

## **Thoughts on a Vladimir Adventure, AH newsletter, October 2004**

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When the opportunity came to work on a summer recreation program for the City of Vladimir, Russia, we jumped at the chance. We didn't know much about Russia – the people, the culture, the history, the weather, the geography – not much about anything Russian. But here was an opportunity to visit that incredible nation. We had to do it!

The summer recreation program came about because the Vladimir City Administration had recognized a typical community problem. The young people in Vladimir have little to do in the summer besides drink beer, smoke and get into trouble – facts that are widely recognized. Many cities in the United States have had similar problems and have turned to organized recreation programs for solutions. Recreation activities are not only fun, purposeful and engaging for youth, but are also much less expensive for communities than hiring more law enforcement officers to deal with the problem, making recreation a sound investment for communities of all sizes.

We came to Vladimir in late July to visit the city, tour its facilities and parks, meet with the city administrators to see what their goals were, and meet with groups of youth to see where their needs and interests lay. We found the city administrators concerned about the problems and open to suggestions. We found the youth excited about new prospects and welcoming of new ideas. We were able to meet with the Skateboard Club – the members are seeking a safe place to skate, with ramps and rails and other obstacles. The Biking/Outdoor Club brought many members to meet us. This club is very community oriented, and works on many environmental projects in the area, in addition to participating in lots of biking and other outdoor recreation activities. One afternoon they showed up with their bicycles, including bikes for us, and escorted us clear across town to a large park with numerous biking trails! It was one of the highlights of the trip – a chance to see the parts of the city that most visitors would never see, a chance to see how the real people lived.

The parks and open spaces in the city have excellent potential for recreation. For the most part, the administrators of those facilities love their jobs and provide as many programs and services as possible on limited budgets. Most of the parks had maintenance issues – run down buildings, hard packed bare dirt surrounding the popular attractions and walking trails that were not paved. With the exception of sports areas and the popular attractions, most parks were left very much in their natural state – with unmowed grass and untrimmed bushes and trees. It was unclear whether this was by choice, or because the budgets did not stretch enough to cover those areas of maintenance.

At every facility we visited, we were warned about vandalism. Virtually all outdoor areas are subject to vandalism it seems, as this was one of the first issues the park directors brought up when we discussed the possibility of adding to their facilities.

Our goal on this trip was not only to assess the facilities and programs already available to Vladimir youth, but to also demonstrate some recreational activities that are popular in the U.S., which Russian youth might not have been exposed to previously. Through a grant from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, we were able to bring to Vladimir a pair of disc golf baskets along with 20 discs, a couple of skateboards and 2 pairs of in-line skates, some new basketballs and over 100 rock climbing holds and other hardware to build a rock climbing wall. The disc golf baskets and discs, along with the basketballs went almost immediately to a youth summer camp, and will be housed on a more permanent basis at one of the parks. The skateboards and in-line skates were donated to the Skateboard Club. The climbing wall equipment was entrusted to the Biking/Outdoor Club, since they were intensely interested in the prospect of having one available in the city that young people could afford to use. (The fee for the one wall that has been set up is apparently beyond the means of most youth.)

Our next phase of the project is to try to find funding to assist the parks and facilities that already exist, and create some new recreational areas, like a skatepark and a disc golf course. An indoor location for the climbing wall is being sought. We are also researching construction diagrams of different skatepark elements—ramps and rails—so that those can potentially be built in Vladimir.

One of Vladimir's greatest assets is its people. Everywhere we went, we met people who really care about the city, who are involved in civic organizations or operations, who enjoy their jobs and look for every opportunity to improve the situation. The staff at the American Home was tremendously helpful, the city administrators were supportive and our interpreter, Yelena Bychkovskikh, made the whole trip worthwhile. Thank you everyone for helping make our first glimpse of Russia very special!