

# AH Alumni Newsletter

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## VARIOUS COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS

**Ron**

Galya and Alexei have been especially busy in the run-up to this issue, so I've let them off the hook. But I promise that you *will* hear from them in the next issue.

This has been an eventful year. We've continued to find ways to get things done—and, as noted below, a lot is being accomplished. We also continue to face problems. For example, the fire inspectors decided that we needed 30 smoke alarms in the AH, all linked to a “monitoring center.” Thanks to Galya's negotiating skills, we now have 20 independent detectors. (It's good to remember that American “safety inspectors” can some times come up with decisions that are just about as hard to justify.)

Most recently—and most unfortunately—one of this year's teachers, Ann Mansolino, had her second encounter with the local militia. Ann is of Italian ancestry and happens to be fairly dark complexioned. This led to the apparent conclusion that she might be a Chechen terrorist. Even given the fact that Chechen women allegedly blew up two Russian airplanes last year, the way the local officers reportedly dealt with Ann cannot be justified. There was especially no excuse for the way she was treated the second time. The U.S. Embassy was notified and they advised

Ann to return to the States—which she did. An American living in Vladimir with her Russian husband has taken over Ann’s classes.

Please see Ann’s comments below.

The Embassy has lodged a protest with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We have requested an investigation by senior militia officers, the City Administration has promised to look into what happened, and an article appeared in Molva. (If you would like a copy of the Molva article, let me know. Specify Russian or English—or both.)

Clearly, some changes need to be made in militia operating procedures—and some officers need to be punished. I definitely intend to ask for an accounting of what is being done to make sure this sort of thing never happens again. (This kind of unprofessional behavior undermines respect for the militia, and the mistreatment of foreigners, among other things, threatens efforts to develop tourism.)

Some times “counterproductive behavior” leads to positive change. Let’s hope that is what will happen in this case.

On a more positive note, we are continuing our efforts to upgrade our program. Lena Belova is playing a major role in this—and, as always, Olya and Oxana are contributing. For example, Lena and Sarah Roirmer, this year’s Lead Teacher, have just completed work on a series of video segments of classes that we hope will prove useful during orientation in August. Lena is also working hard on getting useful teaching information organized and on the computer, and she is continuing to organize the library—and to work with the teachers. (I’ll ask Lena for a “full report” for the next issue.)

We are going to experiment with having the new teachers take an online TEFL training course provided by ICAL. One of the new teachers, Jane Keeler, took a similar course—after teaching English in Korea. She said she thought it was useful—but weak on grammar. I’ve been assured that the ICAL course does a good job with grammar. We’ll see. All the new teachers will formally take this course, except Jane. Lena will also take it. Jane and the two returning teachers, along with Galya, will receive copies of the course materials, and everyone will share the completed lessons with the tutor’s comments and suggestions. This course obviously won’t be a “magic wand,” but it should make a positive contribution to our program.

Beyond our English and Russian language programs, Alexei and I are continuing to have some success with our “special projects.” As you will see from the comments below, there are continuing positive ripples from last summer’s Fulbright trip. (We hope to organize another for 2006.) We are putting the finishing touches on the arrangements for the young jazz singer Juliana Rogachova’s return for more training at the Stanford Jazz Workshop, followed by a “full scale performance” at the San Jose Jazz Festival and more time in New York, including a visit to Juilliard.

We have everything arranged for a young basketball player, Roman Mikheikin, to attend Coach Cal Hubbard’s basketball clinics and spend time with young basketball players and their families. This should be quite an experience for Roman—it’s been two years in the making.

Masha Yumatova is working hard on her Criminal Justice Masters program.

We’ll have updates on all three of these people in the fall issue.

We will have an “intern” from Carleton College in Vladimir this summer. Jenny Holm will work with several organizations and take some Russian lessons.

We will also have two full time “intensive Russian” students: Chris Stroop, a teacher from two years ago who is now a PhD candidate in Russian History at Stanford, and Sarah Lorenz, a Carleton College graduate who is currently working on her PhD in Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley. See Chris’ essay below.

Dr. Bruce Wicks, University of Illinois tourism specialist, will return to Vladimir in June to continue work on the tourism development project. (In this connection, please note on the Serendipity web site the info on the fall trip we have organized as a part of this project.) Bruce will be joined in Vladimir by a Polish graduate student who was at

the U of I last year. She will be collecting information for her Master's thesis, much of which will be of value to our tourism project.

We are waiting to hear about a grant ISU recreation specialist Barb Schlatter submitted to the Tony Hawk Foundation for a skatepark project in Vladimir. We also hope to be able to make another contribution to a climbing wall project and to help set up a disk golf course. Barb and her colleague from the University of Nebraska, Marta Moorman, have written a paper on last summer's "grand adventure" which has been accepted for presentation at an international conference. (We should have a link to the paper on our web site shortly.)

Speaking of web sites, don't forget to take a look at the site we are working on for the City of Vladimir: [www.vladimir-russia.net](http://www.vladimir-russia.net). Comments and suggestions are encouraged.

We are of course continuing to look for ways to improve and enhance what we are doing. In this connection, new teaching materials are always welcome—and Alexei is always pleased to get things he can give out at the Street Ball tournament.

## **NEW & RETURNING TEACHERS**

We hired six new teachers for the upcoming year. They are Joanna Greenlee, Gordon College; Youngmee Hahn, Swarthmore College; Glen Johnson, University of Michigan—Ann Arbor; Jane Keeler, University of the South; Michael Kogan, Indiana Univeristy; and Brooke Ricker, Stanford University. Returning for a second year will be Kelli Gladney and Britt Newman. See their comments below. (Kelli and Britt will share the Lead Teacher duties.) All of the above will be full time teachers. For more on them, go to: [www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm](http://www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm).

## **RETURNING TEACHER COMMENTS**

### **Challenges Unknown and Known—Or Why I Am Returning to Russia Kelli Gladney (2004-06)**

“So, you have just about finished teaching one year in Russia. What are you going to do next year?”

“I'm going to Disney.... Oh wait, no! I'm going to go back to teach in Russia for another year.”

I think that many of my friends in America have very strange views about the kind of experience that I am having here in Russia. They are generally of two opinions. They either think that this is the coolest and most romantic thing ever, or they wonder why anyone would want to leave America to live in Russia. I find that it is really difficult to explain to people who have not actually experienced Russian culture what it is that is so fascinating about it.

For me, coming to teach in Russia for the first year was about facing unknown challenges. First of all, no matter how much you read about Russia or how much you hear about it from other people, it is impossible to fully understand from afar what it is like here. I tried to come here with a very open mind. I knew that it would be challenging. I knew that studying the Russian language would be difficult, and I knew that learning to function in a society where you often don't understand what is being said, or you don't understand the cultural references would involve a lot of frustration and stress. However, in my opinion, it is these challenges, and the things we learn from facing them, that make this type of experience so rewarding. So, I ventured here with the knowledge that I didn't know what I was going to be facing.

Some of the biggest challenges have come of course from trying to learn the Russian language. For example, I was surprised to discover that in most of the stores it is not possible to just go in, pick up what I want and take it to the cash register to pay for it. The Russian system requires people to ask for what they want. I was not very confident in the beginning trying to buy things, because the sellers are sometimes not very patient with people who do not speak their language very well.

So, here I am almost at the end of the first year, and I now know what challenges there are for me living in Russia. While my first year was about facing the unknown challenges, my decision to stay has been based on wanting to face the known challenges. The only way that I can express it is that there is just “something special” about Russia. I want to be more successful as a teacher here. I want to speak and understand Russian better. I want to continue to navigate this culture which never ceases to surprise me. Last weekend, I went on a trip outside of Vladimir with one of the other teachers. We were traveling in a small bus, and on the way back to Vladimir, one of the rear tires fell off the vehicle. I have been in vehicles where a tire went flat, but I have to admit that I had never been in a vehicle where the whole tire (rim and all) just fell off. The surprising thing about this was that the driver did not seem to be all that surprised. He pulled over, got out and ran down the road to collect the tire, inspected the axel, put the tire back on, and we were on our way again. The other surprising thing is that most of the Russians I have told about this have said that it happens quite often.

I guess what it really comes down to is that I feel like there is much more that I can gain by returning for a second year. In short, I am just not ready to leave this country. I also hope that my experiences here can be helpful for the new teachers.

### **Why I’m Sticking Around** **Britt Newman (2004-06)**

I like fresh pickles. I like buying them from babushki that are wrapped in innumerable layers of wool shawls. I like walking through the central market, passing table after table covered with the same produce and hearing the vendors assure me that their stall is the best.

It’s difficult to bottle up the reasons for my coming back for a second year. I can give the answers that I’ve given to my family and friends: I have some great personal relationships with Russians here; I enjoy learning about the Russian language and culture; and I like teaching and interacting with my students. All of this is true, but there’s something more that’s hard to squeeze across phone lines or through a keyboard.

I like drinking hot tea with homemade jam. I like squeezing into marshrutki [small vans]. I like being able to walk by 12<sup>th</sup> century architecture when I want to relax. I like entering a friend’s house, unbundling myself and heading straight for the tea and butterbrodi [sandwiches]. In many basic ways I’m happy with my life here, and I would like to deepen my experience, learn more and simply enjoy it before I move on.

What can I say? I like the pickles.

## **THINGS TEACHERS DO OUTSIDE THE AH**

*Notes: Ted and Moultrie are finishing their third year at the American Home. Sarah and Meghan are in their second year. Out of the more than 70 teachers to date, only three have spent three years at the AH. An additional 16 have returned for a second year—and then moved on.*

It should be noted that, as those of you who have taught at the AH know very well, first year teachers—especially during the fall term—have limited time to pursue their personal interests. Learning to plan lessons and teach effectively requires very long hours. After the new teachers learn the ropes, they have more time to explore, sample, and enjoy the kinds of things discussed below.

### **Being in Vladimir** **Ted Walls (2002-05)**

If I had to provide any words of wisdom (of which I have full many) for the new teachers, I would tell them to make the most of your time in Vladimir. Some of the local inhabitants decry it as hopelessly provincial and boring, but I have found that there are an almost limitless number of pastimes to be found here.

It really depends on what kind of person you are. If you look for activity, you will find it in abundance. I am used to big city action (Detroit), and without exaggerating I can say I've led a rich life here in "little" Vladimir, full of meaningful relationships, personal firsts and achievements. I will miss this place greatly.

Coming from a university environment as most of us do, it is good to keep in touch with the process of learning. I haven't gone through a period of intellectual mourning as most people do upon graduation, because I have been constantly challenged and stimulated here, not only by my Russian teacher, but by the very process of adapting to a new lifestyle and culture—of building a new life from scratch.

I have done and learned a lot of things. I went rock climbing for the first time in my life, something I had been dreaming of since childhood. On this trip I made friends with a whole new circle of people who are hardcore wilderness enthusiasts, and I have since had many adventures with them. Last summer we took a three-day canoe trip through one of the cleanest and most remote parts of Vladimir region.

I've learned to play the guitar, another long-standing ambition, and picked up Russian songs from my friends, as well as composing many of my own. As you will pleasantly discover, guitars and music are an integral part of any Russian party.

I have learned a lot about gardening, having gone through more than two seasons of helping out at the dacha. Gardening can be hard work, but it is relaxing and rewarding. Russians say that people who garden never go crazy or suffer from dementia! Nothing is better than opening a new jar of pickles or jam in the middle of the winter, and letting the smell take you back to the day spent outdoors when you picked the fresh cucumbers and berries.

Church is also something not to be missed. I am not Russian Orthodox, but I have so enjoyed being immersed in the Orthodox culture. The sound of the bells (quite unique), the singing, the incense, the beautiful iconography, the ancient ritual—it is all very intoxicating and uplifting. The people are very devout, some even prostrating themselves on the ground when they pray. The fact that there are so many churches, so accessible on foot, and the fact that they are so old and beautiful, can really create the impression of being in a holy landscape, if you take the opportunity to expose yourself to this aspect of Vladimir. When weather permits us to open the windows of the American Home, we can hear quite clearly the bells of Spasskaya Church, which is very close. If you position yourself in the right part of the neighborhood, you can hear the bells of four or five different churches ringing at the same time. It's easy to stop by on your way to work, light a candle, enjoy the silent solemnity, look at the icons or frescoes, and say a quick prayer that your students will understand today's grammar.

I am a martial arts teacher. I hold rank in a very rare style of Indonesian Pencak Silat, and I teach a group of people at a sports center two nights per week. One of my American Home students has a black belt in Aikido, and he heard that I was involved in Pencak Silat. He wanted me to show him some stuff, and in no time at all it evolved into a full-time endeavor, with almost twenty students. Our little training group is the first of its kind to offer authentic Indonesian martial arts in Russia—they can't even get this in Moscow. My Grandmaster—the head of the art—heard about the new students on Russian soil, and agreed to come to Vladimir this summer to do a seminar. The program will continue after I'm gone, and be something unique and special for a lot of people. Both the Grandmaster and myself will return periodically to encourage them. It has turned into another way for me to contribute something back to the people's lives here, in return for what they've given me.

The martial arts thing hasn't been easy. Sometimes it's hard to be motivated to go train with them when I'm mentally exhausted from teaching my classes at the AH, and recently I broke my hand during a sparring match. But I'm glad I've got another excuse to come back to Vladimir, and I am glad that I have made a new circle of friends.

I've read a lot since I've been here. At college you are forever reading what you must, but in Vladimir you can finally relax and get around to that novel you've wanted to finish for so long. I read *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*—both of them twice. I finished *The Brothers Karamazov*, *We*, and *The Master and Margarita*. I'm on to *The Idiot* and *Dog's Heart* next. I also re-read my anthropological theory texts and had the chance to read a lot of the source material that was presented in part by my professors.

There's something wonderful about reading Russian literature while in Russia. Much of what Tolstoy praises and complains about is still true of the Russian character. The majestic descriptions of nature and the changing seasons described in *Anna Karenina* unfolded before my eyes as I was reading about them.

One of my goals in learning Russian was to be able to do research on a Finno-Ugric ethnic group, the Mari, who still practice an ancient earth religion. While in Vladimir, I was able to make contact with them, and was invited out to the Republic of Mari-El to witness and record their religious rites in their sacred groves. I made friends with their head priest and did a full video interview with him in which he explained the aspects of his people's ancient religion. I have been to Mari-El twice, and will go a few more times before August. With this connection, I have laid a very productive foundation for future research and dissertation topics. I'll have a web-site up about it all as soon as I finish translating and transcribing the materials.

On a more day-to-day level, there is a wonderful babushka who we have for a neighbor, and my wife [Ted is married to an AH student] and I visit her often for fresh hot blini and a rousing game of Uno. She also makes some pretty tasty cabbage soup. I know it doesn't sound too exciting, but we have a blast. About every other weekend there is some kind of party to go to, or friends visiting from Moscow or somewhere else invade the apartment with champagne and chocolates, and don't leave until 3 a.m. When I first got here I went to cafes and nightclubs, but all that seems too boring now that I have deeper connections. Make these connections as soon as you can!

With the arrival of the warm weather, it's time again to go traveling. My in-laws will need help at the dacha, and friends will want to go camping and make shashlik, but still we will find time to finish seeing more of the Golden Ring. Traveling like a native (bus and hostels) is in itself an adventure. We saw Pereslavl-Zalessky last fall, and we want to do Rostov and Yaroslavl this spring.

Being in Vladimir is good. All the teachers could describe in kind their own pastimes and discoveries, how life has opened itself to them here. You will see for yourself.

### **Studying the Flute—Russian-Style**

**Sarah Rorimer** (2003-05), Lead Teacher this year

During my last semester at Bates College, I put most of my time and energy into organizing a Senior Flute Recital that combined my two major interests: Russian studies and music. I performed solo and chamber works by twentieth century composers, including Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Shostakovich. For me, this concert was the culmination of my four years of study, and I prepared by seeking advice from my professors, my flute teacher, and by listening to all of the relevant recordings in the music library. Looking back, I can see that my recital was missing a critical element which not even my most knowledgeable mentors were able to teach me: how to play Russian music the Russian way.

I wanted to study the flute in Russia, but after my first lesson, I was a little skeptical. It was held in a dingy music school where all of the other pupils were under the age of twelve and running through the halls singing songs at the top of their lungs. In addition, my flute teacher, Galya, was just a year older than me. "I'm a college graduate. What can I possibly learn here?" I thought. As it turns out, there was a lot to learn! Galya asked me to play some long tones, and right away she said that I was doing it all wrong. "You ought to breathe from your diaphragm, not your chest," she said. "You've been playing the flute for how long?"

For the first few months, we worked solely on the quality of my tone and breathing. I would spend each lesson playing long notes one at a time—rich, loud, low notes and soft, delicate, high notes. Galya made me repeat the note until I got it just right—equal in volume, vibrato and timbre. "Think of your breathing like your monthly wages. If you spend all of your money right away, you won't have anything left at the end of the month. How will you buy your groceries? You need to economize so that your money lasts until the very last day." (Given the size of my "Russian salary," I could certainly relate to this metaphor.) Galya even gave me exercises to do at home which required me to lie on the floor with a book under my stomach! I had no idea that learning to breathe "properly" would take so much work...and that was only the beginning!

All of Galya's music is dog-eared and well-loved, covered carefully with cellophane to protect the outer pages. Because it is really difficult to find flute music in Russia, I shared what I had with Galya and introduced her to a number of new pieces.

As for my progress, the duets that I had played in the past took on entirely new identities with her coaching. Instead of a measured playing style, I have learned how to "lift the notes off the pages," ripping off fast passages at lightning speed and milking the slow, somber sections for all they are worth. Galya is constantly pushing me to play more expressively and with more forward movement. She often stands next to me and sings the melody in my ear, encouraging me to "Play louder!" "Give it more!" or when I hit a wrong note she reprimands, "Don't compose new music!"

Now after nearly two years of study and two recitals, I have become a completely different musician. Although I will probably never be able to fully master the Russian style, I have a much better understanding of what it means to play "from the soul" with emotion and expressiveness. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to continue my musical studies and learn some of the secrets of playing Russian music from someone who really knows.

### **A Cross Country Adventure** **Moultrie Townsend (2002-05)**

I came to Russia for an adventure. However, the word adventure took on new meaning one cold Sunday morning in February when Sarah [Rorimer] and I met up with a local cross-country ski club at Friendship Park. We set out at 10 a.m. through the park and turned off onto a path heading away from Vladimir to the south. We had done this part of the route before, so I felt comfortable enough.

After we crossed an open field, our group of about twelve skiers stopped at a picnic area and had tea and a small lunch. At this point, a few people headed back to Vladimir while the rest of us brave souls carried on to the Klyazma River. In the fall and summer I can't say that I'm impressed by the Klyazma, but it's truly beautiful in the dead of winter. We stopped in the middle of the frozen river to take some group pictures.

We continued on. After some time, we reached a small lake near a village where four fishermen were out trying their luck at ice fishing. As we waited for another member of the group to join us there, we had the opportunity to ski over to the fishermen and inquire about their success. They said the fish were not biting that day, but catching fish doesn't really seem to be the point of ice fishing anyway.

This place wound up being about the halfway point of our journey. From there we skied along a road until we found a "trail" taking us roughly parallel to Vladimir. During this part of the trip, the views were spectacular, even if the skiing was rather difficult at times.

After another two hours or so, the group was ready for another break, so we went up a road to a ski base and rest center, "Ulibishevo." There they had cabins for rent and a small café. The management let us use their picnic tables for tea and snacks.

After a twenty-minute rest, we skied on towards "Mostostroi" and another crossing of the Klyazma River. Mostostroi ("bridge building" in Russian) is the place where the train crosses the Klyazma not far from Vladimir. When we got there we took another group picture and then skied along the train tracks, finally heading back to Vladimir.

Sarah was initially a little worried about skiing down the middle of the train tracks, but the experts in our group assured her that only two trains a day came by on this route. As it turns out, we had to ski into the snow banks twice to clear the way for trains. I guess it was all part of the adventure.

As the sun was slowly setting, we approached Vladimir. We could see some landmarks in the distance, and I for one was glad that our journey was reaching its end. We took off our skis at a warehouse area and walked uphill another ten minutes to the bus stop, Ruslan and Ludmila. By then it was almost six in the evening, and we had skied about twenty-two kilometers that day. It was quite a trip, and in spite of being tired and sore afterwards, it was one of the all-time highlights of my three years in Vladimir.

## **Teaching English at an Orphanage** **Meghan Gilrein (2003-05)**

Visiting a local orphanage and volunteering my time to teach some of the kids English has proven to be a rewarding experience. The children are eager to participate and always glad to see me. In fact, they tend to run up to welcome me, and often all try to help me take off my coat and scarf at the same time. This can sometimes be uncomfortable, but it is always flattering. I'm not used to being greeted by "students" in such a manner!

There are about ten "students," age six, in the group I work with. The number of kids changes regularly as they are adopted. I do not know for sure, but I believe that several are headed for the United States. I am glad that I can teach them some survival English. They pick up the language surprisingly quickly and their accents are wonderful. Some of the kids have perfect pronunciation.

The children are always ready to speak English and love the attention they get when they stand up to recite some new words. They always have smiles on their faces and inevitably make my day brighter.

*Note: Meghan has been helping out at the Karl Libknekht Orphanage. She was preceded there by another AH teacher, Nina Zaragoza. The children at this orphanage are between 2 and 7 years old. The orphanage staff does their best to nurture the children. This includes making every effort to get as many of them adopted as possible. Unfortunately, recent moves by the Russian government to limit foreign adoptions will make that task more difficult. Russian families don't normally adopt. For more information on the AH's connection with this orphanage, see "Other Projects" on the web site.*

## **SOME COMMENTS FROM PREVIOUS TEACHERS**

### **Russian Noise** **Meghan Lynch (2003-04)**

There was once a time when it was possible to live a normal day without hearing the latest American Idol gossip, when an early morning ride on crowded public transportation didn't make me cringe, and when a scrolling ribbon of the latest news wasn't superimposed on the backs of my eyelids. As I shuffled among the herd of people at the National Cherry Blossom Festival today, a constant stream of conversation bytes pounding the very nerves I'd come to soothe through a little intercultural celebration and the calming Zen of the clouds upon clouds of delicate pink blooms, I searched for the perfect patch of grass with the perfect amount of sun and the perfect distance from the throngs of festival goers to lay my coat, relax, and observe.

The day I sat enthralled soon after my return from Russia as my dinner companions related a year's worth of precise details on Scott Peterson's predicament while four television screens bore down on me shouting the very latest details from every corner of the restaurant, was the day I realized I would miss the absence of noise, the ability to simply observe and not listen. Trolleybus conversations and Russian/Brazilian soap operas could be tuned out with ease, and I was free to compile my own pool of information and experience.

But for all the times I tuned out excess noise in Russia and for all the times now that I strategize my escape from behind the wall of baby strollers as I walk down the street so as not to hear another word on gymboree, or pray for a near empty metro car after a long day, there's a time when I catch a few words of Russian, like hearing my name, and I decide to browse the new line of stiletto heels that I would never dream of buying, and I quicken my pace so as not to lose those few bytes of conversation, and I move my coat just a few feet closer to the throngs of tourists because Russian is just not something I can tune out anymore.

### **The View from Stanford** **Chris Stroop (2003-04)**

Well, roughly a year after leaving the American Home, I find myself typing this piece in a fairly Spartan dorm room at Stanford University, where I sing along to the Russian rock that comes out of my stereo (what must the neighbors

think?) and read published copies of seventeenth-century chancery records. My walls are decked with Soviet propaganda posters, as collecting them is a new hobby of mine. Furthermore, there's an icon in the corner, the Bogoliubskaiia Bogomater', next to a picture of my cousins, a children's book about typing cows, a small matrioshka, an old Indiana license plate, and a number of other things in what amounts to a very anomalous shrine of sorts. Such are the glamorous surroundings of this first-year Ph.D. student in early modern Russian history.

Putting the somewhat austere dorm and all irony aside, Stanford is a fantastic place, with a star-studded faculty, a top-ranked history department, an extensive archive of Soviet materials—original materials from my period are only to be found in Russia, I'm afraid—and an excellent and well-run Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (CREEES), whose events I often attend—not just for the free lunches they regularly provide, although those are a nice bonus. My advisor, Nancy Kollmann, is the director of CREEES and an eminent expert in early modern Russian history.

I believe the AH played a vital part in getting me where I am today. Without my experience living and working in Russia, as well as Nelli Mukhammadieva's tutoring, my language skills would not have been nearly adequate to the tasks I undertake here—and, in principle, I think we should be reading even more in Russian than we actually do. Could I even have gotten into Stanford right after finishing my undergraduate degree, which is doubtful, the first year would certainly have been a major struggle—even more so than the first year of graduate school usually is (which is crazy enough)—and a struggle I may well not have been able to handle. It turns out that working at the AH was not only fun, fascinating, and an all around good experience, but also a good career move on my part.

Recently, I began to think about the fact that my language skills could still use a boost, and I decided to apply for a FLAS (Foreign language and area studies grant) to engage in summer language study. Should I get that grant, I will be back at the AH starting in June, this time in the capacity of a full-time language student, and my development as a researcher and scholar will again be enhanced through its intensive Russian program. I suspect I'll manage to come, even if I'm not granted all the money I requested, and the prospect of returning to Vladimir and seeing my friends and acquaintances there is a very happy one indeed.

#### **A Note from London** **Charity Trelease (1998-99)**

Privet, dorigie druz'ya!

I've enjoyed reading about the apparently unstoppable growth of the AH over the past few years. (We glorify the American Home, indeed.) Ron has asked me for an update, so here goes:

Last May marked the beginning of my "release" from law school. After three grueling years at Georgetown, I got my big-important piece of paper and enjoyed a few weeks off.

Alas, it was not to last. I spent the rest of the summer studying for the DC bar exam, an activity that ranks right up there with repeatedly squishing a slug. For ten weeks. With bare feet.

Thanks to some higher power, I managed to pass the bar and have since taken a job in London with Baker & McKenzie. I'll spend the next two years training to qualify as a solicitor, which is what they call lawyers over here. (Barristers, in contrast, are the ones who appear in court and - most crucially - wear powdered wigs.)

I am happy to report that the AH's prominent billing on my resume has opened countless doors for me, both in being admitted to law school, and in getting jobs with international organizations and firms. My thanks to you all for creating and growing this remarkable institution.

London is a lovely town, perpetual rain notwithstanding. (Sunlight is overrated. Doesn't it cause cancer or something?) And it's a lot closer to Russia than Washington, DC. A trip na rodinu will definitely be on the agenda!

So there you have it. I hope you all are well. Drop me a line if you're ever in London - [charity.trelease@gmail.com](mailto:charity.trelease@gmail.com). Vsego dobrogo!

## UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTERS WITH THE MILITIA

Ann Mansolino (2004-05)

I'll be the first to admit that I didn't know what to expect when I moved to Vladimir last August to teach English at the American Home. After all, I hadn't been to Russia before, and I hadn't studied Russian. I wanted a challenge, wanted to teach, and wanted to learn more about this part of the world. I was open to learning and to experiencing whatever Russia had to offer. And I did learn a lot, though what I learned wasn't always what I had expected. After all, I hadn't expected to be arrested, twice, as a suspected Chechen terrorist. And yet that is precisely what happened.

The first time was in September. I was new to Russia, and everything Russian was new and fascinating. It was a Sunday morning, and I was on my way to the bus stop. I stopped to take a picture of a bread truck, and while doing so, was approached by the police. There's nothing illegal, incidentally, about taking snapshots of bread trucks, and the police later acknowledged as much. But at the time, it provided a convenient excuse to claim I was likely a terrorist, and thus to arrest me. I have dark hair and dark eyes and a darker-than-Russian complexion, and this led the police to conclude that I was Chechen. Unfortunately, they didn't have the courtesy to explain that to me at the time; rather, they put me in a car and took me to the station, leaving me to wonder what the problem was. And they never did tell me. Maybe because my Russian speaking abilities were so limited at that point (I could respond to questions about my name and where I'm from and where I live and work, but that was about all I could do in September) no one thought it worth trying to tell me more. I'm not sure. Regardless, they just had me sit and wait and worry and wonder. The officers milled around the station, chatting with each other and watching cartoons dubbed into Russian on a TV in the corner. They had me wait until Galya could come down to the station to verify my identity before letting me go, and before they explained anything. And then they told Galya, not me, what the "problem" allegedly was. It boiled down to the fact that they thought I looked Chechen. The police also claimed, bogusly, that I had been photographing banks in preparation for a terrorist attack. Amusing, but not true.

Time passed. I got over it—well, to the extent that one can get over being wrongly arrested in a foreign country. I taught English. Learned some Russian. Made some friends. Learned to ski. Was living my life without thinking about terrorism or the police. And then, one day in the middle of March, I went to the market and everything changed.

The Central Market had become one of my favorite places in Vladimir: long tables with towering piles of vegetables, mounds of potatoes, heaps of pungent raw fish, vast blocks of butter being cut to size, beautiful in their pale creamy excess, women holding out pieces of raw meat in their bloodstained hands for you to inspect, all the while assuring you of how fresh and good it is, while wild dogs pace back and forth, patiently, hungrily. I paced back and forth hungrily, too, admiring the cheeses, the meats, the cookies, deciding what groceries to buy. And I felt good about it: my Russian was still bad but had improved enormously, and, as a result, buying food was getting so much easier. And then I was arrested a second time.

I was initially apprehended by market security who said they were calling the militia. I was hauled to the back room behind all of the market stalls, while women employees of the market yelled at the security guards that they'd seen me before with foreign men who were terrorists and that I really could speak Russian well and was pretending not to. The women were lying. I was escorted through the market like a criminal to a back room. I showed my passport, visa, and registration, and a letter from the American Home confirming that I was a teacher there to everyone who asked to see my documents. The fact that I was an American didn't seem to matter.

At the market, I was groped by one militia officer who pretended to be looking for weapons but really was just feeling around inside my clothes while asking if his hands were too cold and demanding to know, "which do you like better, America or Russia?"

Then some women who worked in the market came to make false official statements claiming that they'd seen me before with men who allegedly were "foreign terrorists." I argued with them, but no one seemed to believe me, and the officers dutifully wrote down their statements. The women, clearly reveled in what they were doing, and I wondered why they were enjoying hating someone they didn't know, wondered what they thought they had to gain

by denouncing me as a terrorist just because they could, just because I have a darker complexion than they do. I asked if I could call the American Home and if I could call the US Embassy. I was ignored. The militia officers then marched me back through the market, so that everyone could stare at the criminal. Everyone did stop and stare at me. And then I was led outside to the police car and taken to the station.

Again, at the station, I sat and waited and wondered what would happen next. Again, no one bothered to tell me what, exactly, the problem was. Time passed. Eventually, I was asked more questions, none of which seemed to have any possible right answers, and all of which seemed designed to “prove” that I was a terrorist. They suggested that I must have been arrested in America too—which, incidentally, is not true. Eventually, I was taken back to the American Home.

Shortly after this second incident, I decided that I needed to leave Russia in order to ensure my own safety. As fascinating as Russia is—and I do find it fascinating—I decided that it was no longer safe to remain. I had consulted with the Embassy by this time, and they likewise recommended that I leave immediately. Leaving was difficult, as I liked my students, liked teaching. Many of my students, likewise, seemed sorry to see me go. One Russian friend cried when I left; I cried too. It’s difficult to leave friends and students on short notice, to just drop the life that I’d built for myself since August and walk away. It hurts to do that, but I thought it the wisest response to the situation.

Coming home was strange. I kept talking about Russia and thinking about Russia and then looking up and noticing with some measure of confusion that I was no longer in Russia, that that part of my life was over. I want to remember the good parts of Russia, the beautiful parts, the funny parts, the absurd parts like kiosks in Moscow that simultaneously sell beer and ice cream and also do 24 hour currency exchange, and I do remember, I really do, despite the persistence of the unpleasant memories currently vying for my attention.

I still hear from some of my students, and this makes me happy. They send me email, and it’s great to hear how they’re doing, to see them writing beautiful English. One student wrote, “Dear Ann! It was so unexpected that you left Russia. I think you saw good and bad sides of our country. So you can understand us.” I think she’s right; I hope she is. I want to understand. I’m not sorry I went to Russia. I learned a lot and think I’m a better person for having been there. I think I understand more fully what it means to be human in this world. And that’s worth something.

*Note: As mentioned above, we are doing our best to encourage changes in militia policy that will minimize the odds that this sort of thing will be repeated.*

## **VISITORS TO THE AH**

### **An “Invasion” from Kovrov Lauren TenHarmsel (2004-05)**

Every year several schools from around the area bring their students to the American Home to get a tour of a ‘real’ American house and practice their English. In the past few weeks, two groups of students from the city of Kovrov (located 40 miles northeast of Vladimir) have visited the AH to ooh and ah over the dishwasher [which still doesn’t work—RP] and thermostat and ask the teachers here questions about life in the United States. We were told that these students come to the AH as a reward for winning a prize in an English language competition at their school.

I for one assumed that these students would have little enthusiasm for an educational excursion that seemed like a masked ploy by their teachers to get them to use their English. However, I was pleasantly surprised by their level of interest, and their ability to articulate questions in English. For many of them, this was the first time they had seen or talked to a real-live American, leaving me to feel strangely like a celebrity. They asked us practically every question imaginable from the predictable, “Do you eat fast-food every day?” to more thought-provoking questions about what we like and dislike about living in Russia, the American educational system and politics. The great thing about these visits is that the learning goes both ways. The interest in each other’s culture was reciprocal and thus, it was exciting to be able to engage in a dialogue that was enlightening both for the teachers and students.

For example, the students learned about the way independence plays a large factor in the life of young adults in America (moving out of the house early, etc.), about the trials of living in another culture, and that American culture

does not necessarily look the way it is portrayed in films. I, on the other hand, was given the opportunity to articulate the things I have grown to love about Russia and the way the people and country have impressed me, even in my short time here.

## **BRIEF NOTES FROM SOME OF THE FULBRIGHT TEACHERS**

**Jill Acker**, Latin School of Chicago

This March I traveled with fifteen teenagers to China from Beijing to Shanghai, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. As my students described their Chinese dinner with a Beijing family for the rest of our group, I fondly recalled my home stays in Vladimir and Murom.

That joyous memory, together with fascinating visits to people and places representing every aspect of Russian society, only occurred because of the American Home's creative, effective diligence in providing each of us in the Fulbright group with a clear, coherent understanding of Russia's everyday life and culture.

Students in my Russian Revolutions class this semester benefit daily from the connections I make between that everyday life and culture and the rest of Russian history.

I particularly like to share three connections. First, I enjoy telling the story of the Russian grandfather in Murom who fought in World War II. That gentleman sent his "greetings" from Russia to a "comrade" in the U.S., that is, to my own father who participated in that same war. Second, now that the Cold War is over, the Russian business community recognizes the necessity of being able to speak English whenever undertaking international business. Third, military draft requirements in Russia allow young women, but not young men, to travel abroad without suffering under Russia's conscription laws.

**Jessica Barranco**, Phoenix (Arizona) Country Day School

I have been using a lot of what I learned over the summer in my senior elective course entitled Russian History through Literature. My students have learned the Cyrillic alphabet, and thanks to Nina, Tanya, and Nelli, we begin each class with Russian greetings. I have integrated much of Professor Gurvich's information into my own presentations, and Ron's frequent e-mails help my students and me keep abreast of current events. [I send selected articles from Johnson's Russia List –RP] Soon my students will prepare authentic Russian dishes for our spring banquet. Take a wild and crazy guess what songs they'll be singing at our feast? (One of my students plays the mandolin; it's the closest we could come to a balalaika!)

**Candy Schnepf**, J. J. Hill School, St. Paul, Minnesota

I just returned from St. Petersburg and Tallinn, Estonia on April 12. I traveled with NCEE (National Council of Economic Educators) and visited schools that are teaching economics. The trip was very different from last summer, but being able to be in schools with students and teachers helped fill gaps that could not be filled in the summer.

I began the school year by welcoming my fourth, fifth and sixth grade students to a newly assigned classroom with the Russian bread and salt ceremony. I regretted not purchasing the special cloth with red embroidery last summer and used one of the shawls I had bought instead. (I purchased a "bread and salt" cloth in St. Petersburg on this last trip.)

The fourth-graders in my class read Russian folk tales. I also read several to them. Then individuals or groups of two wrote a script based on the tale of their choosing and created a claymation cartoon using clay characters, painted sets, a digital camera and imovie software. Most groups are now doing the final editing and adding special effects and audio.

After a fall camping trip to the BWCAW (Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness) we also corresponded through email with a Russian biologist who is studying wolves on a preserve near Moscow.

## **ANOTHER MUSICAL NOTE**

**Helen Campbell** (*intensive Russian student for several summers—see her comments on our web site.*)

I'll be traveling to St Petersburg at the end of May for two reasons: to meet up with my good friends, Tanya and Nina Akimova, and to attend a series of lectures/chamber music master classes at the St Petersburg Conservatory. Raphael Hillyer, my viola professor from Yale, and former member of the Juilliard String Quartet, is the honored speaker. Although American-born, Raphael was brought as a youngster by his parents to what was then Leningrad in 1924, where he enrolled at the Conservatory. One of his classmates, the teen-aged Dmitri Shostakovich, tutored him in ear-training and music theory, and later accompanied the Hillyer family back to America. The Hillyers also lived for a while in Moscow at the home of Armand Hammer, where the elder Hillyer, a mathematics professor at Dartmouth, networked with prominent Soviet mathematicians. Raphael is now 91-yrs-old, and hopes to deliver part of his presentation in Russian.

## **ALUMNI NOTES:**

**Anna Babel** (*Fall 2001—allowed us to experiment with having an extra teacher*)

I'm working on a PhD in Linguistics and anthropology at the University of Michigan. My husband, Raomir, whom I met in Bolivia, considers life in Michigan good training for a trip to Russia! While my current research deals with language contact in Bolivia, I still hope to return to Russia.

As some of you know, after I left Vladimir, I went into the Peace Corps in Bolivia where I worked in the agriculture program. My major projects included integrated pest management and soil conservation. I worked with a women's group to establish organic kitchen gardens. With my successor they are now executing a grant from the UN Food & Agriculture Organization for a larger organic garden.

My husband, who is a welder and a bike mechanic, is from the town where I worked as a PC volunteer. We were married twice, first in Bolivia in January 2004 and then in Boone, NC with my family in June 2004. Since then he has been studying English and working at a bike shop here in Ann Arbor. I am just finishing my first year back in school. We will be in Bolivia over the summer.

Hello to everyone—and please write. [annambabel@yahoo.com](mailto:annambabel@yahoo.com)