

# AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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## A NOTE FROM GALYA

This has been a very busy year for us. Just in March we made all the arrangements for and hosted a visit by the U.S. Embassy's English Language Officer (see below), helped host a group of professors from the University of Pittsburgh, and, with the teachers, presented a "musical greeting" at the 40th anniversary celebration of Vladimir State University's Foreign Language Department.

March definitely was a musical month for us. In addition to the "greeting" mentioned above, we had 2 wonderful concerts at the AH. Our friends in the exceptional a capella choir "Amadeus" and the talented balalaika player Misha Loginov were our guests. They treated us to their favorite music. On March 29 Heather Kaye gave a presentation on American gospel music with help from the other teachers. They sang and taught the audience some gospel songs.

As noted below, we set attendance records this year and have had lower than usual attrition. As a result, the AH has become very crowded. We even have one advanced class meeting in the kitchen this term. We had more students for our advanced level than we planned, and teaching them in the kitchen was the only way out. As far as I can tell, they have had no problems having classes there.

We probably could offer more classes this spring if we had the room--and another teacher. So we are looking into the possibility of adding a classroom in the attic. But this may cost more than we can afford right now.

We are going to try this summer to fix up the existing room in the attic for the teachers. (It is too small for a classroom.) This will give them a quiet place to go to relax and work on lesson plans. In addition to some furniture, we eventually hope to get a computer for this room.

Laura has written below about teaching in Pokrov. I would like to add that the factory's management is very pleased with our classes. They have told me how much they like the way they are being taught, and we plan to continue to work with them next year.

I think we have mentioned before that without the extra income from Pokrov we would have had to purchase a much less expensive new copier. The better copier we were able to buy is a great help for all of us, but we use it heavily. I hope that it will survive for more than just a few years.

As you will read below, Nicole and her husband visited us in December. It is always very nice to see the "old" teachers here in Vladimir again. And it is very nice to read Nicole's (and Jeff's) kind words about our program.

I know that it will be interesting for everyone in the States to learn about the reaction of the people of Vladimir to the war in Iraq. We had a couple of groups trying to demonstrate their feelings in front of the AH, but the Militia took care of them. Since then we haven't had any problems, but just in case the Militia is watching the AH very closely. So, we all feel comfortable.

We still have a lot of students on our waiting list, and we have started testing for our summer semester.

We are looking forward to this next year. We already are sad to think that some of this year's teachers will not be returning. And we are very much looking forward to meeting our new team.

### **NEW STAFF MEMBER**

Olga (Olya) Solovkina has just joined the staff as the receptionist secretary. (See below re Lena Kuzmina.) She graduated with honors from the Ryazan Pedagogical University in 2000. She majored in English and "computer studies." Olya has been living in Vladimir for three years. She is a welcome addition to the staff! (I'll try to get Olya to write something for the fall newsletter. –Ron)

### **ENROLLMENT**

The English program set enrollment records of 352 in the fall and 360 in the spring. And we have had some of the lowest attrition ever so far this year. To make our program as affordable as possible, we still allow students to make three payments each term. This gives them two opportunities over the semester to drop out. The possible reasons for the lower than usual attrition include a) the fact that for the first time we had a Russian assistant working closely with students having difficulties (and meeting with their parents)—see below, b) more students realizing the value of learning English (there is other evidence that suggests that students are becoming more diligent—see Alexei's comments in the previous newsletter), c) improved economic conditions making it possible for more students to afford to make all the payments. We suspect all three factors are at work.

### **HELP FOR THE TEACHERS**

Lena Kuzmina, the "reception secretary," started working with the teachers last spring. (Both Lena and Oxana studied to teach English.) This year she began talking with the teachers about students who were having special problems. Lena then met with those students—and, in some cases, their parents. In a number of instances she felt that this approach helped significantly.

Lena also began "indexing" supplemental teaching materials for the intermediate level classes. Anyone who has taught at this level will appreciate the value of having a list of some of the best sources readily at hand.

A beneficial side effect of this work was that fairly regularly Lena came across something of value that she wasn't specifically looking for. For instance, she found some good discussion and role-playing materials that are especially appropriate for the conversation classes. She also found photos that illustrate human emotions for another class.

As noted below, Lena is currently on maternity leave. A replacement for the reception desk was recently hired. We hope to be able to find someone who can continue Lena's work with the teachers while she is on leave.

Note: Lena went on maternity leave the beginning of March. She and her husband are expecting their first child in May. We all wish the future parents the very best of luck! After her maternity leave Lena hopes to return to the AH to work pretty much exclusively with the teachers and the teaching materials.

## **THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY**

**By Laura Meany, 2001-02; part time 2002-03**

For those who haven't heard, over the past year the America Home has begun a satellite program in the town of Pokrov, located a weather-permitting hour down the road toward Moscow. The English lessons offered in Pokrov are business-oriented and are open to the employees of the formerly German owned Stollwerck Candy Factory, now owned by Kraft Foods. The lessons have evolved from a one-group, once-a-week schedule into two groups meeting two times per week.

Liz Bird is currently teaching the fundamentals of English conversation and grammar to her group of twelve novice students, while my group of five students focuses on intermediate grammar, business communication skills, and case studies. All students who participate in the program do so in the interest of facilitating communication between the local team of managers and the factory's new foreign management, which is both European- and American-based.

As I have found, one of the unique aspects of the Pokrov program in comparison with teaching in Vladimir is the very definitive common purpose for learning English that brings our students to our lessons. Each of the students participating has found that knowledge of English is essential to his or her job. Some of the managers in our groups have the opportunity to use English on a daily basis and have demonstrated great enthusiasm for continuing to expand their knowledge.

For the upcoming summer semester, both existing groups of students will be attending lessons three times a week. Also, by request, an individual program in conversational English is being considered.

## **EMBASSY REP IN VLADIMIR**

**A VIP Visit**

**By Alexei Altonen**

*Many thanks to Ruth Petzold and the many friends of the AH in Vladimir, including the sun.*

"A person from the US Embassy" sounds pretty scary, especially if you are supposed to arrange their program in Vladimir. Fortunately we had already met the prospective "invader" at the Embassy in Moscow and had good reason to think Ruth Petzold would not be a stereotypical "official."

When she arrived in Vladimir we saw at once she was not a typical bureaucrat. Glad to finally arrive at her destination (the driver of the van that brought Ruth from Ivanovo tried to rely on his nose in his search for the hotel "Vladimir" instead of the specific directions we had provided), the little lady with loads of books seemed to sigh with relief. At that point it occurred to me that going to new places and depending on people you hardly know--even for a person as experienced as Ruth--might be even more nerve-racking than our task of assisting a VIP. Of course I mean an open, friendly, cooperative VIP by the name of Ruth.

When we saw her giving the first TV interview in the hotel's lobby, heard her gratefully praising the room ("the best in my tour of four regions") and our program (which she was ready to start working on "in five minutes"), we knew we could sigh with relief too. But this didn't mean we could relax. This lady does not waste time; she intended to cover everything in the very full program we had arranged--and she had requested.

We felt we had to--and we wanted to--make Ruth's stay in Vladimir as rich and as smooth as possible. We wanted the 10 minute search for the hotel to be the only difficulty. And we gladly did our best--it's a pleasure to help people who know what they are doing, care about the results, and trust you and appreciate your assistance. No wonder all those numerous people who happened to meet with Ruth during her short visit to Vladimir praised her as a very pleasant person, qualified teacher, and responsive and thankful spectator. In short, everyone liked Ruth. We are all sorry she is leaving Russia soon and will not have the time to come to Vladimir again.

I'd like to think the visits to English classes in five Vladimir schools (or at least some of them) added something to Ruth's knowledge of the teaching of English in Russia. Here I should certainly mention the willingness of the local teachers whom we approached to let Ruth visit their classes. They must have been pleased with Ruth's firm request for "no shows, please! Just a regular lesson." She remarked that Vladimir teachers were especially good in complying with that request. We are very thankful to schools 17 and 33, the Vladimir State Pedagogical University, Vladimir State University, and the Pedagogical College, the Vladimir City Administration, and the Vladimir Teaching Methods Center, and of course most of all to the participating teachers for being (not for the first time) so cooperative with the AH.

The two-hour workshop on modern teaching methods that Ruth conducted before leaving was unanimously rated by the 30 participants (from 13 schools and VSPU) as extremely interesting and helpful. After the workshop the teachers eagerly bought the books she had heroically saved for Vladimir through all her journey. I was very pleased to see that Ruth's efforts as a "pack horse" were not in vain as the teachers enthusiastically departed with their new "treasures." The AH was also "rewarded" by Ruth with a short workshop. It was not only enriching for the AH teachers, working with Ruth was fun. [*Several teachers wrote that they very much enjoyed Ruth's presentation and were able to put the things they learned to immediate use in their classes.* -R.P.]

Both Tuesday and, to our great regret Wednesday when Ruth managed to find time for a bit of sightseeing, were cloudy and dull. Alas that was the one thing we couldn't control. Thursday morning wasn't any better, and it looked as if Ruth was going to leave Vladimir without seeing our golden domes shining in the sun. But we all wanted the sun to shine so much that when we departed school 17 after observing a lesson Ruth liked very much, the sun was out--bright and warm. The domes of the cathedrals and the Golden Gates saw Ruth off in their full glory.

Would I look a little crazy if I thanked the sun and the domes of Vladimir for in the end being so cooperative with the AH?

### ***Ruth's Comments***

Hello, my name is Ruth Petzold, and I am the Attaché at the US Embassy responsible for English Language Programs. We have been part of the embassy since 1993; our work includes bringing US TEFL specialists to Russia for conferences, coordinating the English Language Fellows Program, providing low-cost TEFL books and free magazines to teachers, and sponsoring conferences and other ELT events. I also make visits to communities around Russia.

My recent visit to English teachers in Russia's Golden Ring ended with a bang! The American Home staff and the teachers of Vladimir clearly did their best to make me feel welcome and to provide all that I asked for. Just to give you a flavor of whom I met, what I did, and who was paying attention to the March 11-13 visit, here's an excerpt from my report:

Finally, in Vladimir, NGO American Home, organized my March 11-13 events. This included visiting classes and talking to 60 students at the Vladimir Pedagogical University, the Vladimir Pedagogical College, Vladimir State University Dept. of Journalism, and School #33.

At School #17, TV Vladimir filmed while we observed a "class of the future, modeled on the US" where each student gave a Power Point presentation.

A meeting with the deputy mayor Galina Kochetkova, the head of the International Relations Department Yelena Klimova, and the city advisor on education Tatyana Panarina allowed me to share information about US government programs.

A methodology workshop for American Home teachers was followed by a roundtable for 25 local teachers during which the teachers received Forum magazine and other materials; we also had a low-cost book sale.

A second methodology workshop for 35 teachers at the Vladimir Teaching Methods Center was covered by journalists from Radio Stil, and the newspapers Vladimirskiye Vedomosti, Khronometr, and Priziv.

Some of my favorite moments were not even mentioned in my report because they weren't work! Both of the musical evenings the American Home arranged [with the vocal ensemble Amadeus and with Mikhail Loginov on the balalaika] showed some of the talent Vladimir has to offer. For details, check with the American Home! The other overwhelming moment for me was seeing the Andrei Rublev frescos on the walls of the cathedral in Vladimir.

But as a teacher of English myself, I also thoroughly enjoyed the time spent in workshops. I am a firm believer in the notion that language classes that are enjoyable, as well as effective, are more successful. People do more of things they like! So all of the activities I shared with teachers in Vladimir not only teach English, they motivate learners. Following is one example:

#### Running Dictation

What is it good for? It's fun so it is motivating. The activity practices all language skills, is very interactive, promotes student control of learning and cooperation, and provides copies of texts without photocopying! Choose the text according to the level.

Materials: Teacher needs one copy of text for every 15-16 students

Directions: Put texts on the wall far apart from each other. Put students into small groups. Decide how many copies of the text you want them to make for the next activity – usually 1, 2, or 3 per group – and be sure each group has that many sheets of paper. Tell students they will take turns dictating part of the text to their group mates. One person at a time goes to the nearest copy of the text, memorizes a small section, returns to his group, dictates what he's memorized, and answers questions the group has about what he has dictated. He may go back to check if necessary. Then the next person carries on where the previous finished until the whole text is transferred to the group's papers. This may be a competition if you like.

Checking: To check accuracy, you may want groups to exchange papers and then groups take turns reading one sentence slowly and clearly for others to check. Disagreements are settled by a student consulting the original text.

Follow-up: Might introduce or review vocabulary or grammar to facilitate comprehension and then respond to the text (finish the story, act it out, write another version using this as a model, etc.)

One other resource I shared is *Hello Online*, an interactive magazine for students and teachers of English language and American Studies. It is supported by the English Language Office and can be found at <http://www.hello-online.ru>.

If you'd like to contact us, please do. You can find us -- most of the time -- at:

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<http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching>

## **SPECIAL LUNCHESES**

For several years the American and Russian staffs have traded off fixing special meals at the AH. Following are some comments from Lena Kuzmina on this activity--with input from David Johnson.

We have special lunches at the AH regularly—and most recently we had a special “southern breakfast.” It’s not because we are lazy and want someone to cook and feed us. The reason for these special meals, I assume, is to get to know each other better.

If you saw us cooking, arguing about recipes, stirring something delicious in a huge pot, you’d enjoy it.

Sometimes, however, you’d think the “cold war” hadn’t ended. When Russians are making their lunch for the Americans they refuse to tell anyone from across the Atlantic what they are making. And when the Americans are making their lunch it’s the same. Even when we beg each other for information, our grandmothers’ secrets are kept safe.

There has been a noticeable increase in the availability of different kinds of products in Vladimir since the American Home opened in 1992. But even when they claim to be American, French, or Japanese, these products often don’t taste the same as they do “back home.” This means that the Americans can’t always prepare their dishes to taste “authentic.” But they are nevertheless very tasty for the Russian staff.

My favorite American foods are brownies and banana bread, and I like to drink pina coladas.

## **A SECOND YEAR**

**By Ted Walls, 2002-04**

Ron asked me to write a few words about why I am choosing to stay on for a second year as a teacher in the American Home. My reasons can truly be summed up in a few words: this has been one of the best experiences of my life, and I'm not ready for it to be over. My students, my Russian family, my friends; they have become such a part of me that I cannot imagine never seeing them again. Be warned--this job causes one to develop attachments that are not easy to break.

My first few months here were filled with euphoria, culture shock, confusion, and the heroic struggle to become a competent English teacher. Everything was new, exciting; nothing short of magical. And then the winter set in. As I write this at the end of March, we just got another big snowfall, and winter has passed the six-month mark (and winter here means constant white). The weather and the job can both be challenging, but now I am used to them and have found my stride. I have a social life in Vladimir, I speak Russian, and I can basically function in this society.

The longer I am here the more I learn about the Russian people and culture. I realize that I have just scratched the surface; Russia is big both geographically and culturally. I am finally in a position to see and appreciate what this place has to offer, not just as a guest, but by actually living here and experiencing it as the people do. I know the ropes now, and want to take my adventure further.

Also I love teaching. I had never taught in a classroom before, and it can be a great experience. The give and take with my students, the progress I see them make, the fun we have together. Within certain limits, I am given creative leeway in how I teach my classes, and it seems that the good ideas just keep coming. It's like a game now to see how fun and interesting my classes can be, both for me and my students.

There is just nowhere else I want to be right now, I guess. I live in a wonderful relatively small town where I can take the trolleybus or walk wherever I want to go. There are many ways to experience real culture; plays, concerts, etc. I can skate, ski, or sled in the winter, go to someone's dacha in the warm weather, swim, learn just about anything I want to (I've learned to play the guitar since I've been here). There are cafes, clubs, and someone is always inviting me to a party or to do something else. Moscow is only a few hours away by train, and I can spend a Sunday there whenever I want. On my longer vacations, I can do other traveling. I've been to St Petersburg, Nizhnii-Novgorod, and other places. For not a lot of money (maybe \$300) you can go to Turkey or the Red Sea in Egypt and stay for a week in a four star hotel.

You never know when adventure will strike. I made acquaintance with a Russian English teacher who invited me to her small town school to speak with her students. As it turned out, the two of us who went were the first Americans to ever visit this place, and we were treated with a level of hospitality that was truly legendary. When you make friends here it usually results in invitations, sometimes just to parties, but also to dachas and other places. This summer I am staying for a while in Estonia with someone who I know. Estonia! It's a long way from Detroit.

But if it were just the adventure I don't think it would be worth the time away from my family, and the hassle sometimes involved with living in Russia. The job itself can be very rewarding (and very frustrating too!), and I'm learning all the time. I can say that being here has changed me as a person, and I like the change. My values, the things I think are important and necessary, have been conditioned by my stay in Russia in major ways. I feel more alive. I said it well once to my Russian host sister; in America everything is easy and good externally, but there can be an internal angst. Here in Russia, everything is a pain in the butt externally, but on the inside it feels good. I need to know why.

Anyway, I've shared more than I had planned. It's from being here. People seem rude to each other in public, but when you have real interaction with them, you always get genuine conversation. People sometimes have a level of openness and connection to each other that is amazing (but it can be a double edged sword!). It can seem like a big family here, oftentimes a big dysfunctional family. But one thing that's for sure is that it's never boring. I, for one, like that in a place.

Note: Four of the current teachers will be back next year. For more on Ted, see the second newsletter: [www.serendipity-russia.com/alumninews2.htm](http://www.serendipity-russia.com/alumninews2.htm).

## **VLADIMIR'S MUSIC SCENE**

**By Jenne Pross, 2002-04**

Living in Russia, it is impossible to ignore the sometimes amusing, sometimes profound mixture of Eastern and Western influences in its musical culture. Though I didn't escape Christina Aguilera videos and Britney Spears' Pepsi ads by coming East, I have been able to ignore them in favor of much more interesting sounds, both home-grown and imported.

One of the first things I heard upon arriving was the sound of church bells. The Vladimir region is simply bursting with famous, ancient churches and cathedrals. One of the most famous is Uspenskii Sabor, or Assumption Cathedral, which is in the center of the city. One day in late August, the bells began pealing out from Cathedral Square in the middle of the afternoon. Heather and I decided to walk to the cathedral, ten minutes away, to investigate. When we got close to the cathedral, we began to hear choral music. We covered our heads and stepped inside, entranced by the Russian Orthodox choir, the incense in the air, and the rituals of the service. We stayed there, just listening for what seemed like an hour, loathe to leave the candlelit church and step back onto the noisy street.

Just a few days later, we saw posters on the trolleybuses advertising a concert of a famous pop group, Ruki

Vverkh (Hands Up). Eager to bone up on our Russian pop culture, we bought tickets. Throngs of screaming, shoving teenage girls pushed against the doors of Torpedo Stadium, as we stood in the parking lot, trying to keep ourselves separate from the crowd that was becoming crazed with anticipation. Though the young girls were by far the most vocal fans, our little group of older Russians and Americans wasn't exactly out of place. There were men and women also standing outside the press of girls, sometimes looking excited, but then remembering themselves and composing their expressions into one of bemusement. I never thought I'd see Beatlemania-esque hysteria over a group in Russia, but here it was, all for a two-man techno-pop group.

When we finally entered the stadium, I was expecting to have an all-out pop concert experience, complete with a huge stage, walls of speakers, lights and lasers and the requisite crowd packed in right up to the stage. Instead, what we saw was, well, small. An inflatable sound shell on a small wooden stage stood in the middle of the soccer field, facing one side of the stadium. A Casio keyboard was set up on stage, and a few amps sat in front of the stage on the grass. Two rather normal-looking guys jogged out onto the stage. One was kind of young and hip looking, and the other was older and fatter, wearing jeans and looking like a roadie. The young, hip one took his place at the keyboard and the older, fatter one grabbed the mic. Two more, cooler-looking young guys jogged out onto the grass from behind the stage and started dancing hip-hop style, thus completing the spectacle. When the music started, the crowd went absolutely nuts! We didn't know who to watch, the band or the crowd! As the concert went on, we had the most fun just watching the reaction of the fans who were singing along, dancing, and swooning.

Vladimir is the home of some phenomenal musicians. Apart from the American music aficionados that we churn out at the American Home's Music Club, the locals produce singers, pianists, and instrumentalists of all kinds. Vladimir has a music college and numerous musical schools for younger students. There is a symphony orchestra and numerous professional vocal groups in Vladimir, all of which regularly perform. Galya and Alexei Altonen know many of the best artists and performers in the city, and often invite them to perform concerts at the American Home for its teachers, students, and friends. We've heard traditional folk songs and dances, modern Russian and Soviet choral music, the salsa as interpreted on the balalaika, and jazz vocal acrobatics all within the comfort of our very own American Home basement. Around town, more great concerts are always happening than we have time to go to. We've heard the most American of music, the blues, played with such pathos and sung with such a great Southern American accent that we had a very hard time believing we were still in Russia. What made the experience complete was the cowboy hat and boots of the band's singer-guitarist. He must have picked them up while touring with B.B. King, we decided.

Yulia, my violin teacher here in Vladimir, is a former American Home student. Whenever we can make our schedules coincide, we meet at the children's music school in my neighborhood for lessons. Our lessons are nothing if not intense, lasting anywhere from 1 1/2 to 3 hours at a time. Aside from the typical violin concertos that all violinists play, Yulia has got me playing short pieces by Shostakovitch, Tchaikovsky and Glinka, orchestra parts from the old standard classics by Borodin, Shostakovitch, and Prokofiev, and constantly listening to recordings and watching videos of the old Russian masters. "Look, Jenne! See how they use every little bit of their bow?" she says to me in Russian.

Somehow in the middle of the Fall Semester, it was decided that Heather, Liz and I would be performing a concert of our own before we all scattered for our winter break. Together with our violin teacher, Yulia Arian, we performed "Greensleeves" as a violin trio with piano accompaniment. All of us collaborated on a J.S. Bach double violin concerto. Throughout the evening we played Mendelssohn, Rachmaninoff, and a modern American piece. The little hall outside of the Drama Theater where we performed was full of our students and other friends. There have been several requests for a spring concert with new pieces.

Note: Jenne will be returning next year to teach part time in Pokrov and study at the Pedagogical.

## **CONCERT REVIEW**

The following article was translated from Molva by David Johnson, the current Lead Teacher. (David will be returning next year. He'll be the first teacher to spend 3 years at the AH!)

It's wonderful to have such talented teachers working at the American Home!

### **A Bridge of Friendship from the World of Music**

*Molva, January 11, 2003*

**By M. Konshin**

**Photos by P. Sokolov**

A unique concert from the series "Masters and Debutants", which continues to be organized and presented by pianist and Vladimir State Pedagogical University teacher Yulia Akbar, was held in the Regional House of Artists.

For the first time on a Vladimir stage appeared violinists from the United States Jennifer Pross, and Mary Elizabeth Bird and pianist Heather Kaye. Each of them is over twenty years old and, for the time being, single. They each have received humanitarian and professional musical training, and Mary Elizabeth also studies in the first course of the philological faculty at the Vladimir State Pedagogical University. They live in Vladimir and work in the American Home, where they teach the English language.

The idea for the concert was violinist Yulia Arian's. For more than fifteen years she has played in the Moscow Film Orchestra and has studied English in the American Home.

The violin trio brilliantly performed the English folksong "Green Sleeves." The final piece of instrumental music was the first part of the "Concerto for Violins and Orchestra" by composer F. Mendelsson. This music is in the repertoire of all violinists. It is one of the masterpieces of world music, and represents the best work of this composer. The first part of the concerto is lyrical and emotional. Pianist Heather Kaye successfully substituted for the orchestra and Jennifer Pross performed expressively and convincingly. The American Home and its director Galina Altonen were the guests of the Regional House of Artists as a bridge of friendship. Incidentally, the concert was titled "Bridges of Friendship".

The concert program was also graced by the appearance of Nadezhda Souraikina, who beautifully performed an operatic aria, a romance, and a Russian folksong. She is a lovely, velvety dramatic soprano.

### **GOING "HOME"**

**By Nicole Brun-Mercer (1996-98; see Alumni Notes in the first newsletter)**

"I haven't been home in two and a half years," I said to myself as we landed at the airport in Moscow. Though I now live in France and return to my native California every year, only when I see Vladimir's Golden Gates do I have the sensation of going back home – to the American Home, that is.

When I look back on my two years of teaching in Vladimir, from 1996 to 1998, I remember first and foremost my friends and family, both my host family and the caring Russian staff at the school, headed by my "foster mother," Galina Petrovna.

However, after teaching English in California and currently in France, I now appreciate my American Home experience from a more logistical point of view. No one who has been to Russia could say that the country is conducive to organization, and while the American Home could do nothing to prevent the trolleybus from breaking down, the school is run more smoothly than any other I have worked for.

Our teaching schedule, for example, was regular. Today I arrived at work to be told, "Your class this afternoon was cancelled, and tomorrow, could you fill in for Veronica?" No, at the American Home our classes were as reliable as clockwork. In San Francisco, each term started on a Tuesday, and we could have a list of our new classes the day before, Monday, as of 4 p.m. In Vladimir, the next semester's schedule was definitive at least a week before classes started. Such planning time is appreciated if you have been teaching for years, but it is crucial for beginning instructors.

The American Home is also exceptional for its resources. It has a collection of text books, reference books, video and audio cassettes that is unrivalled, even in libraries I have seen at schools with nearly twenty teachers and over 400 students. Again, as a teacher with little experience, my lessons were saved thanks to these resources at our disposal.

Nor have I since had such a physically comfortable teaching environment. You are, indeed, working at “home”. After planning a tough lesson, I would head up to the kitchen, make some coffee, sit on the couch, pet our American Home cat and discuss activities for the present perfect continuous with colleagues. In comparison, on Tuesdays here in the Haute Savoie, my first class starts at 8 a.m. and my last class ends at 8:30 p.m. I eat lunch at my desk, and if I take a break – well, it is at my desk with a newspaper. This is not a home; it is a job. Granted, a good job that I am very happy with, but after a year, I still needed a holiday. I needed a trip back home.

“There it is!” I exclaimed, grasping wildly at my husband’s hand and pointing. From the outside, nothing appeared to have changed, though surely I was seeing the façade with a few extra coats of paint. The door was opened almost before I could ring, and there was Galya, waiting to welcome me back home. As I showed my husband around I was relieved to see that, except for a few new slippers for guests and a much needed new copy machine, it has generally stayed the same. Of course, the American Home family has changed, but I was happy to hear that most of the old staff has continued to keep in touch.

Returning to the American Home, though, was like squeezing into a pair of jeans from high school. They look the same at a distance, but the seams start bulging and my tummy hangs out over the waistband. The school is now using every inch of space it has to accommodate the expanding number of teachers and students. It is fantastic that the home is growing, and I only hope that it will not be limited by the size of the house itself.

As the school continues to gain ground, it offers more and more novice and experienced teachers what I consider to be the best possible teaching environment. Several former instructors have continued their careers in teaching after leaving the American Home. Similarly, several students who had attended classes for years have gone on to travel or study in the United States.

The American Home is a valuable experience for teachers and students alike, with the only drawback for the former being that they are limited to two years. Though obliged to look elsewhere to continue teaching, they can, and do, visit, thankfully proving that you can go home again and again.

NOTE: Nicole is currently working at a small language center in Haute-Savoie, France, just across the border from Geneva. The center, which is in its eleventh year of operation, is both a translation agency and a school, offering classes to children as well as adults. The majority of the students work in technical fields such as aeronautics where they need English. Nicole is one of five English teachers and is head of the translation department, which depends largely on freelance translators

## **LOOKING BACK...AT TIME WELL SPENT**

**By Jeff Long, 1999-2001**

It’s hard to believe that almost four years have passed since I first arrived in Vladimir in August 1999. I sometimes wonder what I was thinking heading off to Russia to teach English, having neither spoken Russian nor taught English before. And yet somehow despite my inexperience – and thanks to the help of a wonderful group of colleagues and friends – I managed to get through two rewarding years in Vladimir and take away many lasting memories. Looking back, I think it was my initial inexperience that has helped me to see just how much I have gained from my time at the American Home, both professionally and personally.

Professionally, I have used my experience in Vladimir as a stepping stone from which I moved on to a position at the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in Washington, D.C. and now graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With IREX, many of the skills that I developed at the American Home, including my experience working with young people, my Russian – which Tanya

and Nelly so supportively helped me to develop – and the organizational skills I developed as Lead Teacher, were critical not only in helping me to land the job initially, but also to perform well once I got it. As a graduate student in Russian and East European studies at UNC, my experience in Vladimir has also proven invaluable. Specifically, it has enabled me to contribute a unique perspective to my classes on Russian history, politics, and language. For example, when my contemporary Russian politics class was recently discussing developments in post-Soviet political institutions, I was able to offer the experience of actually having gone to the polls with my Russian hosts when they voted in the December 1999 competitive Duma elections.

Personally, I have come away from Vladimir with many lasting friendships. I continue to stay in touch with my American colleagues, the American Home staff, my Russian friends, American Home students, and my generous Russian hosts. I am sure that the bonds that were built with friends, students, and staff in the basement of the American Home and on the streets of Vladimir are bonds that will continue to grow, despite the distance separating many of us. And, in fact, in an effort to close that distance I hope to return to Vladimir this summer to continue studying Russian and to catch up with old friends.

Note: After leaving Vladimir, Jeff spent a year working for the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in Washington, DC. At IREX he assisted with a number of academic exchange and institution-building initiatives, including the Russian-US Young Leadership Fellows for Public Service Program, an exchange program designed to promote public service work in Russia. He is currently a graduate student in Russian and East European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he is preparing to write his master's thesis on Soviet youth culture during the late Brezhnev era and perestroika

### **AMERICANS ARE.... SOME MYTHS CORRECTED**

**By Oxana Ustinova, Office Manager** (See Oxana's comments in the first issue.)

The American Home in Vladimir is sometimes considered an institution “officially” representing the U.S. in Russia. To some extent it is true for it is in the AH where the citizens of Vladimir can come in touch with American culture, which is represented, first of all, by our American teachers and by the spirit of the AH itself. Thus, our students have an opportunity to get / shape an actual idea of what Americans are like. It is equally true as far as the Russian staff of the AH is concerned. Though people of my generation have been living in the period of growing international relations and cooperation, we still inherited some ideas from the Soviet regime. Due to the remnants of the Soviet world outlook and the general human inclination to make generalizations, I had certain stereotypes of what Americans should be like.

Having worked in the AH for almost 4 years, I have greatly changed my views of Americans as a people thanks to the individuals I have worked with. First and foremost, I no longer think that the Americans and the Russians are TOTALLY different.

Here is a short list of stereotypes I used to have:

- 1) Americans are absolutely different
- 2) They have a quite different world outlook, system of values, and aspirations.
- 3) They are America-centered and are not in the least interested in other cultures, traditions, languages, etc.
- 4) They do not know how to cook (see the note on special lunches)
- 5) They are unable to survive in Russia even a couple of months, especially in winter

Judging by my experience, I am now sure that none of the aforementioned statements are true, especially the last one.

### **ALUMNI NOTES**

Sandi (Schneider) Wulf : 1992-93 Sandi writes: Jonathan Delaney Wulf was born 03/03/03 at 9:04 p.m. (8 lbs. 11 oz. and 21.5" long) He's doing great, as are Marty, Lauren and I. (For more on Sandi see previous newsletter.)

Another birth notice: Ron and Susie Pope became first time grandparents on January 22. Thomas Scoville Dyrek came in to the world at 6 lbs. 12 oz. and 20 inches. His Mom, our youngest daughter, Amy, visited Russia, including Vladimir, with her grandfather, parents, and two cousins in 2000. Grandparenthood is great!