

AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER  
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INTRODUCTION

Ron

As Galya, Alexei, and others note, 2003 has been an eventful year. We’ve been able to make a number of improvements—in the AH and, we hope, in the English Program. As finances permit, we will put the finishing touches on the remodeling, and we will of course continue to do our best to improve what we teach and how we teach it.

We are also attempting to expand our “educational exchange” and related efforts. In his essay, Alexei declines to give specifics on these projects—while claiming he is not superstitious. He is of course at least a little concerned about jinxing our efforts. I, however, am less worried about this—but I agree that it is best to leave extensive comments until later. Suffice it to say now that we are working with an organization in Seattle, Washington, the NorthWest Student Exchange, on a possible small high school exchange program; we will play a major role in a program for elementary and secondary social studies teachers if the University of Illinois’ Russian and East European Center receives the Fulbright Group Programs Abroad grant they have applied for with our extensive assistance (Alexei has done a great deal of work on this project); and we are working with the Vladimir City Administration and Illinois State University faculty and students (plus one faculty member from the University of Nebraska) on four special projects. These are tourism development, a summer recreation program, web site design, and a program to assist with domestic violence. Future issues of the newsletter will discuss the fate of these efforts.

On its way to completion—at long last—is the “History of the Vladimir Region” that we’ve been working on for a number of years. This is a brief history pulled together by several interns over the years that emphasizes interesting facts and legends. While I was in Vladimir this past summer I found the time to try to thoroughly edit the text. Alexei also went over it looking for factual mistakes that I didn’t know enough about the region’s history to catch. The City Administration is very interested in helping us finish this project. They would like to have the “book” available in both English and Russian. (Oxana and Olya are playing a major role in preparing the Russian translation.) The City wants to give the book to honored guests during the “Day of the City” celebration this next June. Alexei recently met with a designer selected by the City who will oversee the preparation of the necessary maps and other illustrations. The finished product should help attract both tourists and prospective investors. (As of now, there is no reasonably comprehensive and up-to-date information available in any language.)

In the “already completed category,” we were able to arrange for a very generous contribution to the Youth Health and Education Center in Vladimir. This organization works with troubled children and teenagers, their teachers and parents, and school administrators. The Director of the Center is Olga Goncherova. As some of you know first hand, Olga is an excellent Russian tutor and regularly assists us with our program. As noted in issue No. 3, her daughter, Natasha, married Peter York, one of our most successful intensive Russian students.

The gift enabled us to purchase a good computer and copier for the Center. (When they were told they were getting the new equipment, particularly the copier, the staff reportedly broke into a spontaneous cheer!) We were fortunate to have found a generous donor and to know how to put the funds to good use.

Also, we received a donation from one of the Bloomington-Normal, Illinois Rotary Clubs that was used to purchase a case of 40 basketballs for the younger boy’s teams in Vladimir. They badly needed some new balls—and there were no funds in their budget for anything “extra.”

Finally, we organized another study trip for the Illinois State University Criminal Justice program. Thanks in large part to all the international turmoil, it was a small group, but they had a good trip. (A non-student participant in this trip made the donation noted above.)

In short, it has been a productive year.

I’m confident you will find the rest of the contributions to this issue of special interest, beginning with the info below on the current teachers.

THE CURRENT GANG

David Johnson – David is the first teacher to stay for a third year. He’s in his second year as Lead Teacher. Last summer he was able to complete work on his MA in Russian Studies at St. Cloud State University. (See David’s comments below.)

Meghan Gilrein – Majored in Russian and East European Studies at Tufts University. Spent her junior year in England—studying Russian at the University College of London. This is her first time in Russia.

Meghan Lynch – Majored in International Relations and minored in Russian and Eurasian Studies at Mount Holyoke. Studied in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2001-02 and in St. Petersburg that summer.

Sarah Rorimer – Graduated from Bates College (in Maine) with a major in Russian and a minor in music. Spent a semester during her sophomore year studying in St. Petersburg.

Chris Stroop – Earned a BA in History and German at Ball State University. Studied abroad for a year in Germany and England. Made four previous trips to Russia, including Vladimir. Was strongly recommended for our program by Alexei’s students at the Pedagogical!

Sarah Grace Volkov – Completed a double major in Russian and Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon in June. Has a Russian “old believer” heritage—but this is her first trip to the “motherland.”

Returning teachers (see issue No. 2)

Ted Walls – Wayne State University; teaching at the AH (See his comments below.)

Jenne Pross – University of South Carolina; teaching in Pokrov

Moutrie Townsend – Presbyterian College; teaching in Pokrov

#### A NOTE FROM GALYA

As Ron mentions, this has been an especially busy year. As Alexei explains, we did a lot of work on the AH over the summer. We knew that we needed to add an extra classroom to better meet the demand for our English program. Using space in the attic was the logical thing to do. But we couldn’t decide how to best give the students access to this new room. We discovered that adding a staircase to the attic over the existing stairs to the basement would be very expensive and the stairs would have to be unusually steep. Ron, Alexei, and I had many discussions, with Ron always coming back to using the existing stairs in the garage. But none of us wanted the students to walk through the cluttered garage to get to the attic. In June, a colleague of Ron’s from Illinois State University, Dr. Momar Ndiaye, visited Vladimir at our invitation. (See his comments below.) He had a very busy week meeting with university and government

representatives. But he found the time to discuss our "remodeling dilemma" with us, and he suggested turning the back part of the garage into a room. This would provide a lot more space for our arriving and departing students and, at the same time, provide acceptable access to the existing stairs. (See the comments on the new "waiting room" below.) The front part of the garage is now storage—which we need to finish organizing. If we ever get a vehicle, we'll have to try to get permission from the City to build a separate garage—or we'll have to park it in the driveway.

We will probably need to add another teacher this next year to fully utilize the extra classroom. After the holidays we want to use the new room to teach our regular students. For the time being, the smallest classroom in the basement will be used for office hours and individual students.

Others comment in this issue on the new teachers' office in the attic. I just want to say that we are glad to finally be able to provide them with more room—and a "real window." We also were able to buy a large locker for each teacher. As the budget permits, we will add more furniture and a newer computer or two.

Speaking of adding things, we were able to get a third phone line over the summer. It is not a part of our intercom system, and this seems to make it work better as our Internet connection. The returning teachers can appreciate this, but the new teachers can only compare what we have with the Internet access they were able to use back home—and our connection is still pretty slow and not always reliable. When it becomes affordable, we will switch to high speed access.

Most of this work, including the work on the exterior of the AH which Alexei discusses, would not have been possible without the extra income from the classes we are teaching in Pokrov. (See Liz Bird's comments below.)

We are also putting even more effort into trying to improve the effectiveness of our program. As Olya notes, we are experimenting with a new textbook, *Passages*, in the B and C classes. As discussed in the previous newsletter, Lena Kuzmina started working directly with the teachers—with some immediate success. She then left in March for maternity leave. (Her baby, Danila, was born May 21. Mom and baby are doing well!) Under Russian labor law, Lena has up to 18 months to return to work. She has indicated that she would like to work part time with the teachers.

Alexei is also putting more time and effort into our program. For now he is helping me visit classes and provide the teachers with feedback. In the future, we hope to have him evaluate our program and suggest ways to make it better organized and more effective.

Also as noted below, over the summer Oxana and Olya worked on indexing articles from the Reader's Digest and other sources to make it easier for the teachers to find suitable readings. Linda Harris, one of last year's teachers who is now working at the Tourist Academy (where she is the first native speaker to teach English), also worked on the indexing project.

In summary, we keep trying to make things better for everyone—our students, our teachers and all the rest of the staff, as well as those who come to study Russian or work on special projects.

We hope at least some of you will be able to visit us and see what we've been doing. You are always welcome at your American Home in Russia!

## THE 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY, WORK ON THE AH, AND OTHER PROJECTS

Alexei Altonen

In 2002 I suggested—and Ron approved—that in place of our all-are-welcome party on July 4, 2003, we instead mark this glorious day and the AH's 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary with our traditional Street Ball tournament (see below) and with some “heroic deeds.” And so we did.

First of all, I decided to demonstrate my outstanding skills as an excavator. However, I was naive to think that I could quickly dig a hole in the ground at the back left hand corner of the AH. The hole was to be filled with gravel so that water from the rain gutter on that side of the house would have some place to go instead of pouring over the edges of the gutter. (All the drainage pipes for the rain gutters go underground.) It turned out that the soil was only loose on the surface. Within a half hour I found that the rest of the way down was rock hard. No wonder the rain wasn't able to soak in! I had to call for help! Fortunately the AH is rich in heroes, and three of us, Vanya, Vasily (both “house guards”) and I, took on the excavation job. (What a shame Ron Pope wasn't in Vladimir at this time since this was all his idea to begin with! We could have used an extra strong back....) A week later we were able to proudly show our large hole to all the inhabitants of the AH. Nobody could guess what it was for, which only demonstrates how unique Ron's mind is. Unfortunately, now that the hole is filled up with gravel and covered with dirt and green grass there is no evidence of Ron's special genius and our heroic efforts—except for the fact that when it rains the water no longer overflows the gutter.

On the other hand, the much greener and denser lawn does clearly demonstrate the talents of the AH team. This fall every American teacher brought some good quality grass seed—which unfortunately is still not available here in Russia. This was planted on newly raised areas of the lawn. (Over the summer we brought in a large amount of enriched soil, which we spread where needed.) The new lawn is growing into a nice carpet to please everybody's eye—and Ron's heart. In September we also redesigned the flowerbed in the backyard. We hope this will add beauty to this cozy part of our yard.

Over the summer we also replaced the roof—there were signs in the attic that it was starting to leak—and we had the home professionally painted. (For example, the door going into the garage had all the old paint scraped off and now that it has been very nicely repainted it looks almost brand new.) In addition, we replaced the old pathway

from the street with good quality concrete squares, and we covered the porch with the same material. We also had a concrete border installed around the foundation.

Both this work and the paint job were done by crews working for our “house guard,” Vanya. (Ron was here when the concrete blocks were laid down, and he commented on how quickly and professionally the two-man crew worked.) All this work has made the outside of the AH look really decent now.

But as good as we’ve made the exterior look, the interior improvements are even more impressive. We have significantly expanded our usable space. First, as Galya notes, we closed off the back two thirds of the garage area and turned this in to a very nice “waiting room” for our students and other visitors. (See Olya’s comments below.) In addition, at Ron’s suggestion, we added a staircase in what was the storage room to give the teachers easy access to the room in the attic that Andrei’s construction business had been using. At the beginning of this month the crew finished work on a new classroom in the part of the attic over the garage. The stairs in the garage have been fixed up to accommodate the students.

Both rooms in the attic have been equipped with air conditioners and good quality electric heaters. Hopefully they will be comfortable year round.

Upward ho!

As Galya explains in her note, we needed the new classroom to accommodate the growing demand for our English classes. And as both Olya and Ted note, the teachers are really pleased with the new space they now have.

The question now is where can we expand to next? I have already learned that digging down is probably not feasible. Your suggestions will be most appreciated!

Now to my short report on our sixth Street Ball tournament. The tournament has been gaining respect every year and is said to have won an important position in the sport schedule. There is no need to advertise it now; the strongest teams look forward to being invited. We did our best to provide the fifth tournament (on the tenth anniversary of the AH) with especially good prizes. But this means that it's not so easy to maintain this high standard. Fortunately, thanks to Ron's efforts, we are now able to award the winning team and top players with what they most appreciate, good balls.

The intensity of last summer’s tournament was especially high from the start of play. Some of the top teams from previous years were beaten by aggressive younger teams—which made for some very exciting games.

As usual the AH was represented by its own team, which included some close friends of ours led by Daniel Akimov (Tanya Akimova's son). They didn't win, but did their best and looked really decent on the court. Of course, if we invite our legendary AH teacher John Semlak (about 6’10” tall and teaching English in Moscow), keep Ted Walls (about

6'7") for another year and get him to switch from baseball to basketball, and if Ron is able to include a good "player-coach" among the next group of teachers, we may be able to defeat some of the top teams ourselves.

Seriously, the local basketball program would be delighted if we ever manage to bring a good player-coach to Vladimir as one of our teachers. I won't be surprised if some day Ron finds the right candidate.

Basketball is of course not the only thing we are working on. (Although it's time to think about the prizes for next year already! If any of you can come up with good prizes, your efforts will be very much appreciated. For example, autographed photos of top NBA players would be wonderful to have—and they should be easy to send to us here.)

This year promises to be mainly filled up with educational trips and exchanges. We, on both sides of the Atlantic, are busy trying to pin down all the organizational and preparatory issues to make the plans feasible. For now I won't give any details. It's not that I'm superstitious, but I'd rather write about what we are trying to do when we see these programs really launched and the participants here and pleased with what we have been able to provide.

I also will be most pleased next summer, I confess, to see here Nina Zaragoza who is planning on returning to her "home" for several weeks! Such "educational visits" are always great! Does anybody else need to improve or restore his/her Russian?

#### OBSERVATIONS FROM A VISITOR

Momar Ndiaye

NOTE: Dr. Ndiaye is the Director of Illinois State University's Office of International Studies and Programs.

I was able to visit Vladimir and the American Home this past June at Ron Pope's invitation. I've traveled to more than 60 countries over the years, but this was my first trip to Russia. In the past, I had had many opportunities to travel to the Soviet Union, including Russia, to conduct training programs and joint research; but I always found excuses not to go. I thought that, for one, not speaking or understanding a word of Russian would limit my interactions with people. And, of course, I was concerned about the regime and what implications that could have for me with respect to my freedom of movement and security. It really took meeting and talking at length with Dr. Pope to convince me that the time was right to make the visit.

During my stay in Vladimir I was truly impressed with what I saw and the people I met. The AH has a superb staff and an excellent reputation in the community. And Vladimir provides a wonderful place to study Russian history and contemporary society—something that I hope ISU will be able to take fuller advantage of in the years to come.

I learned that thousands of Russians in Vladimir and the surrounding communities owe much of their English training to the American Home. While it is possible for these Russians to learn English at other Russian-run institutions, the quality of the teaching, and the background and experience of the AH instructors and staff definitely seem to set this program apart from the rest.

The learning experience has clearly been a two-way street—as it should be. Russians learn English—and much more—from the American instructors; reciprocally, the American instructors and others are given the opportunity to learn Russian and about Russian history and culture.

I was pleased to learn that besides teaching English as a Second Language, the AH is also actively involved in a number of other educational projects, several of which involve ISU. These have included, for instance, organizing very successful Criminal Justice trips and initiating and helping to sustain a law enforcement exchange program between Illinois State, the University of Illinois, and the Vladimir Juridical Institute.

Overall, it is clear that the AH "enterprise" is well organized and efficiently run. Throughout my visit to Vladimir, I was very much impressed by the Home's management and instructional staff. I would like to point out that the success of the American Home depends greatly on their reliance on each other as a team.

At the end of the trip, I met with Ron and his staff to explore the possibility of their involvement in future discussions and program implementation issues with the local universities. Based on its well-deserved reputation for "getting things done," and its experience and contacts, the American Home represents a very valuable resource that I hope we will be able to take substantial advantage of, beginning with the four projects Ron mentions in the introduction to this newsletter.

I hope to return to Vladimir in the near future.

#### THE VIEW FROM THE RECEPTIONIST'S DESK

Olya Solovkina

I have worked at the AH since April 2003. As all the receptionists who have been hired by the AH, I graduated from a Pedagogical University. I trained to teach English and Computer Science. English was always my favorite subject at school, due to great teachers. So, the work I had always dreamt of doing needed to be closely connected with English – either teaching or translating or whatever. My previous job was not connected with English in the least, which is the reason I looked for new employment. I wanted to keep (and even advance) my knowledge of the language. At the AH I can say that I have found what I wanted.

Though I had heard a lot about the AH and its English program, I never imagined that one day I would be working here. What I like most of all about working at the AH is the opportunity to communicate with people from different nations – and I do not only mean the teachers, but also the people from other countries who study here; not all of our students are Russian. Also, the work here is not a boring daily routine. Communication and interaction can never be monotonous

As far as the courses are concerned, we started using new textbooks for the B and C levels this fall. In my opinion, "Passages" is an improvement over "American Dimensions." It is of great help to the teachers and of great interest to the students – there are challenging assignments and interesting topics. Besides, new supplemental materials were found and indexed during the summer. For example, Oxana and I tried to find interesting articles in Reader's Digest and other sources that matched up well with specific lessons.

As for the building, free spaces that still existed are now being utilized. As Alexei notes, a part of the attic has been remodeled as a teachers' office. It's pretty large. The teachers are happy to have extra room. Sarah Volkov offered to call the new room "Cloud Nine." The new "waiting hall" (the ex-garage) is an inexhaustible source of delight for our students. When they came to the AH at the beginning of the semester, the returning students screamed with surprise and joy. One of the students, who has been studying here for several years, said, "The American Home had only one disadvantage – its small hall. Since this inconvenience has been removed, the Home has no weak points now."

## VALUE OF THE PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGE STUDENTS

Leyla Meshkova

I got back from Bloomington and Normal, Illinois, where I had spent a year attending high school, in June. I was fortunate enough to have been selected for the Sister Cities' educational exchange program. I'm now preparing to graduate from high school here in Vladimir in the spring. I hope to then be able to return to the States for college.

I stopped by the American Home in August to meet with the new teachers and to look at the long-desired new room in the garage. Unfortunately, the "waiting room" is a convenience which I will never get to experience, since I'm not planning on attending classes at the AH anymore. I was wandering around the room, looking at the posters on the walls and trying not to have a fit of nostalgia. My mind, in its turn, was wandering through the five semesters that I spent at the American Home. Then my memories were interrupted when the new teachers arrived. Everyone proceeded into the kitchen where we had tea and talked for two hours about our dream vacations and education. My nostalgia had faded by the time I got home that night, but I still kept thinking about my AH teachers and everything that had happened over the past three years.

My first teacher was Dan (Stout). It seemed like he was the most confident person I'd ever met. Through him I eventually acquired confidence in my knowledge and abilities

that I had lacked before, which is very important when you're trying to get good at something. I recall getting home from class and starting on my homework right away. Everything we did for the class seemed incredibly interesting. By the time the summer semester was over, I was positive I'd continue studying at the AH. My next teacher was Sarah (Schores), a very charming and pleasant person. My classmates and I used to write small notes to her in every class, sharing with her whatever we wanted to. I still have a bunch of pieces of paper with our correspondence on them. I can't believe I used to be that childishly silly. I now wonder how much patience it took Sarah to read through my notes every class. However, thanks to her, I was able to develop the ability to write conversationally.

I had finished levels C-1 and C-2, which meant that I was supposed to be really good at grammar so that I'd be able to develop other skills. My D-1 and D-2 teacher was Nina Zaragoza. Later on I understood how important it was that I met Nina at that time. We did a lot of talking and writing, and it turned out that Nina and I had plenty of things to talk about. Each of the students kept two journals where we would write to Nina and she would respond to our letters. I guess that could be officially marked as the final stage of the development of my writing skills at the AH. After completing D-2, I decided to repeat it again the next year. Coincidentally, Nina had decided to stay in Vladimir for another year, so I had her as a teacher again. Three semesters in a row with Nina really paid off—I learned how to think in English, which is as good as it gets. Of course, there's always room for development, but, regardless, those five semesters with Dan, Sarah, and Nina resulted in an unforgettable year in the US.

After studying at the AH, I felt very well prepared for my year in America. To begin with, I didn't end up experiencing any "language barriers." Knowing the language well eliminates, or at least greatly reduces, most of the problems you can come across as an exchange student. We exchange students are often told about this "cultural shock" we are supposed to experience when we arrive in the US. Well, thanks to the AH, I didn't seem to be shocked at all when I got there (I had already faced all the "shocking" sides of American culture at the AH!). I could go on forever about my amazing experience, but I guess it's already obvious that the AH made my life in the US much easier and more enjoyable.

One nice thing about the AH is that you can still count on being welcome even if you're not technically studying there anymore. So I won't have to fear getting kicked out when I stop by next time. So thank you, American Home, for being there for me and for always welcoming me!

P.S. If there's anyone who knows me who'd like to keep in touch, email me at [leilaLM@yandex.ru](mailto:leilaLM@yandex.ru)

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHERS

REFLECTIONS ON LIVING IN VLADIMIR

Sarah Rorimer

Although I'm now approaching the 3 month mark as I write this, I pinch myself every day. I'm still amazed that I'm in Russia! Each day is filled with new, unexpected situations and challenges. It sometimes feels as if I exist on a different plane, disconnected from my homeland and all that is familiar. I can read news from the States on the Internet or I can simulate feelings of home by listening to certain music; but as soon as I take off my headphones I snap out of it. Although I miss some things about living in the US, I have also become strangely attached to Vladimir and almost defensive about it.

A few weeks ago I was on a fully-packed bus with two other AH teachers coming back from Suzdal, a small city 50 minutes away by bus, 30 minutes by car. As people got off at different stops, I realized that I was sitting next to another American whom I did not know! He was wearing baggy jeans, a gore-tex type winter jacket and an LL Bean backpack (which I was at first excited and then irritated to recognize). For some reason I had no interest in striking up a conversation. I felt annoyed to find another American on "my turf." In hindsight, I'm ashamed of my reaction. Who do I think I am? I only live here...but that's it—I LIVE here!

My behavior reflected the battles going on in my head: my longing to pass for a Russian in public, speak well, and understand life here vs. the plain fact that I'm a foreigner. Sometimes it's fun to be an outsider, but more often it's embarrassing. It's not that I don't understand what's going on. I can assert myself when necessary and complete everyday errands just fine, but for some reason I constantly expect to be confused. I go back and forth between telling myself not to be embarrassed about who I am and just get over it already and accept the fact that I don't speak and act like a Russian...and trying to blend in and hide and play the game of keeping my foreignness a secret. The second voice usually yells more loudly than the first one, and it is a dangerous argument, because it cultivates a fearful attitude and makes me want to use the same phrases that I know work well instead of expanding the boundaries of my language and comfort zone.

The other day I was in a marshrutka (a van with a set route) and a woman asked me if the van was going to a specific stop. Without even thinking about it I replied, "I don't know." It was easier to avoid asking her to repeat her question and admitting confusion. As I sat there, though, I realized that I take the same route each day and DO know it well. So I spoke up, answered her question and actually made a positive, helpful difference! I always assume that I'm the only confused one, but this mini experience reminded me that I'm doing just fine, and perhaps I'm not always as foolish as I feel. Instead of wishing I could interact with people more like a native, I'm working on biting the bullet and using what I have. My own self-consciousness is the only thing really holding me back.

WORKING VS. VISITING  
Chris Stroop

Having visited Russia and even Vladimir several times before I came to work at the American Home, my first impressions as a new teacher were not strictly my first impressions of Vladimir. Nevertheless, the experience of coming here for the long-term was new, as was the degree to which I was going to be on my own in various situations, relying on my Russian skills and cultural knowledge. Sometimes my skills and knowledge have failed me in minor ways, although I'm getting to know Russia better and better as I learn from my mistakes. I've learned to barter in the open-air markets, which is now actually fun. I've also learned to deal with the fact that some stores sell things in one section and make you pay in another—so that you have to ask the price, remember it exactly, go pay, get your receipt, and then go back and claim what you've bought. A terrible nuisance at first, this process is now only mildly annoying, at least most of the time. However, on my less culturally sensitive days, when, for example, a lady at the post office is extremely rude to me, all such things become just as annoying as they ever were, and I feel like singing "God Bless America" in the middle of the street, or at least "God Bless the Down-Home American Concepts of Good Business and Service with a Smile." In general, however, Russia is becoming less foreign to me, although this is an on-going process.

During my first few months here, I've had some particular adventures with public transportation. For example, I was bewildered three times when trolley-busses I was riding just stopped in the middle of their route, seemingly at random. After the third time, I remembered to ask a Russian about the matter, and I finally figured out what had happened. The unclear Russian the conductor or driver was yelling every time people got on was not an announcement of the next stop, but rather an announcement that the bus would be finishing for the day at a particular stop. I've also learned the minute details of "Marshrutka Etiquette"—all the proper phrases for asking fellow passengers to pass your money to the driver, how to pool a bunch of money when several passengers get on at once, and how to ask the driver to stop—and even why the stress in the word "ostanovitye" (stop) is sometimes on the fourth syllable, and sometimes on the third. (The first is a command: "Stop at the next bus-stop!" The second is a question: "Will you stop at the next bus-stop?" In Russian, the command is actually not rude, although I am still having difficulty adjusting to the way Russians command each other so often. My cultural background gives me a tendency to perceive these commands as impolite, especially when they lack the word "pozhaluista" (please), as they so often do.)

As far as public transportation is concerned, I've also learned to recognize the stops I need, even when the windows of a bus or marshrutka are extremely dirty, fogged up, or iced over. Before, how anyone managed to do this was a complete mystery to me—I lamented the fact that the bus-stops were not announced on the vast majority of busses, thinking that Russians must have a sixth sense, just like they must have specially adapted eyes to see in the dark. (I still think the latter is the case. At night, which these days starts about 5:00 o'clock, they don't seem to step in nearly as many puddles as I do. I've gotten to the point where I'm waiting for the puddles to freeze over.) Meanwhile, I became extremely frustrated as every Russian I pressed on the subject of announcing bus-stops told me that Vladimir was a small city, so there was no need to do this. I remembered my days of study in Germany—efficient, order loving Germany—where

each and every bus-stop was announced by a pleasant, electronically recorded voice, even in my (by Russian standards) tiny city of some 70,000 inhabitants. While I still prefer the German system, I have adapted to the Russian, and I suppose I can grudgingly admit that it's part of the charm of living here. I now have no difficulty in getting off at the right stop along routes I normally take.

So, Russia is causing me to grow, teaching me new things, and, I suppose, building character and all of that. I enjoy the challenge of the language—I only wish I had more time for it, but as a first semester English teacher, I'm very busy. I also enjoy much of the intercultural interaction, the history that is all around me, and a lot of Russian food and traditions. And then there's the Russian rock music. Only legal since the mid-1980s, some Russian rock is wonderful stuff—a mixture of Western and traditional "folk" influences. Not only do I love listening to groups like DDT and Lyube, but they also help me improve my language skills. Before I leave this place, I will certainly be learning a recipe for borsht—and buying a few more CDs. Meanwhile, I'm working on the challenge of getting people with only three verb tenses in their native language to understand the future perfect, applying to grad schools, and hoping that maybe, just maybe, I will develop eyes specially adapted to see puddles in the dark.

### WHY I KEEP COMING BACK

David Johnson

NOTE: As mentioned above, David is the first teacher to return for a third year. He is in his second year as Lead Teacher—and, by all accounts, doing a great job.

The following statement–question–statement combination was popular in central Minnesota when I was home last summer: "So, you're going back to Russia next year. Why? There must something there for you." The statements on either side of the question I can confirm: yes, I'm going back and, yes, there is something there. I still haven't figured out how to fully explain "why." I first encountered this question when I started studying Russian in college—and I'm still trying to answer it.

"There must be something there for you." I suppose the reason I've come back for two additional years is that there are lots of "somethings" here. This is the logical spot for me to make a list of all the people and things that keep bringing me back. I won't do that, however, because the list would be too long. That's the strongest statement that I can make about my experience, I think.

Let me share one episode with you that can, perhaps, serve to illustrate my attraction to this place. I generally walk to work in the morning. The route I take forces me to cross Gorky Street, which is usually fairly busy. On a recent morning I was waiting to cross with an older woman. She looked worried about stepping out into the traffic. I guessed that she was going to the Red Cross hospital located across the street. Just as the traffic thinned out and I was about to go, I heard a voice: "Grandson, will you help me get across?" It was the old woman. She grabbed my arm, with surprising strength, and we

slowly walked. It couldn't have taken more than twenty seconds to get from one side to the other. She made a comment about the frightening traffic, looked me straight in the eyes and said thank you. She didn't ask where I was from. She didn't smile at my American-Minnesotan accent. She didn't do anything out-of-the-ordinary.

Scratch the surface of that story and you'll find lots of things that are worthy of thought, and you'll find my response to the statement made popular in Minnesota last summer: "There must be something there for you." Yah, there is something here for me. In fact, there are lots of "somethings" here.

## MY SECOND YEAR—IT'S ABOUT THE JOB

Ted Walls

In my first year, as I'm sure you previous teachers can all relate to, I was overwhelmed with the newness and novelty of this place. This being my first visit to Russia, the prospect of a ten-month immersion was both exhilarating and daunting. So much of one's psychic and mental energy is taken up by the bewildering adjustments; new culture, new job, new friends, new family. But this provides a cleansing, a catharsis; a rare opportunity to build a whole new life. This radical of a change is a rare occurrence, and one is left with the glow of a "cool experience" which comes from travel and adventure.

But eventually this passes, leaving one with the "unadorned" experience. As Frost would say, "What to make of a diminished thing?" You get used to Vladimir, you know all the names of the ostanovki (bus stops), you've visited most of the cafes, and you've weathered your initiation to Russian vodka (at least in my case this is true). You've developed a taste for buckwheat kasha, whether you like it or not. You learn the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs (transitive takes an object- don't forget!), you can explain and diagram all twelve verb declensions, and you have a mountain of lesson planning material to draw from. You no longer freak out when people crowd and bump you on the trolleybus. Where does one go from here?

Other teachers may have other answers to this question, such as a developed social life, a deeper pursuit of the Russian language, but for me it's the job. (Given my reputation for not always putting all the time I should into lesson planning, Galya will probably laugh when she reads this.) I have really come to love teaching as a craft, and as a theoretical science. I have always had good dynamics with my students here, Slava Bogu (knock on wood, spit over my shoulder three times), so classroom time has always been more fulfilling than frustrating. Beyond this, I really appreciate the things I've learned about English grammar, about epistemology, and about teaching. No lie, and I wouldn't say I'm a nerd either. It really is interesting stuff.

Nina Zaragoza, if you read this, I would really like to thank you for leaving the book "Understanding Second Language Acquisition" by Rod Ellis. Reading it affected the way I structure my classroom time, and how I view my resources here. In the lower levels, the teacher must elucidate, then reinforce the material. But getting the students to use it is a completely different process. This takes place within the students, in their own time, and on their own terms. If we accept the Russian pedagogical method of force-feeding and memorization, our presence as native speakers capable of demonstrating and eliciting natural speech is wasted. So we must have patience—there are two processes occurring here, and we must treat them differently.

The first process involves providing the tools, and this must be done very carefully and very thoroughly. Students have multiple ways of learning, and presenting new grammar and constructions must reflect this. I now like to use redundancy in presenting new grammar, explaining it in at least three different ways, or using three different reinforcing exercises for the same thing. At least one exercise must be very logical and structured, and I usually have a diagram drawn on the board to support this. Another exercise must be more creative, requiring the students to actively participate, including using their imaginations when coming up with examples. The third, for me, is usually a photocopied exercise from one of the Betty Azar books.

The second process is to create an environment for language activation. The Penny Ur book has a lot of useful suggestions, but this part of the lesson has to be specifically tailored to the collective temperament of each class—they are all different. It is important to make the students want to communicate something to you—and in the process stretch their current capabilities. It's so frustrating for them when they lapse into Russian for a few sentences, only to have me say, "What?" But then they usually try, with help from everybody, to say what they need to.

This second process is where we can shine as native speaking teachers. Repetition counts, and students will always speak at their highest level if they are inwardly motivated to do so. They say their most advanced things over and over until they are natural. I see this time in the class as like playing basketball—you explain the rules, give the kids the ball, and let them get good by PLAYING! My position is analogous to a referee—trying to keep the game within the rules, that is, keeping it in reasonably correct English.

It takes multiple exposure to words and constructions before students start to activate them in their speech. At first this is strained, but it becomes internalized and naturalized only through practice. I have D-level students who still confuse "is" and "are" when they write compositions, but towards the end of my class they usually never make this mistake in conversation because they have learned to use the right forms verbally—without having to think about it.

I play the sax, so I also like to compare all this to jazz. First you study your scales, then it's time to improv. Your ability to improv comes at first through imitation, and then through building your own personal vocabulary of "riffs". Can you dig it?

The "structured" part of the presentation is important. This is after all Russia, and if you think that you can just throw a topic out and expect your students to run with it, you will be wrong most of the time. I made this mistake at first, and of course blamed my students and their culture for being unimaginative and non-self-motivated. But we are after all teachers, and if we don't meet our students where they are and respond to that, then what the hell good are we?

So for me it's about the job now. Not completely of course, but now that the initial stress has passed and I have a foothold in the discipline, I can really start to appreciate it and see it as a chance to expand my own talents and abilities, which feels good. After all, is there anything, any profession, more pure than that of teacher?

It's the job, but my friendships and other relationships are even more important to me. (Now I really hope Galya doesn't read this!) Because the sad fact is that this job will pass. But the links I have forged with people will not. I've managed to make the most out of this job by finding out how it can be good and rewarding, how to deal with the inevitable frustrations and difficulties and come out on top in terms of a constructive and treasured life experience.

Okay, too cheesy, but I'm not going to backpedal. It's Friday night, and all of us teachers have an appointment to keep at the local you-know-where. By the way, the new space is pretty neat. The former storage room in the hallway next to the bathroom is now a "spiral" staircase up to the attic. It's all very Batman. I told Galya that what we need next is a fireman's pole from the new teachers "lounge" down to the basement. We have a lot more space to "be" in now, which is a welcome change.

All's well at the American Home. If you're in Russia, make sure to stop by and see the changes. Poka!

## REFLECTIONS FROM PREVIOUS TEACHERS

### TEACHING IN POKROV

Liz Bird

After teaching at the American Home for the 2001-2002 academic year, I returned for 2002-2003 to teach at the Pokrov chocolate factory that had recently been purchased by Kraft Foods. This was the first full year American Home teachers taught there, so Laura Meany (another returning teacher) and I had a lot of leeway in creating a new program. It was a rewarding experience as it had different challenges than teaching at the American Home.

The Kraft students are extremely motivated because they need to learn English as quickly as possible for their jobs. My students included engineers, secretaries, human resources staff, security staff, and some managers. They needed basic English skills to be able to correspond by e-mail and communicate by telephone with other European Kraft factories.

Many of the students had not studied English since elementary school, and, therefore, we started from the beginning. (I had the lower of the two groups – Z2).

One thing I especially liked about teaching at Pokrov was how much more serious, focused, and determined the students were in comparison to the typical American Home student. There are of course serious students at the AH, but I think it is rare to have an entire class that is focused on learning and not just there for a social hour. This is not to say it is bad that the AH draws students seeking a fun, laid-back time. But it would be nice to find a way to divide the serious students from the fun-seekers. I think that would make AH classes more effective, but I understand the difficulty in implementing that kind of differentiation.

The only drawback of teaching the serious, determined Pokrov students is that you aren't able to see them as often as the AH students. You don't hold office hours and there are no Saturday activities. I think both of these aspects of the American Home are important because the more interaction we offer with the teachers, the better the students' English will get to be.

NOTE: Also see Laura Meany's comments on Pokrov in the previous issue.

#### STUDYING RUSSIAN AT THE PEDAGOGICAL Liz Bird

NOTE: Over the years a number of teachers have returned to Vladimir to study at the Pedagogical.

For anyone interested in studying Russian at one of Vladimir's universities, I will give you my candid opinion about Vladimir State Pedagogical University, which is where I took classes my second year in Vladimir. For the most part I enjoyed it, but I have some criticisms. For one thing, the department claims that you can take as few or as many classes as you want, but that's really not true. They prefer that you take 10 academic hours minimum. We (Laura, Julie Spears, and I) had Galya call and work things out for us, but still, it was always an uncomfortable situation when we signed up for fewer than 10 hours. The "dekan," Galina Alexandrovna, is a little bit of a wheeler-dealer if you ask me. She kept trying to get us to take more classes by saying we were taking much fewer than was "allowed," but I don't think there is any official university rule about how many you have to take. The thing is, I would have loved to take 12 academic hours all year as I did the first semester, but I literally ran out of money! It is quite expensive! Future teachers considering studying there should know that it is \$8 per academic hour (which is only 45 minutes) and so those dollars really add up if you have to take 10 academic hours a week! I guess I just didn't like Galina Alexandrovna's approach to us. I thought she should be happy we were studying there at all, since we pay twice as much as their other students, by virtue of being Americans. Instead, she was trying to get as much money out of us as she could.

[According to Alexei, the ten-hour requirement comes from OVIR; this is supposed to be the minimum number of hours a foreign student takes to be eligible for a visa. However, there are apparently ways around this, especially for the second semester. –Ron]

Now about the university in terms of academic effectiveness – I really became close to two of my professors, respected them, and loved studying with them. Yet, I must say that the university does not have the best professors I've seen. One distinctive quality about the department that I feel is both an advantage and a disadvantage is the fact that they don't have a specific Russian language program. Each student (Western student I should say – for the Chinese students, there is a specific program that the department uses every year, for every student) arrives at the Ped, and he himself decides what topics he would like to study and how many times a week, etc. In a way this is excellent because I was able to choose specific topics such as the “Stalinist period” and “Current events in Russia” and these classes were created just for me. While I was happy the classes were designed based on my interests, they were not of the best quality. What I mean is the subject matter was very interesting, but the teaching of the language itself left much to be desired. Often the focus of my classes was on the content of what we were reading, and my speaking skills were not addressed. I continually tried to change this in my classes, but I was not too successful. I think the Ped would be better off if it had a standard Russian language program that it stuck to for each student. They never did any testing for example – neither at the beginning, during classes or the end! I think they should really test each student when he/she enters to get a sense of what level they are at, and then they should have a basic structure within which to place this student.

I can discuss both teaching at Pokrov and studying at the Ped in more detail – feel free to contact me with any questions. My email is [MaryElizabethBird@hotmail.com](mailto:MaryElizabethBird@hotmail.com).

## COMING HOME

Laura Meany

After two years in Vladimir, I knew that coming back to the U.S. would generate a storm of emotions. First, there would be the goodbyes in Vladimir as I parted with the people who had become my friends, people who had seen me through everything that making a life in a foreign country can inspire, give to, and take from a person. Then there was the question, what was I going back to? How had my family, my friends, my plans for the future changed? I was boarding my flight home with more than heavy suitcases—suitcases that were full of more than I had packed to go abroad in the first place. I spent ten hours in the air dutifully trying not to arrive at any answers. I wanted to adjust to my new old life, including the time zone change, first.

"It's good to have you back, Laura." I smiled and hugged everyone at the airport and in the week that followed, certain that my replies would eventually become true, I answered: "It's good to be back."

Eventually, it was true. Five months have passed. I have a job working as a program assistant at the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation, an organization based in Arlington, Virginia. My group sponsors and administers grants which feature cooperation between former-Soviet and U.S. scientists. My two coworkers are from the former-Soviet countries of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, so conversation at work frequently slips into Russian—and I can hold my own.

I am enjoying living in DC, and hope to soon be enjoying various travel opportunities associated with working for a group with offices in Kiev, Moscow, and Vladivostok. Though I could easily see myself indefinitely content working with the fantastic and interesting people at CRDF, I am busy asking questions and making plans to choose a graduate program here in the DC area.

## WORKSHOP COMMENT

NOTE: We attempt to provide workshops for area English teachers each fall and spring. See the previous issue for comments from an invited presenter, the English Language Officer from the U.S. Embassy. This fall the workshop was presented by the AH teachers. Nineteen local teachers attended, ten of whom had participated in previous workshops. Following is a comment from a regular attendee.

“Thanks a lot for giving us the opportunity to communicate with real native speakers, and not as in an ordinary classroom. This is the fifth year that I have attended the seminars at the American Home with great expectations and a feeling of joy and pleasure. These workshops' distinctive feature is the atmosphere of informality and kindness. I learn a lot of language teaching techniques at these workshops. I like your method of teaching for it is modern, non-conventional and doesn't wear you out.

I have especially good memories of Nina Zaragoza. (See Alumni Notes.) I always use the materials she acquainted us with. And I try to discuss many issues based on her methods.

During the most recent workshop Ted (Walls) especially impressed me. He has a teaching intuition and sense of a classroom. He can joke and enliven the class. A ‘Hagrid’ at the American Home is a great find.”

NOTE: For those of you who don't know, Hagrid is the “grounds keeper” in the Harry Potter series. He is good for thoughtful comic relief—and he and Ted resemble each other physically.

## ALUMNI NOTES

Mary Aquila, 1995-97 Since my wonderful time in Vladimir, I have been very busy. After I returned to the States, I moved to Chicago and started working at Kaplan

Educational Center. I taught various levels of English there. Needless to say, I would not have been able to do this without the invaluable experience I received at the American Home. Not only did I learn how to teach, but I also learned how to connect with the students which is an obvious necessity in this field. Currently, I am getting my Master of Linguistics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. After I finish this program, I intend to enter the Master of Education program with a concentration in secondary education. Ultimately, I would like to teach concurrently in adult education and high school. My two years in Vladimir provided me with some of the best professional and personal experiences anyone can ever hope to have!

Jake Chizzo, 1998-99 I finished my Master's in Multicultural/Multilingual Education (and TESOL) at George Mason University last summer. While working on my degree, I taught ESL at the Islamic Saudi Academy (the Saudi Arabian Embassy school) in Alexandria, VA. That was a very unique and interesting job. Now I've moved to Istanbul and work as an English Instructor at Koc University (pronounced "coach"), arguably the top university in this country. The campus is located in the northern part of the city and overlooks the Black Sea and the mouth of the Bosphorus. It is an incredible location. The students and teachers here are great, and the campus is very modern and comfortable. The website is: [www.ku.edu.tr](http://www.ku.edu.tr). The recent events in Istanbul have been a cause for worry; however, we are safe and God willing we will not have any more terror attacks here. [yasha\\_jc@yahoo.com](mailto:yasha_jc@yahoo.com)

Sandi (Schneider) Wulf, 1992-93 Our son, Jonathan Delaney Wulf, is now 7 months old, crawling, babbling and even has a few teeth. Our daughter, Lauren, will be 3 on Christmas Eve.

Professionally, things are going well too. I currently serve on the Board of Directors for the Illinois Society of Association Executives (ISAE) and have been asked to "go through the chairs" there. I will start my term as Secretary/Treasurer in '04, will move to President Elect in '05 and President in '06.

That's about all the news I can think of. Hope everything is going well in Vladimir. Please tell everyone hello.

Nina & Derek Zaragoza, 2000-02 Hi everyone! Derek and I are fine and doing well in New York. Whenever we want Russian cooking we can buy stuff at a Ruski Magazin down the block. Of course I don't cook so we go to a Russian restaurant in Brighton Beach. I am taking Russian lessons twice a week but Derek is not! He is playing basketball, though. Derek misses Oksana, Lena, Alexei, Galya, and Tanya. Of course, he misses Gosha (the AH cat), too, and we can't forget Misha (a neighbor's dog). It was great when Leyla, one of my American Home students, came to visit us in April. We walked all over NYC! We hope to see everyone next summer—I'm saving up my dollars!

NOTE: If you don't know Nina and Derek, check the first newsletter. (Derek is Nina's young son. His Russian was excellent by the end of the second year. Hopefully he won't

lose it all....) Also, don't miss Leyla Meshkova's essay in this issue on the value of the English program for high school exchange students.