

# Siberian Intercultural Bridges, Inc.

Formerly Musical Bridges Inc.

Access, opportunity and good neighbors  
through cultural exchange

A non profit organization dedicated to bringing access and opportunity to isolated communities in Siberia and Russia's Far East  
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Tom Dickinson (middle) with SIB teachers of 2000,  
David Balan and Whitney Lawton in Chita.

Americans in permanent residence—one, Robert Romano, is a former SB teacher who married a woman in Chita, and the other, Michael Shipley, is now our on-site representative. 12 years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Siberian Bridges remains the only western charitable organization focussed on, and maintaining a consistent presence in, Chita.

Funding for SB always has been very scarce. Yet, despite that, for ten years we have nurtured relationships and trust, which have made us far more effective than better funded organizations that have come through Chita with short term projects, and which left soon after because they looked for results unreasonable in light of the area's situation and history.

I have never been more encouraged, nor more concerned, about the future of Siberian Bridges, than I am now. I am encouraged because of our excellent Executive Director, Tatyana Puchkova. A permanent resident of the U.S. for ten years, this Russian native understands both our cultures and what works and doesn't work with both sides. Her first project, sending American professionals on one-of-a-kind exchange tours to meet colleagues and become familiar with the place, is off to a most encouraging start. In addition, her other initiatives including plans to bring students from the region for internships in the US, and organizing a peace and conflict resolution summer training program for Chita young people.

However, I'm very concerned, as well. Under Tanya's leadership, SB has increased the number and diversity of its projects, reaching a new level of activity. But just when we hoped to get financial support for those new initiatives from federal government sources and foundations, the economic downturn in the U.S. led to a 50% reduction in federal grants and a more than 65% reduction in foundation funding. It is anticipated that by the end of 2003, more than 50% of U.S. not-for-profits will fold due to severe competition for the remaining funding.

SB can not allow that to happen, because it would leave Chita and Chita Region without us as a resource.

**We remain one of their most significant non-governmental connections to the outside world, providing grassroots level support for their efforts to build a strong legal economy, democracy and civil society.**

It is quite conceivable that without support such as ours, Chita Region will be left behind and may repeat an all too familiar pattern seen in other parts of the world where lack of opportunity and despair lead them to become a breeding grounds for violence and social degradation. In the struggling Russian national economy, Chita Region is ranked 87th out of 88 provinces, so such worries are not far-fetched.

We are determined to survive and continue with our mission that we have pursued so successfully for a decade. To do so, we need all the help

Dear friends,

This fall I gave two piano recitals/Siberian Bridges presentations in my neighborhood, the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. The first was in the home of David and Helen Gehrenbeck, and it was a wonderful Sunday afternoon. The second was for a meeting of the local American Association of University Women (AAUW) chapter, arranged by an old high school classmate, Terri (Miller) Stark. Also, very gratifying. These presentations are a great way to learn about Chita, and I hope I'll be able to give one in your area. Just ask! I'm on a campaign to heighten your interest in Chita, and solicit our readers for fund-raising ideas for our work.

Siberian Bridges is a peculiar project. Rather than focusing on a particular issue, we focus on a particular set of people: our friends in the city of Chita, in Chita Region and its surrounding area of eastern Siberia. They warrant this attention because they were isolated for most of the 20th century—the city was closed during the Soviet era—and that isolation still holds them back during this post-Soviet era because they entered it without any previous contact with the west. Contact is still scarce. If a list were made of all the Americans who, in the past 12 years, visited for more than a month, it would consist almost entirely of the 16 teachers we've sent since 1995. Right now, there are only two

# More ideas? You bet!

*Tatyana Puchkova, Executive Director*



Tatyana (Tanya) Puchkova

I am excited to report that our first group exchange visit to Siberia was a great success. As we hoped, for six faculty and students from the Midwest, despite gorgeous nature and great sightseeing experience, the highlight of the trip was connecting to people and their lifestyles. Whether enjoying dinner and folk music in a Buryat yurt, part-taking in a traditional ceremony in the Russian Old Believers village or staying with Russian families in Ulan-Ude, the American visitors were getting a glimpse of the real life of different cultural groups that intertwine creating a unique blend that is Southeastern Siberia.

Encouraged by this success, we will not only continue to offer Americans cultural visits to Siberia, but will diversify their main focus. In the spring and summer of 2004 we will offer both trips that emphasize exploring the spectacular nature of this truly untouched and one of the most remote areas of the planet, and those experiencing a

variety of cultures, religions and historic landmarks of the region.

The first type of the trip will include boating on Lake Baikal, hiking in the Kodar mountains, multi-day rafting on Siberian lakes and rivers and horse-back riding through Mongolian steppe (yes, you've heard it right – we have added neighboring Mongolia to the itinerary). The second type will take you to Russian churches and Old Believers villages, Buddhist temples and remote monasteries, pagan festivities and meetings with Russian clergy and Buddhist monks. Of course, all tours will also include main historic places of interest, visiting people's homes and interacting with the locals.

But before actually taking people to Siberia, we would like to show Americans that part of the world through the eyes of its inhabitants. So our next project is a travelling photo exhibit from Chita region. The collection of pictures we would like to share with America was taken by several Siberian artists whose lenses reflect the pristine beauty and diversity of this remarkably isolated and romantically picturesque land. The first exhibit will take place in Traverse City, MI in February 2004. If you, your organization or your town would like to host the show, please, let us know.

Of course, no exchange is possible without reciprocity, and besides exposing Siberia to Americans, we intend to expose America to Siberians. It's no secret that the latter is a challenge, largely because an average monthly salary in Siberia is under \$100, which makes foreign travel out of reach for most there. So, SIB thought long and hard to find a way and we think we have found one. We are going to select young people from Chita who speak English and bring them to the US for 3, 4 and 6-months long paid business internships in the US. We have already concluded a preliminary agreement with Pinehurst Resort, NC, that is interested in having a small group of business/hospitality interns from Russia beginning in March 2004. It is difficult, however, to find paid placements for foreign interns in the current economy. We do need help. So, if you or anyone you know can think of other companies or organizations that would be willing to partner with us for that purpose, please, let us know.

**I was very pleased that I had embarked on this adventure. I visited a part of the world that I had never expected to see; I met wonderful people and caught an inkling of what life is like for others in another culture. It was truly the trip of a lifetime.**  
– *Mary Joy Johnson, professor, Bay College, summer 2003 SIB cultural visit participant*

The benefits of such internships for young people from Siberia are invaluable. They will give them access to professional practices in the West, help them practice their English, and most importantly, give them a taste of American culture. At the same time, it would give their American hosts a unique chance to interact with people from the region that for centuries, has been out of reach for Westerners and is just opening up.

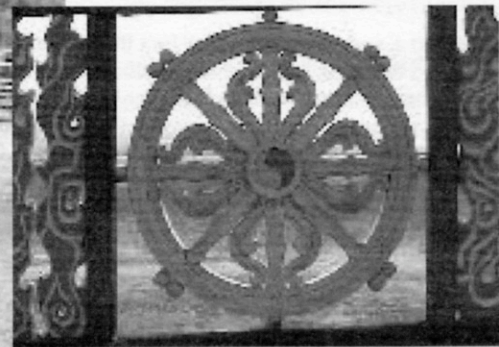


Please, help us make all these projects a success or suggest a new one. For more information and to make suggestions about any of the projects, please, contact Tatyana Puchkova at [puchkovt@kirtland.edu](mailto:puchkovt@kirtland.edu)

## In other news:

Siberian Bridges has two new teachers! Sophia DeMaio and Brooke Swafford will teach in the region for the duration of 2003/04 academic year. Sophia teaches English at Chita Technical University in the city of Chita, while Brooke teaches English at a high school in a remote Buryat village of Zutkulei in Chita region. To learn more about Brooke and Sophia, visit our website at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org)

Find Us Online at  
[www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org)



*“We and the people of South-East Siberia thank all our generous supporters!”*



## SIB News

*Continued from page one*

we can get from those we can rely on here at home. We need your support. We need your input. How can we—all of us together—ensure future SB activity?

Can you think of fundraising ideas in your area? (Invite me to your area for a recital and/or presentation!) Would you like to get involved in any of our projects or know someone who would? Would you or your family and friends like to join one of our exchange trips to Siberia? Do you know of a company that would like an intern or to get involved in a

Siberian project? Do you know of a high school that would like an exchange student from Chita? Are you interested in the revival of Buddhism in post Soviet Russia? Our area holds Russia's traditionally Buddhist population, the Buryats.

All ideas are greatly appreciated. Please, call, write or e-mail us with your suggestions. Just knowing that you care is a great boost!

Thomas Dickinson,  
Chairman and Founder

You can donate to Siberian Bridges online by going to [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org) and clicking “donate”

# Excited About My Exile

By Brooke Swafford, SIB new teacher in Zutkulei, Chita region.



While studying abroad in 2001, I saw *Ploshad Dekabristov* for the first time in St. Petersburg, Russia. It was there in 1825 young officers influenced by Napoleonic ideals tried to summon enough forces to overthrow Tsar Nicholas I. Many considered this the first attempt at a Russian revolution. Now, two years later, I am preparing to teach English as a second language in a Siberian village within miles of Chita, where a group of the Decembrists was exiled following their failed revolt.

Exile and *gulags* are what family and friends bring up when discussing my upcoming trip to the Buryatia region. Most of them cannot fathom why someone would willingly go to Siberia—especially the Muscovites and St. Petersburgers I know. Though the history of this great expanse has been undeniably grave and thus, is burdened with negative connotations, Siberia has played an important role in the history of the country that I have been fascinated with for four years. The harsh yet beautiful wilderness has seen hordes of Mongols sweep across the taiga, dominating Kievan Rus in its early formation. The expanse has also seen the deportation of Russia's greatest and most intriguing minds, from the literary genius of Fyodor Dostoevsky to political leader and revolutionary Vladimir Lenin.

My fascination with Russia is not limited to the tourist's scope. Though I am enchanted with gilded icons and the whimsical domes of St. Basil's, I want to know what it is to be Russian, to have an idea of what the "Russian soul" is all about. When I discovered Siberian

**I feel that the harsh realities Russians have faced for centuries have made them a deeply resilient people with much to share. The tragedies of history, the marvels of culture and the diverse influences of Europe and Asia in the Russian Federation's possession entice me.**

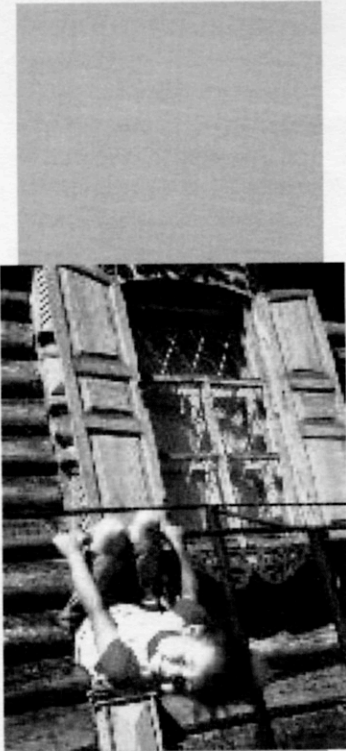
Intercultural Bridges had openings for English teachers, I couldn't believe how perfectly the program matched my interests. I had been grappling with the idea of applying to the Peace Corps, but in this time of world conflict, I wanted to find something unaffiliated with government. Peace Corps no longer has a branch in Russia, anyway, and I was desperate to find a way back to the place I have

considered a second home. The fact that the openings were in Siberia was even better. I have harbored a hope over the past few years of one day visiting the east, having lived in Moscow and St. Petersburg already, and lately I have longed for a more rustic lifestyle, something away from consumerism and suburbia and closer to nature.

I have only three goals while teaching English to 13-17 year-olds in Zutkulei: to do the best I can to meet my students' needs, linguistic and otherwise; to improve my foreign language skills; and to learn more about the Buryati culture, as I help them learn more about my own. If I leave with all or any of these aspirations accomplished, I will consider myself a very lucky person.

I realize there are days awaiting me that will be filled with homesickness, frustration with bureaucracy, loss at where to go next in my lesson plan, and despise for the harsh cold. I am prepared to meet them head on, because I know that the days filled with gratitude toward my new neighbors, acceptance within the region, pride at students' progress, and wonder at the natural beauty around me will far outweigh the rough times.

If experiencing a new culture while teaching English in a snow-blanketed winter wonderland is considered 'exile' as my family and friends like to joke, consider me ready and willing!



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