

AH ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	
Progress & Challenges –Ron.....	2
One More Year –Galya.....	4
SOME NOTES FROM THE RUSSIAN STAFF	
Continuing to Work with the Teachers.... –Lena Belova.....	5
Providing Information in Russian –Oxana Ustinova.....	6
Helping with the Tourism Project –Olya Solovkina.....	7
COMMENTS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHERS	
A Great Place to Start Teaching –Youngmee Hahn.....	8
Why I’m Staying for Another Year –Joanna Greenlee.....	9
Finding Time for Some Basketball –Michael Kogan.....	10
Putting the New Technology to Use –Kelli Gladney.....	11
Thoughts on the ICAL Online Course –Brooke Ricker.....	13
SOME STUDENT COMMENTS	
Are We Ever too Old to Learn...? – Munira Galimkhanova.....	14
Why Do We Learn the English Language? – Kate Gubanova.....	14
I Love the American Home! – Jenia Belyakova.....	15
Grateful for the Opportunity –Ekaterina Popova.....	15
A PREVIOUS TEACHER	
Time Out for Tea in NYC –Sarah Roirmer.....	16
AN INTERNSHIP	
Comments From an Intern --Jenny Holm.....	17
ALUMNI NOTES	18

INTRODUCTION

Progress & Challenges

Ron

As is always the case, a lot has been going on in and around the AH. Galya, Lena, and Brooke comment on various efforts to improve the English program. I know that Lena in particular, with help from the teachers, is working hard to get all the teaching materials and “good ideas” organized in a database. And we are continuing to collect teaching materials. Just this morning I received word of the delivery of another batch of books for the AH library—and area English programs. (Some of the books were reportedly checked out before they made it to the basement shelves.) Kelli comments below on the new large screen plasma TV and laptop computer. (I know that several of the new teachers plan on preparing PowerPoint presentations for their lectures—now that we have that capability in the meeting room.) And then there is Galya’s remark about possibly adding another room to the basement! We’ve fully occupied the attic, so I guess the only way we can afford to go is down.

Oxana writes about the new Russian language info on the Serendipity website. And Olya provides a humorous account of her contribution to one of our tourism development projects.

We have an excellent group of teachers lined up for this next year. To check them out, go to: www.serendipity-russia.com/newteachers.htm.

As Lena indicates in her contribution, we are working on several ways to improve our English program. This includes attempting to help the teachers get a better grasp of grammar—and how to help students understand the rules—or lack thereof. An effort is also being made to include more truly worthwhile exercises—and drop those from the textbooks that don’t really advance the students’ command of English. In addition, a decision has been made to use the last day of classes for “productive fun,” that is, for example, have students play games that put what they have been learning to use. **(Suggestions for games and other appropriate activities will be very much appreciated.)**

I hope we will be able to get the necessary hardware to provide Internet access and PowerPoint capability in more than just the main room in the basement. We also want to have the ability to work with digital video.

I’m sure we will never get to the end of the list of worthwhile improvements—even if we had a lot more money to work with. But that is what helps make operating the American Home interesting.

Speaking of confronting interesting challenges, Alexei has been *very* busy lately—which is why there is no contribution from him in this issue.

One of Alexei's biggest projects has involved managing the design and production of a map in English for visitors. This required, among other things, long hours deciding what should be included (e.g., which cafes should be identified), and how should the information be presented. I'm sure he was very glad to see the final version go to press as we here in the States were, with equal relief, sending off our tax returns.

Alexei has also: 1) supervised the design and production of the first bilingual (Russian and English of course) signage for a visitor destination—the Oblast Arts Center—see the tourist website: www.vladimir-russia.net; 2) lined up host families for potential high school summer program students (it looks like we'll have one young lady); continued to assist with communication with the young jazz singer, Yuliana Rogachova, and her family (she's going to stay in Moscow this summer in order to prepare for and take university entrance exams; the Stanford Jazz Workshop has offered to provide her with a scholarship any time she wants to attend); helped coordinate communications for a variety of the ongoing tourism development projects in addition to his work on the map; and much more. I don't know what we would do about the "special projects" without Alexei.

Alexei is of course not the only highly valued member of the staff. Several of the teachers writing below mention how great the staff is. In a recent note to me Galya mentioned how pleased she was with the way the staff works together—with everyone ready to help with whatever needs to be done. I know that when I ask questions, I get substantive answers—sometimes that same day. And, of course, there is the crucial and creative contribution Galya continues to make.

We are *most* fortunate!

The tourism development project is moving forward on a number of fronts. In addition to the map and the sample Russian-English signage mentioned above, the database project should make a substantial contribution. (See Olya's comments below.) We are also continuing to work on the "tourist" website (feedback is welcome: www.vladimir-russia.net), and we are helping the City International Department staff edit the English version of the City's "official" website.

The trip to the Gdansk area of Poland this last January by representatives from the Oblast and the City, plus the director of the new Oblast Information Center and Dr. Bruce Wicks, provided a firsthand look at what can be done to promote tourism, especially when all levels of government and private businesses cooperate.

Katya Lakshanova, the website specialist on our "tourism development team," will be going to Vladimir next month to provide briefings on the database program and to explain how the tourist website has been set up. We plan on having a webmaster for this site in Vladimir. Dr. Bruce Wicks will be making his third trip to Vladimir the end of May. He and I will meet with a number of people as we plan our "next steps." And Karen Hasara will lead the "second annual tourism development tour" to Vladimir, St. Pete, and Moscow in September. (See the "tours" section of the Serendipity website.)

There is of course even more—but I've taken up enough space in this issue. I think you'll find what follows especially interesting.

One More Year

Galya

The fourteenth year for the American Home in Vladimir is coming to an end. Once again, the year flew by as if it was propelled by a rocket.

I remember our first teachers' meeting in August. All the new teachers seemed to be very tense. They didn't know what to expect from their students—how strict or how lenient they could be, what activities might work in their lessons and what might not work.

In contrast, at recent meetings we have discussed how to make our program more effective, including how to get students to not be afraid to speak freely; what we should demand from students going to the advanced level; how we might be able to reorganize parts of the curriculum so that our students, without missing out on the grammar they need to learn, might have more time for conversation practice; what we can do to make our final exams more creative, giving the students the opportunity to show what they have really learned; and so on.

In other words, this year's teachers have survived and prospered—as we knew they would.

This next year is going to be our fifteenth anniversary. We've already started thinking about how we might best celebrate this milestone.

We would love to be able to add one more room, maybe under the current deck. If we had large sliding doors that divided the new space from the current meeting room that we could open during parties it would be nice. We'll have to see what we can afford. If we do come up with the funds—and get official permission for this project—we'll definitely wait until after the 4th of July celebration. We won't want the back yard to be torn up at that time.

We are already sad at the thought of having to say good-bye to all but one of the current teachers. (As you'll read below, fortunately Joanna Greenlee will be returning as Lead Teacher.) At the same time, we are very much looking forward to meeting the new team. Ron is confident that we will once again have a talented and hard working group.

If any of the new group is anxious, we understand. But they need not worry. We will take very good care of them, their students will love and respect them, and we are sure that they will be diligent and creative.

In short, we are expecting another good year—maybe one of our best yet.

SOME NOTES FROM THE RUSSIAN STAFF

Continuing to Work with the Teachers—Both American and Russian

Lena Belova

According to some of the American teachers, the American Home has an “unusual work environment.” Others claim that it isn’t a “real job.” What they mean is that the program encourages people to demonstrate their potential, be creative, and, at the same time, feel comfortable and safe. In other words, working here is much more pleasant and rewarding than they had expected. (See the essays by Youngmee Hahn and Joanna Greenlee below.)

As for me, I look forward to coming to work at the AH every morning. I know I’m going to meet new people (guests, tourists), maybe have a wonderful Russian or American community lunch, or learn about some new Russian experience one of the teachers has just had.

But what really makes this job interesting, and even exciting, is the work.

I will have been working at the AH for 5 years this July. For more than a year and a half now I’ve been the “Teachers’ Consultant.” I’m their consultant on grammar (what might be difficult and what is easy for Russian learners to understand), on effective lesson planning, and effective language practice. I have been trained to do this sort of thing. I even had some teaching experience before I came to work at the AH. It convinced me that a well thought out, well-structured lesson plan is the key to a successful lesson. My opinion was reinforced when I was called on this spring to teach two beginning students who had requested a special morning class. This additional “hands on” experience has encouraged me to try to find more ways to upgrade our program and to provide the teachers with more assistance.

Limited lesson planning has been one of the shortcomings of the AH program. The ICAL online course the teachers were required to take before they came to teach this year (see Brooke Ricker’s essay below) and the orientation with several mock-lessons gave the new teachers a better idea than we’ve been able to provide in the past of what needs to be done before you go into the classroom. But there is room for improvement in the training they receive before they start teaching. We are working on this.

This year’s teachers are very creative. They have a lot of interesting ideas. For example, the advanced students watched the movie “Erin Brokovich” and then went through some mock trials. The low-intermediate students and even beginners have experimented with role-playing and, believe it or not, with unstructured conversation! Intermediate students have been exposed to Dr. Seuss’s stories, as well as poems and cartoons, and all of them have been learning about American culture, including music, customs, and, in general, the American way of life in its different forms.

Almost everything our teachers come up with for their classes is new and interesting for the students—and this increases the odds that the teachers will have success when they introduce new material. Lesson planning becomes more challenging when it is important to review or practice something the students are trying to learn.

My work with the teachers helps in developing effective practice activities. As a Russian speaker with a good understanding of the AH's program I can often point out what needs to be practiced more and what has worked well in this or that situation in the past.

I have continued to work on the AH teaching materials database this year. Now a teacher can easily find out how a specific grammar point was introduced and practiced before, find a song's lyrics, a poem or an activity to fill the last 5-10 minutes of a class. There is still a lot to be done. But the database is already being used.

With regard to our "outreach" efforts, I had never thought of sharing teaching ideas with local Russian English teachers by e-mail. This was Ron's idea. It was presented at the January teacher workshop, and the Russian teachers who have Internet access welcomed it. Currently, I have one regular contact (I am planning to increase the number). He is an English teacher in a small town on the way to Moscow—where he has limited access to teaching materials. He has requested some poetry, limericks, children's rhymes, simple songs—in short, those little things that make a lesson special and memorable but can be difficult to locate even if you have access to the Internet.

NOTE: This January the AH provided one of its regular 3-day workshops for Vladimir area English teachers. Our teachers shared teaching ideas and conducted mock-lessons for them. During the workshop the area teachers became acquainted with the AH's special EFL resources and the library. We gave them old brochures, leaflets, university booklets, magazines and duplicates of popular fiction books. Several people are sending us a regular supply of magazines and books—which we will continue to share with area teachers. More shipments will be very much appreciated. They can be addressed to:

Lena Belova
Letneperevozhinskaya, 3
600000 Vladimir
RUSSIA

Providing Information in Russian

Oxana Ustinova

We have recently taken one more step to make information about the American Home more accessible to one of our prospective audiences. Finally, those Russians who are interested in the American Home's English program and other activities have an opportunity to get firsthand information in Russian on the pages of our website: www.serendipity-russia.com.

We now have three Russian-language pages. One page presents basic information about Serendipity-Russia and the history and activities of the American Home meant for those who ask us questions like: “Why is there an American Home here in Vladimir?” and “What do you actually do?”

There is also a page focusing on the American Home English School – including information on the upcoming semester. The third page has information on our “special offerings.” In this section we are going to place news on our special language courses. Right now we are working on developing a new course for the hospitality industry—specifically for people in hotels and restaurants who work directly with English-speaking foreign visitors.

This is our first attempt at providing information in Russian on the website. We know that it is always the case that there is room for improvement. So please don’t hesitate to send us your comments and suggestions.

Helping with the Tourism Project

(What AH Students Want to Know but Are Usually Afraid to Ask: What Does the Staff Do When There Are No Classes in Session?)

Olya Solovkina

Sometimes students ask me, "Olya, what do you do at the American Home when there are no classes, that is, before 4 p.m.?" They apparently believe that I have nothing to entertain myself with except receiving payment for classes and tattling on them to their parents. But thanks to Ron Pope, the President of the American Home, we have an abundant supply of various kinds of entertainments here.

For example, it is a well-known fact that in addition to the English Program, Ron pursues other projects, including one that is focused on the development of tourism in the Vladimir region. So, some time ago Ron asked us (I mean Oxana and me, or, as he refers to us, Olya/Oxana—a two-headed entity) to help test a newly created Vladimir region tourist resource database. This database will ultimately be available on the Internet.

Ron asked us to input information about real and fictional hotels/motels, attractions, restaurants/cafes, shops, etc., so that all the various "links" in the program could be tested, and any problems found and corrected.

Frankly speaking, at first I was not very enthusiastic about this assignment. But I ended up enjoying it. Since the database in question was not yet available to the public, we were welcome to "create" restaurants and hotels according to our own taste, and even to make our humble selves "owners."

It was fun, I should say. It provided a chance to give free reign to one's wit—risk free. I was able to enjoy in private "creating" properties for my co-workers. Many of them became tourism tycoons. My favorite institutions are Misha's restaurant, "Small Odessa," and Oxana's "Five Star" shelter.

I am sure that after the database is tested and filled with real information it will be of great help to visitors willing to come to Vladimir. And hopefully tourists will find better attractions than the typical Soviet canteen, "Blinchiki," or McDonaldz national Ukrainian cuisine.

NOTE: According to Olya, they can understand Japanese at Gosha's Hotel—if you speak slowly; and you shouldn't bother calling, faxing, or e-mailing during a Russian or American lunch at the American Home—because everyone will be busy eating.

COMMENTS FROM THE CURRENT TEACHERS

A Great Place to Start Teaching

Youngmee Hahn

“So, what are you thinking about doing next year?”

The question itself is a harmless one, but it became an extremely sensitive subject for us first year teachers at the American Home. Many of us came here open to the possibility of staying for a second year. But when it came time to make the final decision most of us struggled quite a bit. For me, it was especially difficult because my experience here has been almost *too* good! I felt the need to leave Vladimir not because I was dissatisfied with my experience at the American Home, but because working here has been such a wonderful introduction to the world of teaching that I now have the urge to return to my university, finish the Pennsylvania State teacher certification program, and commit to a career as a language teacher. Now that I've made my decision, it's a relief to know for sure what I'll be doing next year. But at the same time, I can already feel how much I'm going to miss the American Home.

I believe that it's not much of an exaggeration to say that working at the American Home is a first-time teacher's dream job. For one thing, the general atmosphere is unusually warm and welcoming. Anyone who spends even just a day here will notice that the American Home staff members genuinely care about each other and about their work. And if there happens to be a Russian or American lunch on the day that you choose to visit, you'll understand why I have a hard time using the word “coworkers” to refer to my fellow teachers and the Russian staff—how can I use such a dry, impersonal word to talk about people who feed me such wonderful food in such a festive atmosphere, and for whom I've had the pleasure of cooking equally big and festive meals?

Besides the wonderful atmosphere at the American Home, I know I'm also going to miss the working conditions here. Having studied education in college, I had a theoretical background in pedagogy when I arrived here but no actual teaching experience. To be honest, I was terrified before my very first class in September. But the American Home provided me with everything I needed to be the best teacher I could in spite of my lack of experience—grammar reference books, supplementary materials, pictures, and perhaps most important, Lena, our wonderful teachers' consultant, who has been a godsend to me

many times when I have been at a loss for good ideas. At the same time, the American Home has also allowed me a lot of freedom—the only thing that is decided for me is which grammar topics I’m going to teach and the order I’m going to teach them in. Other than that, how I present the grammar and how the students practice it is completely up to me. In short, the American Home has provided me with the support I have needed to get started as a teacher; and at the same time it has given me the freedom to find my own teaching style and to grow into being the kind of teacher that I’m most suited to be.

More than any other part of teaching, I’ve enjoyed interacting with the students in class, and I’m certainly going to miss that too. There’s something special about the student-teacher dynamic at the American Home: students don’t just learn English grammar and vocabulary here, they learn to communicate and make personal connections in English, both with each other and with their teachers. For the most part, American Home students are engaged, highly motivated, and inquisitive, and it’s been a pleasure to work with people who are so interested in learning. I’ve had a great time working here, and I’ve learned many invaluable lessons about being a teacher. The American Home has been an excellent place to start out. I’m sure that I’ll keep calling on my experiences here as I continue to develop as a teacher in the years to come.

Why I’m Staying for Another Year

Joanna Greenlee

When I started thinking about whether I was going to return to teach at the American Home for a second year, the question for me was not so much, “Why should I stay?” but “Why should I leave?” There isn’t one overarching reason why I decided to stay; rather, my decision was based on many small, everyday experiences that make up my life here in Vladimir. Here are a few examples.

One beautiful Saturday, Youngmee and I went skiing in Park *Druzshba* (Friendship). After we finished skiing, I was waiting for Youngmee to return her rental skis when I saw one of my former students out walking with her little son. We talked for a while, and then she asked me to wait while she got something for us. She came back with a thermos full of steaming hot blini, dripping with butter, which she poured out into our hands. It doesn’t get much better than eating blini out of a thermos after a morning of skiing in the park.

My birthday was in February, and I realized how great it is to be a teacher on your birthday. My students did not let it pass by unnoticed. I accumulated more and more gifts with every class. One class brought champagne and chocolate, and gave me *Anna Karenina* in Russian (I’m currently about 3 pages into it). Many of my students remembered my love for the banya when they gave me gifts, and I now have a large collection of scrubbing implements and other useful banya accessories. The American Home staff gave me what is probably Russia’s largest *venik* (a bundle of branches with leaves on them) for use at the banya. Even some of my former students remembered my birthday. About half of a former teenaged class I had affectionately named the *zopark* (zoo) stopped by the American Home to give me a rose and other presents for my

birthday. And of course, I received many congratulations and wishes that my life would be full of happiness, success, health, and love.

Every night when I come home from work I'm greeted enthusiastically by my 15-year-old host brother, Pasha. After dinner we drink tea, and Pasha usually launches into one of his favorite conversation topics and doesn't stop for quite some time. I say "conversation," but usually this time consists of Pasha talking and me giving an understanding "Uh-uh" or "Da" once in awhile. I've heard discourses (both in Russian and English) on war, friendship, honor, the possibility of life on other planets, fate, love, and his favorite band, System of a Down. Pasha is a student at the American Home, and he often tells me about the grammar he learned in class that day. My favorite example of this happened after he learned double comparatives. He was walking around the apartment singing, as he often does, and he came into my room. "Joanna, I want to tell you something," he said. "The more I see you, the more I want to sing."

Living in Vladimir and teaching at the American Home has provided a rich assortment of unique experiences that I know I wouldn't have encountered elsewhere. Thus, I am returning to Vladimir to add even more memorable experiences to the ones I already cherish.

Finding Time for Some Basketball

Michael Kogan

Working at the American Home in Vladimir does not afford many opportunities to pursue American hobbies, especially when those hobbies demand the use of a basketball gym. Nonetheless, with the generous assistance of Alexei Altonen, one of the many amazingly helpful staff members here, I have been able to continue playing basketball in the heart of Mother Russia.

Starting in August I began playing at the local Electroprebtor Factory gym with a motley assortment of Russians. I have played with teenagers, adults in their late forties, and everyone in between, but the important thing has been my ability to continue playing thousands of miles from home a sport I love. When we began teaching in September my schedule did not allow me to play more than once a week—Friday nights after class. While this hurt my play I was still invited to join the factory's amateur team. Unfortunately, I was never able to make it to any of their games.

Now, in the midst of the second semester I have more free time; and I can manage to play basketball twice a week with some of the friends I made at the gym. I really cherished the few hours I was able to spend away from the familiarity of the American Home each week—until I injured my right hand while playing two weeks ago. I immediately got the attention and sympathy of Galya, the other teachers, and many of my students when they saw my red and slightly swollen hand. After many mystery creams, massages, and offers of other Russian remedies that I didn't dare try, I finally agreed to go to the hospital to get my hand x-rayed. Luckily, the x-ray was negative (and free!) and my hand has since been hurting less. I am even planning a return to the basketball court this next week!

Teaching at the American Home is a very time and labor intensive affair, as all current and past teachers know all too well; however, we do get free time and the opportunity to pursue our interests if we choose to take the initiative. The American Home staff has been very supportive of my attempts to play basketball—which is yet another testament to the great working environment.

Putting Our New Technology to Use

Kelli Gladney, co-Lead Teacher

Among the things it has been possible to purchase this year are a plasma television and a laptop computer. The television has been used regularly to show movies on Saturdays, but we have been slower to put the computer to use in our classes. However, at the beginning of April I found a way to put both of them to use.

Earlier in the semester, one of the topics in the C2 level textbook was advertising. We talked a lot about TV commercials. More recently, our topic has been technology and inventions. I was very excited to discover a way to put these two topics together.

Michael's* sister had sent him a web link to a commercial which Honda had produced in 2004 (www.albinoblacksheep.com/flash/honda.php). The two-minute commercial uses car parts like dominoes in a really impressive “relay.” There is a lot of discussion on the Internet about whether or not this commercial was made using real car parts or was computer generated. It is one of the most impressive commercials that I have seen in a long time. I decided that I just had to find a way to use this commercial in my classroom. When I taught this level last semester, I used an activity that focused on crazy inventions. Each invention started with one thing which then caused another thing to happen, and so on (very much like the Honda commercial). That lesson had worked well, so I had high hopes for the new lesson I was planning.

It was not very hard to think of multiple ways to use the Honda commercial to tie our current theme into what we had talked about before in the section on advertising. The hard part was figuring out how to make it work in the classroom. For this, I had to turn to Oxana for help. She told me that the new laptop that we have can be directly hooked up to the new television, so that I could use it to show the commercial. She spent time finding the commercial on-line in the format we needed, and she set it all up on the TV for me. Some of the other teachers aided me in this experiment by agreeing to switch classrooms with me since I don't teach any of my classes this semester in the room with the new television.

We started the class out as we normally do with announcements and with checking homework. I had given them some quotations about science and technology to read, and we discussed the meaning of the quotes—for example, “Whenever science makes a discovery, the devil grabs it while the angels are debating the best way to use it.” -*Alan Valentine*. After this, I asked them if they knew how computers work. Some of the students said that they knew, and others said that they didn't really care as long as they just worked. Then, I asked the same question about cars. I also asked if they had ever

thought about all the little parts that have to be put together to make things like cars. Most of them said, “No.”

Next, I completely changed the subject and asked if they knew what dominoes are. I figured that they would know, because the Russian word is very close to the English word, but I ended up having to draw a picture on the board. I asked them what we use large numbers of dominoes for. All of my classes remembered seeing dominoes set up in a “relay.” I told them that we were going to watch something that involved technology, advertising and dominoes. This statement earned me some strange looks from my students. But they were all amazed when we watched the commercial. Each of my 3 C2 classes wanted to watch it twice. We then talked about whether they thought the commercial was computer generated or not. The majority of the students thought that it was done with computers. We read an article together which talked about the commercial and the experience the crew had shooting it. From the article, the students learned that there were no computers used. In one of my classes, the students still couldn’t believe that it was possible. They all asked a lot of questions about how certain things were done. Thankfully, I had read a lot about the commercial in order to prepare for the class, and I was able to successfully explain how things worked which they doubted could in fact work. For example, there is a part where water is sprayed on the floor, and a set of windshield wipers “walk” a short distance to set something else off. The students doubted that the wipers could turn themselves on. I told them that Honda has developed a special kind of windshield wipers that activate themselves when it starts to rain.

We then turned to the drawings from the previous semester of the silly inventions that worked like a relay. We looked at the different steps and described the process. In one of my classes, we even had time for the students to create their own “relay.” One group created an alarm system which began with one person kicking another and ended with a dog bone being flung through a window. The broken window set off an alarm that brought the police.

It was nice to have the capability to show something which could be used to excite and interest the students and at the same time fit in with the topic we were discussing. It was even better to be able to bring in things that we had discussed previously. I think that my students will remember this lesson for a long time. They certainly left the classroom excited about what we had done that day.

Oddly enough, for the first time this whole semester, every one of my students came to class on the two days we covered this material. They must have instinctively known something interesting was going to happen.

* Michael Kogan is one of this year’s teachers. See his essay on basketball in this issue.

Thoughts on the ICAL Online Course

Brooke Ricker

When I was preparing to come to the American Home, I was very nervous about some things—speaking Russian, living on the other side of the planet, adapting to a host family—but I felt fairly confident in my teaching abilities. I applied to the AH after having spent three of the toughest months of my life teaching third and fourth grade at a private elementary school in California. Hired on an emergency basis after the previous teacher quit mid-year, with no credentials and no experience, I was completely unprepared for the daily demands of a classroom full of young children. I learned by trial and error, with a lot of emphasis on the error part. But knowing that I had survived that challenge made me feel ready to take on the AH's students.

Still, I welcomed the idea of an online EFL course. I hoped this would help me avoid repeating the sink-or-swim aspect of my early weeks at the elementary school. I wanted as much preparation as I could get.

The ICAL course consists of five modules. In each section you read a text on an aspect of EFL teaching theory and then do a few exercises. At each step you receive comments on your work from a tutor. Our tutor was extraordinarily helpful; he had a lot of teaching experience in many countries including Russia, and he drew on that experience to give us concrete, intelligent suggestions for improving our lessons. From the point of view of a person who'd already logged hours in the classroom, his mentoring was both practical and encouraging. His advice was for me by far the most valuable part of the course. I also liked the way the lessons gradually built up; at first you collect ideas for a lesson, then you write segments of that lesson, and finally you create an entire lesson plan. In addition to feedback from the tutor, the teachers shared their graded assignments with each other by e-mail. This meant that I got the benefit of other people's perspectives on the same questions as well as the tutor's suggestions for them. While the course doesn't review English grammar effectively, and the written material can be a little redundant, overall I felt that the course was well worth my time and energy—primarily because of the targeted feedback from the tutor.

Of course nothing can replace Lena's well thought out training regimen, but I do feel that I was better prepared to absorb the teacher training during orientation at the AH after having taken the ICAL course.

NOTE: A grammar test has been added to the ICAL course. In addition, Lena is going to try to provide supplemental materials while the new teachers are taking the course. The goal is to help all the teachers build a common foundation in preparation for the three-week orientation in Vladimir.

SOME STUDENT COMMENTS

NOTE: This is a new section—which we should have thought of including in the first issue. Hopefully it is true: *луче поздно, чем никогда* / better late than never. Please keep in mind that while we have the students write as much as possible, our primary focus is on helping them develop their oral communication skills. (Minimal editing has been done on these comments.)

Are We Ever too Old to Learn a New Language?

Munira Galimkhanova, Level C1 (seventh semester)

When I became a pensioner, I asked myself: “What should I do, what could I do if I wished to be an energetic person?” I decided that I should study English! Studying English allows me to speak English with my son-in-law and grandson. They are Americans. When I was in America in 2000, I didn’t know any English words. I started to study English at the American Home in January 2003. At first I was shocked at the lessons! I didn’t know any words in English! I didn’t understand anything! I thought, “Why do I do it? I’m a pretty old woman, I can’t learn English, it is too difficult for me!” Owing to the fact that the teachers were patient, attentive, friendly and creative I started to understand the language. But I couldn’t believe that my lessons would have continued for so long. Now, I’m a student of the seventh semester and don’t feel English is very difficult for me. I can understand American speech and speak a little. I can also write letters to my American relatives sometimes. I remember all my teachers. And I am thankful to them for their kindness and understanding.

Why Do We Learn the English Language?

Kate Gubanova, Level C1

What I would like to start with is that nowadays it is necessary to learn foreign languages. That’s why pupils have such a subject as a foreign language at school. Everybody knows his/her own language, but it is also useful to know foreign languages. What about me? I learn English because I understand that I can use it. For example, if I go to England or to the USA I’ll be able to speak English. If I know English, I’ll take books by English and American writers in the original in the library. I know and like such British and American writers as Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Mark Twain and others.

I like to travel but it is difficult to visit countries when you don’t know the languages spoken there. Also there are many English films. If you want to understand them you should study, learn and know English.

So we can find many reasons why we ought to know foreign languages: somebody likes to travel, somebody watches foreign films, reads foreign books, for others the job requires knowledge of foreign languages. And in conclusion I’d like to say that I understand that I have to learn English properly and I try to do so. That’s why I went to the American Home, where I learn English with great pleasure.

The great German poet Goethe once said: “He who knows no foreign language does not know his own language.” That’s why in order to understand oneself and the environment one has to study foreign languages.

I Love the American Home!

Jenia Belyakova, D1 (ninth semester)

All the Americans who were ever my teacher: Johnathan, Chris, Meghan, Ann, again Meghan, Kelli, and, at last, Brooke—they are all very cheerful, interesting, unforgettable and remarkable people!

A very big thanks for the Saturday activities (especially the for celebration of holidays like Mardi Gras)! In general, thanks that there exists such a place as the American Home where it is always easy and pleasant to learn English!

I haven’t yet chosen my future job, but I’m sure that in my future life English will be very important!

PS: It’s very sad that at the American Home there are only 10 levels...

PPS: Thanks to the American Home I found that people from foreign countries are not scary and they can understand me.

Grateful for the Opportunity....

Ekaterina Popova, former student (1994-96)

NOTE: The author is a Senior Inspector in the Corporate Clients Department of the Vladimir branch of Sberbank (Savings Bank of the Russian Federation).

Dear Galina Petrovna and the AH staff!

I would like to use this opportunity to express once again my gratitude for the wonderfully organized AH English language courses and for the warm and friendly atmosphere that reigns within the American Home’s walls.

It is always a pleasure to recall my two years of studies with you. I use every opportunity to recommend you to my friends as an excellent place to learn American English.

I followed the recommendation of a friend of mine and joined your program right after my graduation from the university. I had far reaching plans concerning post-graduate studies, besides I wanted to be able to understand my pen-pall’s letters without any exterior help. My pen-pall was an American, April Lynn Jolliff from Long Beach, California. Unfortunately, I haven’t started my post-graduate studies yet (although I plan to). However, April always compliments me on my letters!

My teachers were Jason Muse and Matt Rehkopf. I can't say which of them was better. They both were excellent teachers and nice and cheerful guys—optimists with an excellent sense of humor. I sometimes wonder how they are doing, what they have achieved?

Our classes were conducted in an informal conversational manner. And thanks to the methods employed and the opportunity to communicate with and get knowledge directly from native speakers, I gained even more knowledge of English than at school and at the university together!

A visit to a language school in Canterbury organized by the AH was also extremely interesting and valuable. We lived with English host-families, studied English in international classrooms in the morning, and after lunch we went on visits to most interesting attractions: Charles Dickens's museum in Rochester, Leeds castle, London with its sights, etc. I even passed a "survival exam" and took an independent trip to Dover (a port on the coast of the English Channel) where with the help of the English people I was able to find the Dover castle, come back to the bus station and return to my host-family in Canterbury. The trip was unforgettable!

It is in the American Home that I got to know about the popular and beloved American holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving and about their history. Saturday movies in the original were also of great help.

Now I do my best not to forget English. I travel quite a bit and always use my knowledge of English every time I am abroad.

I wish the American Home and its staff and teachers prosperity and success in your efforts to strengthen Russian-American friendship and teach English.

A PREVIOUS TEACHER

Taking Time Out for Tea in NYC

Sarah Roirmer

NOTE: Sarah was Lead Teacher last year. See the Alumni Notes re what she is up to these days.

When my Russian-crafted watch stopped last month, I didn't bother to replace the battery. In fact, I quit wearing a watch all together in an attempt to liberate myself from temporal constraints. In a city where time is money, everyone is scrambling to save an extra minute. I love the high energy that comes from the collective spirit of busy-ness in New York City, but at times I wish everyone would relax a little.

The Russian staff would be proud to know that since I moved to the city this fall, I have found the most effective solution to freeing my mind is to enjoy a cup of hot tea. As I

was recently savoring a cup of green tea labeled *Healing Heaven*, I noticed a note on the back of the tea packet: “As we evolve we become more aware of how precious and fleeting our time is. Taking tea is a signal for a ‘time out’ from a busy schedule. It allows one a moment of reflection and raises our level of consciousness.” My mind flashed back to countless cups of tea consumed in the AH kitchen. It was more than just snack time. It was when everyone gathered together to celebrate each other’s company and focus on the present moment. Increasing my tea intake has not only helped me to center my mind and find peace in a bustling urban environment, but it is also a reminder of the fond memories I have from working at the AH. Cheers to the tea-drinkers—and thank you for training me so well!

AN INTERNSHIP

NOTE: Over the years a number of Carleton College graduates have taught at the AH. Jenny was the first—and we hope not the last—intern from Carleton. It’s taken a while, but we hope to have the website she worked on completed and online shortly.

Comments from an Intern

Jenny Holm

Just prior to coming to Vladimir, I spent three months in Moscow on a program through Carleton. I had a wonderful time, but I never would have experienced there the things that made my summer so meaningful. Living in Vladimir gave me an entirely different perspective on Russian life that enriched my stay in the country immeasurably. I do love the capital for her theaters and clubs, her Metro and her crowds, and yes, sometimes even for the anonymity she thrusts upon you. But Vladimir satisfies the other half of me that wants to know what’s left when you take away the hustle and bustle, all the glitter and bombast—and that is connections between people. It is in honor of those connections that I’d like to emphasize my thanks to the American Home staff, especially my Russian tutors Tanya and Nelli, and the other teachers and friends who made me feel at home so far away from Minnesota.

I arrived in Vladimir with a vague plan to volunteer at a few different social organizations but, as so often happens in Russia, reality didn’t exactly lend itself to “the plan”: the orphans were away at camp until the end of July, the at-risk youth groups weren’t meeting during summer vacation, and no one seemed to know anything about the disabled kids. I *could*, however, create a website for the center where my host mother worked—they’d been so happy to hear that someone who’d had experience with that kind of thing was coming to Vladimir and was willing to help them out. I’m not sure who it was they were expecting, but it certainly couldn’t have been me, who’d never so much as *seen* a line of html code. Ever eager to please, though, I put on my best “confident” face and said I’d be happy to do what I could.

I met with Olga Iosefovna Goncherova, director of the Youth Health and Education Center, several times over the next month and a half to discuss the organization’s

mission, programs, goals, and difficulties, gather photographs and student artwork to decorate the site, and to get help with editing the Russian text I had written to make it sound as “po-russki” as possible. I put off figuring out how to put all these parts together into a clear, cohesive, and—most important of all—*functioning* bilingual website until the last two weeks of my stay in the city, when I sat in front of a computer screen daily for hours on end, taking a break only to run to the grocery store across the square to buy myself some *vinigret* (beet salad) and a yogurt for lunch. (I’d like to say a huge thank you to Sarah Lorenz [see the previous newsletter—Ron], for her invaluable tutelage as I was trying to get the hang of html—I couldn’t have done it without her!)

Completing the project on time (barely) was, naturally, a real victory for me: I’d never felt particularly comfortable working with computers and had never expected to find myself in this sort of position. The biggest reward from the experience, though, lay not in working on the website itself but in the weeks I’d spent putting it off. It was then that I got my first taste of those rituals that are synonymous with summer in Russia—*shashlyki* in the forest, lazy days at the *dacha*, and evenings spent with friends on the steps of the Lunacharsky Drama Theatre, chatting under a sun that seems like it might never set. Russians have the art of relaxation down pat, and one can’t help but cast all those “shoulds” and “woulds” to the wind when the cheery morning light announces a day of sunbathing and berry-picking near the river. Indeed, no one—not my host family, not the staff at the American Home, not even Olga Iosefovna—would have wanted me to spend any more time on the website if doing so would mean giving up even one minute of a walk in the park with my host sister or one tipsy folk song sung around the campfire. The juice and the lifeblood of any culture lie in these delicious moments of idleness, the times when people come together for no other reason than to enjoy each other’s company, and where the fact that I didn’t know the Russian word for “Internet service provider” made no difference at all.

ALUMNI NOTES

Alison (Kitzman) Silva, 1992-93

NOTE: I put together the following from correspondence with Alison who happens to be especially busy right now. –Ron

Alison was finally heard from after 13 years of silence—well maybe not quite 13. She is alive and well and teaching English in Japan at Kinki University in Osaka. Alison graduated from Illinois State University with a major in Russian Studies in 1992. I persuaded her and another ISU Russian Studies grad, Sandi Schnider (now Wulf), to go to Vladimir as two of the first teachers. After teaching at the American Home—and blazing the trail as the first Lead Teacher—Alison returned to Illinois where she earned a Masters in TESOL from the University of Illinois. This is considered one of the best TESOL grad programs in the US. She then worked for Arthur Andersen where she developed an Advanced Business English Course before moving to Japan. At Kinki one of her first responsibilities was developing a Business English curriculum. Most recently she was put in charge of creating a new curriculum for the native-speaker taught Oral

English courses. She has also been tasked with coordinating English language development for the entire campus. Two years ago she married Tom Silva, a colleague at Kinki who was originally from Chicago. It is a small world. They finally managed to find time for a two-week honeymoon in Sicily this past March. To top it off, Alison has published several specialized EFL texts in Japan. We hope to hear more from Alison before the next issue of the newsletter.

Alyona (Serykh) Hansen, Russian Tutor, 1992-97

I had the pleasure of hearing from another person from the past, Alyona Serykh. Alyona was our Russian tutor for the first 5 years. I remember one of the first Lead Teachers, Nicole (Mercer) Braun, who had studied multiple languages, saying that Alyona was the best language instructor she ever had.

Since September 2003, Alyona has been teaching Russian to American, European and Japanese astronauts and English to Russian cosmonauts at NASA (Houston, Texas). One of her American students, Jeff Williams, is currently a crewmember on the International Space Station. When President Putin called the Space Station on the occasion of the anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's space flight, Williams conversed with him in Russian. The current commander of the ISS, Pavel Vinogradon, was one of Alyona's Russian students.

I'm hoping that Alyona will be able to find the time to write something for the next issue of the newsletter about how her AH experience (she took advantage of our English program) helped to lead to her current position.

Sarah Roirmer, 2003-05 (Lead Teacher, 04-05)

Last week I was promoted from an intern to a paid position at Colbert Artists Management Inc, a classical music agency across the street from Carnegie Hall. I will continue to work there part-time as well as at Shen Wei Dance Arts, a New York based modern dance company, until I travel up to Vermont for the summer. (I have officially decided to go to Marlboro to work in an administrative position at their chamber music festival). Thank you (Ron) for speaking with them. Whatever you said must have helped—they hired me!