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From: Gus Wilhelmy
guswilhelmy1935@yahoo.com

When it comes to promoting the learning of English as a second language in Russia, Serendipity is without peer. At the American Home it conducts one of the most successful and cost effective programs I have seen.. While I like the corporate name, Serendipity, I believe that the American Home finds all the good it does not by accident, but through careful planning.

I am a retired businessman and founder of a large Chicago-based nonprofit. When I was 64, I joined the Peace Corps and with my wife went to Russia. There I spent nearly three years living in the Nizhnii Novgorod Oblast, working with NGOs. I taught marketing, strategic planning, board development, financial management and fundraising to hundreds of NGOs—several of which specialized in teaching English as a second language.. During my stay in Russia, I did a good deal of research in fourteen cities along the Volga Valley where a team of Russians I directed surveyed over 800 NGO leaders, 160 business people, and 145 government officials. The purpose of this survey was to gain an understanding of the status and effectiveness of the NGO in Russia today. I believe this background puts me in an especially good position to evaluate the work of Serendipity's American Home project.

Before I went to Russia I contacted Dr. Ronald Pope. As an expert on Russia in the Political Science Department at Illinois State University, I called upon him to advise and guide me in my new adventure. His knowledge of the Russian system and appreciation of Russian culture impressed me deeply. His admonitions, his warnings, his insights, and his love of the Russian people guided my entry into Russia. I believe it was he who told me with a chuckle, "Russians are the only people in the world who can hold to yes, no, and maybe on the same subject at the same time." That I never forgot, and it gave me great insight into the sublime paradox everything and everyone in Russia presents.

While in Nizhnii, I traveled to Vladimir numerous times and visited Dr. Pope and the American Home there. That home has definitely lived up to its name. It offers a wonderful introduction to American culture right in the middle of Russia. Its Americanism stands out--but it isn't in any way "ugly." The home has become a bridge between two cultures. The Russians of Vladimir repeatedly told me that. The Home has joined two peoples in a marvelous way. Set on a very Russian street, the Home attracts Russian professionals, students, athletes, artists and intellectuals. All go there to share and to learn something of the American experience.

But the Home is more than a place for cultural exchange. It is in its own way a living "library" where Russians and Americans encounter each other through the study of language and other interests. I have seen many ESL and other foreign language programs in my day--I have even taught classical languages myself--but few programs have the depth that one finds in the English courses, lectures, and other activities at the American Home.

One Russian teacher stated that the American Home's method of teaching, with its focus on learning the meaning behind words, is "more important than learning the words themselves." She went on to explain that, in her view, 87% of communication requires appreciating the culture behind the words. Only 13% is in the translation. The American Home is a master at communicating culture. For me that is the most important. Only teachers steeped in both cultures, such as those at the American Home, move language study beyond a grammatical memorization exercise.

On one visit to the American Home, I spoke with two of the young teachers. Only in the Peace Corps had I seen such dedication above and beyond the call of duty. Their commitment to carefully tailoring curriculum to the needs of the Russian speaking students was matchless. Pounding out grammar and idiomatic expressions may be important, but even more important is a deep respect for the Russian students and their culture. Language teaching is facilitated greatly by an undefinable dedication to the native students.

Once when I got lost in Vladimir while out for a walk, I stopped and asked for directions to the American Home. The Russian gentleman I questioned said, "Oh, everyone knows where the American Home is, because it seems like it's always been here. We hope and believe that the Home will never leave us." That is the best accolade any Russian or anyone else could give.