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The Center for Civil Society International has been aware of Dr. Pope and his work in Vladimir for at least six years. We published a front page article about the Serendipity project in the February 1995 issue of our newsletter, Civil Society--East and West, because it combined such important elements of local initiative, grassroots exchanges, education and better intercultural understanding.

Since the building of the American Home in Vladimir, Serendipity has branched out in numerous directions. In addition to the English program at the "Amerikanskii dom," Serendipity has facilitated law enforcement and educational exchanges, art exhibits, and even a basketball exchange program. Among the most creative efforts, in our opinion, is the current six-month law enforcement exchange involving a militia (police) officer from Vladimir, who is being hosted by the Bloomington and Normal, Illinois, police departments and the county sheriff's department. Serendipity has also been involved in several humanitarian aid efforts, including providing used American medical equipment to Vladimir hospitals.

In public talks, we often use Serendipity as an example of how much a well-administered but local, grassroots initiative can accomplish in promoting understanding and goodwill between the people of the United States and Russia. In my introduction to the first edition of our publication, The Post-Soviet Handbook: A Guide to Grassroots Organizations and Internet Resources, I noted Serendipity's work in this connection.

With the collapse of the Soviet system and opening of the post-Soviet world, the Russian people and economy have had to play very fast catch-up in a number of fields of learning, not least among these the English language. By and large, in my experience, Russians have not developed a very high level of competence in speaking English through their own educational system. Often, they achieve a "workable" knowledge of the language, but that leaves much to be desired.

Programs like Serendipity's help Russians acquire a deep understanding of English, allowing them to communicate internationally with precision and confidence. They also help Russians in Russia--most of whom will never have the opportunity to visit the U.S.--to acquire a good knowledge of Americans and our culture through the institution of the American Home.

I believe that Serendipity and its English-language program in Vladimir represent among the very best citizen efforts to build closer Russian-American relations. I encourage support for its programs without any reservations.