

# Siberian Intercultural 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  
604 Rood Pond Rd., Williamstown, VT 05679      Web site: [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org)      E-mail: [aver11@yandex.ru](mailto:aver11@yandex.ru)

## There I Was.

*By Brooke Swafford, the first foreign teacher in the village  
of Zutkulei.*

There I was, on stage before hundreds of onlookers, singing my own rendition of Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On." "How on EARTH did I get myself into this position?" I had thought to myself at the time. No, I wasn't at a karaoke bar—I was in Zutkulei, a remote, ethnically Buryat village, performing in their New Year's concert at the House of Culture.

One of the many things I learned about Buryats while teaching English in the Aginsk-Buryat Autonomous Okrug was that Buryats are a very musical people. Never does a social gathering, a visit from out-of-town friends or a holiday go by without at least a song or two. A concert at the village community center is held whenever a reason can be found. Road trips, whether on a school bus, in a hired car, or in one's own vehicle, rarely escape a melody. I was to be no exception.

Always having been intimidated by speaking in front of large groups of people and having no talent in voice, I was mortified to learn that the director of the village's cultural programs was eager to have me sing something in English at the New Year's celebrations. He must have heard about this, because soon my students and friends were all cajoling me at every opportunity. I protested, saying I can't sing and do not like facing crowds anyway. "Don't worry," one peer told me. "What's important is that you sing, not that you sing well! Besides, people here cheer even louder for those who sing poorly!" Somehow I did not find this very reassuring.

Eventually I broke down and agreed, reminding myself that I wasn't here just to be an English teacher, but to be a good sport in situations as these, no matter how embarrassing I may find them. Originally asked to sing

"America, the Beautiful" (a wonderfully short song, I noted joyously), I soon found myself agreeing to the *Titanic* theme song, since no one knew the music to the patriotic hymn and were much more excited by the pop-culture alternative.

I cannot deny the relief that flooded me once I suffered through the many stanzas of the song on New Year's Eve, though the wild applause made me recall my friend's disclosure of how often such exuberant clapping is a mark of a less than impressive attempt. Still, I was glad to have it done and over with. Little did I know, that song was soon to become my sworn enemy, becoming the favorite request of my students at their school dances and graduation and of my host mom, who would always volunteer me and the song at staff banquets and at home in the company of esteemed guests.

Luckily, the good followed as quickly as the bad and the ugly (above). The presentation of the song spurred requests for the lyrics, which I gave to my students happily, thinking if this is the best way to spark their interest in the language, so be it. The thought soon gave way to one of my most effective ideas while at Zutkulei Middle School—instead of having the daily after-school conversation class extend until Friday, I would reserve that day for "Muzika Ameriki i Anglii,"

or, "The Music of America and England." During this class, I would present bands and singers who are well-known in the West and carry meaning in spheres of society, politics and history. We would write the lyrics of the first song, translate them, listen to the song, and then sing along before moving on

to the next. Each lesson would feature a different artist or set of artists.

I kicked off with the Beatles, thinking sneakily, as only a teacher must sometimes, that I must lure them with a big name they're familiar with in order to ensure participation, for the after-school sessions are often sparsely-attended, especially on Fridays. The kids loved it, telling me though they had heard a number of the songs we had listened to, they never quite understood the messages. We spent two sessions on the legendary British band before moving on to an unknown to Zutkulei—Bob Dylan.

Admittedly, the kids were dubious upon hearing my spiel



*Brooke Swafford (middle) with her students and a student's mother in Zutkulei.*

Believe me, you've seen and heard nothing until you observe Buryat children singing "Sweet Home Alabama."

# A Toast to the Romantics:

# Russian Weddings.

## A Message from the Locals.

By Olga Fleshler and Svetlana Sivtsova, Chita natives and college professors of English there, and long-time supporters of SIB.

By Michael Shipley, a California native and now a permanent resident of Chita and SIB resident director there.

Any great endeavor is sure to trigger a great response – sometimes even long after the endeavor itself. Here’s what we mean.

Russians like fun and humor at their weddings and pack them with lots of games and entertainments.

This past summer both of us had the privilege to work in a Summer Language Camp, in a picturesque region of birch and pine trees on the banks of the Chitinka River in Chita, Russia. Teenagers from across the Chita Oblast came to the camp to test and practice their English language skills, and to have fun in a kaleidoscope of extracurricular activities. The Camp program started five years ago with the aim of stimulating kids’ interest in learning English and German languages. We’ve been lucky to participate and to contribute our understanding to the Camp’s mission; coupling language instruction with preparing young people to integrate into a global community via English, either through raising awareness of foreign cultures or the use of original English teaching materials.

On the morning of the wedding, the groom must ‘buy’ his bride. Together with his close friends and family, he approaches the house or apartment building of his beloved. On the street the girlfriends and family of the bride meet him. It is their task to test, taunt and tease the groom, offering adequate resistance so as not to simply ‘give away’ the bride, now clad in her wedding gown and cloistered in a back room of her apartment. Often whole stories and rhymes have been rehearsed in advance, with each side offering theirs in turn. Then the groom must pass a series of tests. For example, he is given an apple with 20 matchsticks inserted. He must remove the matchsticks one at a time, giving a unique affectionate name for his bride for each. Or he is handed a large piece of paper covered with lipstick kisses from different women. His task is to guess which belongs to his wife. (If he can identify them all, he probably shouldn’t mention it.) Or else he must extract a key from the bottom of a gallon jar of water without touching the water with his fingers. These games are infinite in range and provide much amusement for the assembled crowd.

As he passes each test, the groom advances closer to his goal. He must also provide sufficient payment in money and sweets to the bride’s friends along the way. At last he reaches the bride’s room, where he can see her in her white wedding gown for the first time.



Above: A girl in the traditional Buryat outfit.

Left: “The Statue of Liberty”



They then take separate cars to the civil ceremony, which is always held at ZAKS, a kind of government-run House of Marriage. To the accompaniment of live or canned music, the couple stands before a civil servant, flanked by close friends and family. After listening to a

To help us do so, we used invaluable tape recordings of readings made by the well-known Musical Bridges (now SIB) activists Robert Romano and Tom Dickinson. The stories and fairy tales they read on tape in different years triggered the kids’ curiosity, and discussion went well beyond the stories themselves, though they were interesting and thought-provoking enough. The students wanted to know what kind of organization SIB was, and who Robert Romano and Tom Dickinson were, and what had attracted them to Chita. When we told them the organization’s mission and history, and of its founders and supporters, the kids’ verdict was: **They must be incurable romantics!** Which everyone agreed was GREAT...

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fairly lengthy standard speech wishing them health, love and good fortune, the couple sign an official marriage document. Two witnesses also sign, the equivalent of Best Man and Bride's Maid. The couple exchange rings (on the fourth finger of the right hand), kiss, then accept the good wishes of everyone assembled. The whole entourage then files out of the hall to make room for the next wedding party, which is waiting to enter at their allotted time slot.



Afterward, the couple and their friends take a driving tour of the city's main sites, stopping at each to take photos and share some refreshments. It is a common tradition for the bride and groom to make a stop at a local monument to the fallen soldiers and lay flowers there – this symbolizes gratitude for the sacrifice of life by some that allows happy future for others.

Later all meet at a hired reception hall—usually a café or restaurant—where partying and many more games continue until late in the evening. The party is often interrupted by a guest shouting out: “My drink is bitter” followed by all the guests chanting loudly “bitter! bitter!”, which is a sign for the bride and groom to stand up and kiss in order to “sweeten it up”, and of course, to please the jolly crowd...

### A Herring “in a Winter Coat” -- a recipe from Russia

#### Ingredients:

- salted/pickled herring (should not be sweet - 1 lb.
- block cheese - 8 oz.
- sour-sweet apples - 3 medium size
- boiled potatoes, skinned - 2 or 3 medium
- boiled beets - 2
- hard-boiled eggs - 2
- mayonnaise (in the US, Hellman's Real is best) - 1 1/2 cups

#### Preparation:

1. Cut herring into pieces of 1 x 1 inch
  2. Very coarsely grind each remaining ingredient (separately -- do not mix)
  3. All ingredients should be placed into serving bowl in layers, with mayonnaise between each layer, in the following order from bottom to top:
    - a. herring, b. cheese, c. apples, d. potatoes, e. eggs, f. beets
  4. Add a thin layer of mayonnaise on top
- Serve chilled as a side dish/appetizer.

### There I Was Continued from page one

about American folk music and singer-songwriters, but as soon as I mentioned the hippies of the 1960s, they were won over immediately. Most of the songs we listened to were those of the anti-war movement that became rallying calls for protests against the war in Vietnam, giving me an opportunity to explain the culture of political activism at that time and the conflicting emotions that came with American involvement in that region of the world. Similarly, later on in the semester we listened to U2 and the Cranberries in a lesson focused on artistic expressions decrying violence in Northern Ireland, an ongoing problem of which my students knew nothing. Other lessons featured The Mamas and the Papas, Styx, and Lynyrd Skynyrd. **Believe me, you've seen and heard nothing until you observe Buryat children absorbing the anti-pop-culture/anti-materialism message of Styx's "The Grand Illusion" or hear them singing Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama."**

The singing of Celine Dion's hit also facilitated more conversation about thematic trends in Buryat music, ironically enough. Having translated the song on numerous occasions for inquisitive and interested neighbors and colleagues, they would marvel at how music can relay the feelings the artist wishes to express when the words (or language) fail. They would then break out into Buryat songs about love. My host mother and our mutual friend would often tell me about how most traditional Buryat songs are about love, mothers, sacred sites in nature such as the Anon River (one of the many places historians speculate Genghis Khan was born), or horses. Some songs combine these themes, such as the song my host mother once sang on our way back from dinner at a restaurant situated in a yurt, the traditional tent-like dwelling of the previously nomadic Buryats. The song was about a woman sneaking off to meet her horseman lover by the Anon River.

Though I knew no more than twenty words in Buryat—a language very similar to Mongolian—I soon had my own set of favorite traditional songs, which teachers and community members would remember and dedicate to me at banquets and gatherings. Whenever I must have looked a bit left out at such events, they would fish around for a song we all knew in Russian and sing that for awhile too.

The concerts in Zutkulei were also a real treat, featuring people of all ages, from 4- to 90-years-old, crooning modern tunes and folk ones alike. There were also contemporary dances, hip-hop moves, ethnically-inspired choreography from places like India and nearby Yakutia, and as well as traditional Russian and Buryat dances, all to the appropriate musical rhythms, of course.

For me, that embarrassing performance of “My Heart Will Go On” ignited a series of cultural exchanges which characterized my pleasant and fascinating experience in a small Siberian village. I have discovered that Siberian Intercultural Bridges continues to bridge cultural gaps by means of music, as its former name Musical Bridges suggests. To quote a pop diva just as well known as dear Celine—Madonna—music makes the people come together.

# Road Trip, Anyone?

Well, considering how many thousands of miles long and how exotic the road is, the term may be the understatement of the century. Nevertheless...



In the summer 2005 SIB invites all of you on a spectacular grand trip to Siberia. The trip will include such prominent places as UNESCO World Heritage Site, Lake Baikal, and such remote and undiscovered gems as Kodar mountains, the least known Buddhist temples of the world and rafting on a great river tucked out of the way, dinosaur bone digs and historic Russian cemeteries — the list is long. We will even swing by Mongolia and make several brief stops there. **We can not promise you that you will want to move there, but we do promise an extraordinary off-the-beaten-path experience with the backdrop of spectacular nature and unique culture, not to mention a fantastic variety of excellent food, local music, home visits and hospitality.** And to those of you who are true altruists at heart, we will even give a chance to extend your trip for another week in order to do some volunteering/service-learning in the area. Watch for details coming up at [www.siberianbridges.org](http://www.siberianbridges.org) on December 1! You can also contact us at [aver11@yandex.ru](mailto:aver11@yandex.ru).



Siberian Intercultural Bridges  
604 Roon Pond Rd.  
Williamstown, VT 05679

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