hunt where one of our tasks was to purchase the ingredients for American-style sandwiches, it was a treat to eat standard favorites like grilled cheese. As we were enjoying our “American lunch,” Ron interrupted the general chatter at the table to ask the AH staff what they thought about the American-style sandwiches. They responded with polite smiles. It was obvious that what we were eating would not have been their first choice for lunch. For a fleeting second my thought was, “How could you *not* like these sandwiches? Everyone likes them!” It was at that moment that I realized we really were not in the US after all.

Even though this was the American Home, we were in fact in Russia. I concluded that yes, we tend to seek out and embrace what we know—and are comfortable with. But our goal can’t be to “bring America to the world.” That definitely is not the aim of this Fulbright-Hays program. One of the main goals of this program is to provide American teachers with the opportunity to learn about cultural differences and how they can influence individual and group behavior. It was exciting and a privilege to be able to become so embedded in another world that I could switch from being an American to, at least in a limited way, being a Russian. The American Home was a very important part of that experience.

In a sense, the American Home provided that amazing place where we American teachers could, in effect, stand at the side of a swimming pool and dip our toes in the water before deciding whether or not to jump in. Those who were a little afraid could stay near the edge of the pool—and observe from the sidelines. For those who were more adventuresome, the day could be spent in the deep end knowing that if help was needed, there was always an AH “lifeguard” on duty.

Best wishes to the staff of the American Home. You’re the best!

Overwhelmed by Russian Hospitality

Kay Bale, history and psychology, Pendleton Heights High School, Anderson, Indiana

This past summer I was fortunate to be one of fifteen American teachers who had the privilege of spending four weeks in Russia courtesy of a Fulbright-Hays grant through the University of Illinois. I have participated in study tours similar to this in the past, and each has been an enriching and incredibly rewarding experience. But this trip was different. This was the first study tour, for me, with an extended home stay. I must admit that I was apprehensive about this aspect of the trip. To move into another family’s home seemed like an invasion of their privacy and personal space and an inconvenience to all. However, I must say that I was completely blown away by the hospitality of the host families and of the Russian people in general. I’m still gaining appreciation and processing the impact of the whole experience.

There were times when it would have been easier to stay in a hotel. There were times I wished I were in a hotel. But when I think of the experiences I had, I’m so thankful for the opportunity to get to know some really amazing people. It’s hard to find the right words as I share stories with

my classes. In some ways it was one of those “you had to be there” experiences. I can show the pictures and the souvenirs I brought home but somehow that falls short of conveying what an incredible experience I was a part of. Not only were the host families amazing, but so many of the people we encountered went so far out of their way to make us feel welcome and to help us learn about and participate in their rich culture.

I learned more about Russia on this trip than I have learned about any other country I have visited. The connection with these families, the staff at the American Home, and so many others we came in contact with made the difference. Words seem inadequate to convey the emotion that I feel when I think back on this experience.

The American Home is a unique and special place. I am so thankful that I met and was able to spend time with this incredible group of people. Alexei and Galya are amazing ambassadors for the American Home and for Russia. I am truly glad to know them. The AH is a jewel, and based on the enthusiasm and accolades shared at the Home’s fifteen-year anniversary celebration, it seems that the people of Vladimir agree. I sincerely hope that more American teachers will have an opportunity to meet these wonderful people and participate in the daily life of Vladimir and Murom. I feel greatly enriched and immensely thankful for this opportunity.

Russian Memories

Audrey Lesondak, English as a second language, Patrick Marsh Middle School, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin

It’s been more than three months since I stepped off the plane in Chicago from my trek through Russia. I was greeted warmly by my family’s smiles at the gate. (Russians don’t smile often in public.) The remembrances from this trip have lingered with me far longer than can be explained by the usual post-trip euphoria. I carry memories of the trip on a well worn *geostrovskiy padnos* or Russian tray used to hold the bread and salt offered to visitors as a part of a very old Russian greeting tradition. When I look at this tray I can dip my thoughts into the salt of memory even in the middle of my everyday American life. Why do the memories of this adventure linger with me? .

There are so many possible reasons. Maybe it’s the “comfort foods” that Russians eat frequently—dumplings or *pelmeni*, pancakes or *belini*, porridge, soups, and of course chocolate. Eating these here in the U.S. reminds me of meals there. Or maybe it’s the great “kitchen conversations” I shared with my host families—nights sharing ideas on raising children, teaching, daily life, and politics. Of course, these conversations are shared here in Wisconsin with different friends in different kitchens. But common themes bring back memories of such conversations with others in another land with whom we share more common concerns than I had previously realized. Maybe it is all the walking I do. Walking in a school that is two blocks long may be nothing compared to walking the entire town of Murom, but walking—which Russians do a lot of—is very different from driving everywhere as we Americans tend to do. Or perhaps my lingering remembrances are simply because of a single photograph ... Yes, perhaps a single picture.

A teacher in my school put up beautiful pictures of some of the great wonders of the world. One of them is a stunning night picture of St. Basil's Cathedral which sits as "crown jewel" at one end of Red Square in Moscow. I traverse that long hallway often. As I rush from one class to another, I am thankfully forced to pause and marvel. Wow, I was just there! It is then that a whole series of impressions begin rushing through my mind—images that somehow seem stronger and more powerful than mere memories. I find myself picturing one man standing in front of the domes—a man who took it upon himself, at a great personal risk, to beg that St. Basil's not be destroyed during the Stalin era when so many beautiful churches were torn down or converted to other uses. I also see in my mind's eye the many small picturesque icon filled rooms inside St. Basil's—which is in fact a collection of small "chapels." I hear in my head the beautiful rich voices of the stately choir that sang at noon in the Cathedral's belly, and I feel the cool summer breeze on my face in Red Square.

Yes, I'm back in the Wisconsin, in the U.S.—but I think I left a bit of me back in Russia. Why else would such powerful memories stay with me?

Also see: Audrey Lesondak, "Reflections on what we can learn from a Russian school system," <http://www.weac.org/sharephotos/2007-08/oct07/russia.htm>

Our Common Humanity

Tom Holmes, Advanced Placement World History, Early History of Mankind, and Modern Civilizations; Roosevelt High School, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

The dictionary defines "serendipity" as "the faculty for finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for." I think this nicely encapsulates much of our Fulbright program experience.

As I think back upon my time in Russia, I recall the lectures and the excursions covering topics such as justice, history, education and the plight of women in Russia today. In reviewing my notes it becomes apparent to me that the underlying theme was something with which we can all identify, that is the desire of the Russian people to be recognized for their worth as individual human beings.

I remember the discussions on religious freedom, the July 4th gathering at the American home, and a balalaika player who took obvious pleasure in sharing his gift with us. I also remember a special teacher in Murom, grossly underpaid and over-worked, who took special pride in her students.

One afternoon, during a round table discussion, I asked a group of Russian university students what was their greatest fear as they witnessed the changes occurring in their homeland. Their greatest concern was that their government would cease all funding for higher education and, consequently, that they would not be able to pursue their dreams.

Through it all I was touched by the experiences of the individual Russians I came to know and respect. I was reminded of the common thread of humanity that runs through us all.

I also recall my American peers and the enjoyment of sharing a common experience. We shared our thoughts with one another and laughed together. Will any of us forget the fun we had on the train to St. Petersburg? I have been enriched by knowing such colleagues.

Finally, the words of President Kennedy come to mind. Speaking a few weeks before his death he said, "We all inhabit this planet, we all breathe the same air, we all hope for a bright future for our children, and we are all mortal."

Those words spoken at the height of the Cold War still ring true today.

Thanks for the opportunity, Ron

Note: For the trip photo diary, go to either the Serendipity-Russia home page or www.reec.uiuc.edu. Be sure to check out the four blogs.

ALUMNI NOTES

Brooke Ricker, 2005-06

After a year at home in Anchorage, where I've been working odd jobs and taking classes at the local university, I will be starting a graduate program at the University of New Hampshire in January. I'll earn a Masters in English Language and Linguistics with an emphasis on Teaching English as a Second Language. I've been offered an assistantship teaching freshman composition, which is exciting and a little intimidating!

The wonderful experience I had at the American Home was a huge factor in my decision to pursue this degree. I credit the awesome staff, especially Lena Belova, with inspiring my interest in the method and madness of teaching. (Also huge thanks to Galina Petrovna and Lena for the letters of recommendation!). I miss you all and hope you're doing well.

Note: Lena Belova was the AH's first "Teachers Assistant." She is currently on maternity leave.