

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

September 30, 2013

Philanthropy beat: Minnesota has ties to Chita, Siberia, spanning 20 years

By Jean Hopfensperger

Tom Dickinson was touring China in 1988 when he found himself in a train compartment full of Russians. This unlikely Cold War encounter eventually spawned a nonprofit that has connected the Russians' hometown in Siberia to folks in the United States for two decades.

Siberian Bridges marks its 20th anniversary October 8 with a celebration at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. It has a unique niche among Minnesota's nonprofits. Its work focuses on the city of Chita, about 4,700 miles east of Moscow, which was "closed" to foreigners until 1988, said Dickinson. Working in an obscure part of the world has meant that supporters were nonprofit pioneers, sending English teachers, library books, and toys and basic needs to a nearby orphanage. But there was a downside.

"Americans give [money] to places they know about, and nobody knows about it," said Dickinson, a piano teacher in Minneapolis. "And we're not about an issue. It's about a place."

As a result, Siberian Bridges' work has ebbed and flowed over the years. It's a tiny nonprofit, run by volunteers, with maybe \$10,000 to its name. But the wheels of ideas are always spinning, and volunteers are encouraged to find areas of interest and explore them.

Chuck Ritchie, a retired Russian language teacher from the Blake School, joined the nonprofit about a decade ago. Since then he's forged ties with an orphanage near Chita, sending bimonthly shipments of everything from pens to bandages and art books.

"The kids know they have friends in Minnesota," said Ritchie, "that there are people on the other side of the world who care about them."

Siberian Bridges is seeking donations such as children's picture books, encyclopedias and research material, and books in German and French. It also plans to bring its first group of tourists to the region next year.

"For people who are that isolated, and coupled with poverty, it's essential that we don't let go," said Dickinson.

Twenty Years...



First contact: Tom with Chita trade reps on a train in China, December 1988



Frances Werle, one of more than 20 SB teachers, at the Pedagogical Institute, 1997



Display about SB donations to the Pushkin Regional Library, 2000



Prof. Olga Flesher, 1st of several scholarly exchanges with Southern Connecticut State University, 1999



SB Chair Chuck Ritchie at the Children's Home, 2011



SB Treasurer Judy Boudreau at a conference on volunteering in Chita, 2012



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A 501c3 non-profit corporation registered in the State of Minnesota

A Taste of Zabaikalye

Tour Siberia's Unexplored Treasure

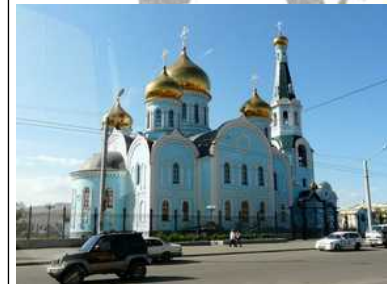
June 1-12, 2014

- ★ Daursky Biospheric Reserve
- ★ Mount Alkhanai National Park
- ★ Chita, capital of Zabaikalye
- ★ and a taste of Moscow



Demoiselle cranes at the Daursky Reserve

Small Buddhist temple at Mt Alkhanai National Park



New cathedral in Chita (Russia's second largest)

Chita's central square

Modestly priced

Intimate contact

Great food

Trip of a lifetime



Hurry, the tour closes soon!



UPDATE — December 2013

Twenty Years of Building Siberian Bridges!

On October 8th we celebrated twenty years of work with Chita and Zabaikalye with a gala event (and cake!) at the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. The evening included presentations of our projects, wonderful foods catered by former board member Lisa Kugler and a sale of Russian souvenirs. We were entertained by the colorful singing and dancing in authentic costumes of *Russian Soul*, a Twin Cities non-profit dedicated to bringing Russian folk traditions to the Midwest. Jack Rendler, longtime human rights activist who led the revival of Siberian Bridges and now chairs *World Without Genocide*, gave a moving speech applauding the work of Siberian Bridges and encouraging support.

A Taste of Zabaikalye Tour – June 1-12, 2014

There are still places available in the *Taste of Zabaikalye* tour, led by Tom Dickinson. This unique and modestly priced trip to a virtually unvisited (by Americans, anyway!) part of the world will introduce you to the Siberia's renowned hospitality, the exotic flora and fauna and scenic beauty of the region, and a surfeit of cultural riches from its days as a trading crossroads, to its role as a land of exiles, to being the birthplace of Genghis Khan and home to Russia's Buddhist population. See images on the back of this newsletter and then join Tom for the trip of a lifetime!

Children's Home/School—A little over a month ago the Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky Children's Home/School hosted the fall Trustees meeting. At that time the Student Council met with Trustees in attendance, and students presented reports on the fall harvest along with an accounting of the expenses and profits earned from their work. All of the children are involved in the planting, tending, and harvesting of the produce, and there is keen competition between the family groups

Continued inside...

UPDATE continued from front...

(groupings within the Home).

The harvest is first used by the school itself. As an example, last year they harvested more than ten tons of potatoes and fed everyone who lives and eats at the Home well into the month of March.



2013 harvesting potatoes and carrots at the Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky Children's Home's gardens.

They also sell their produce, mainly to local townspeople. Not only do they keep very accurate records, the children also earn what we would call *Monopoly money* for their work, which they can spend at a special Market/Fair, where they can buy things donated by friends and sponsors.

In addition this year the children were all involved in a program called "Making Our Home into a Flower Garden." All of the family units participated and they planted 3,430 individual plants and flowers of various kinds! An added bonus was an invitation to compete in a city-wide flower show in which they took third place. In both of these endeavors staff and Trustees alike detected a growing sense of pride on the part the children in their Home/School collective, and a greater sense of self-worth and self-confidence as a result of their hard work and achievements.

Fundraising—Many of our friends donated on Minnesota's Give to the Max Day on November 14, 2013, sponsored by GiveMN.org (a unique venture supporting charitable giving, and worth a look). Despite the website's rather serious technical problems that day, contributions to Minnesota non-profits still surpassed the record set last year. That was true for us as well. With the matching grants offered by friends of Siberian Bridges this year, we almost doubled our donations from last year!

What was special about our matches was that they were all in the \$50 to \$200 range from friends and longtime supporters, local, national and international.

Concluded after next panel...



Meet

Victor Kulakovskiy and Yelena Anisimova Benefactors of the Children's Home/School

Victor Kulakovskiy and Yelena Anisimova are two very special friends to Siberian Bridges. Yelena and Victor live in Chita and have played a pivotal role in supporting the Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky Children's Home/School. Theirs is an involvement borne out of personal experience, a reality which makes them such valuable assets.

Victor was orphaned at the age of one and a half and was brought up by his aunt, who took him in and raised him along with her own three daughters. However, she worked as a railroad conductor and spent much time away from home, often having to leave the children to the perils of the streets. Nonetheless she instilled in him the values of honesty and hard work. Victor went on to achieve two higher degrees, one in sports training and the other in law enforcement, a field in which he achieved 25 years of distinguished service.

Yelena, was put in an orphanage (children's home) in the Petrovsk region far to the east of Chita when she was three, along with her brother and sister. It was there that she first met Natalya Skliarova, a teacher of History, who took a special interest in her. Natalya would frequently take her home, and as a result Yelena developed a life-long passion for literature and a love of learning. She recognized in Natalya a role model that became her inspiration. She went on to achieve two degrees in Cultural Science and has enjoyed a fulfilling career

of her own. Victor and Yelena have a son and a daughter, both of whom have followed their father's career in law enforcement.

Yelena's relationship with Natalya Skliarova continues to this day, and is, in fact, the source of our involvement in the Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky Children's Home/School. It was Yelena that led Sibirskye Mosti (our partner NGO in Chita) there, where the director is now none other than...Natalya Skliarova! (For our profile of Ms Skliarova, download our Fall 2011 newsletter at www.siberianbridges.org).

Our partners in Chita encouraged Siberian Bridges to join in, and so we have become another part of the support system for this home/school.

Victor and Yelena are an inspiration and important role models, which is so obvious when you watch them interact with the children. They represent the hope for all of them that each can rise above their circumstance, unfortunate as it may be, and become a valued and effective member of society...educated, productive, and loving.

We are proud to introduce you to this wonderful and inspiring couple.

UPDATE continued from inside first panel...

We hope that in the future others might offer similar matches to encourage more to donate. (One has offered a \$200 match for this mailing.) If you are interested in supporting us with a match of *any size*, let us know.

Books—Following our mention in the Minneapolis Star Tribune (see panel) we've been happily inundated with offers of encyclopedias. We are probably maxxed out for the moment! We'll be sending at least two sets, one to a suburban Chita school and looking for other destinations for them. While these are terrific longterm resources for English language enrichment, they are quite costly to send. It is about \$300 to send the 20-25 volumes—*can you help us out?* We also received contributions of children's literature and books in French, both requested items that we are happy to send, and we welcome similar donations of books from you.

Cut and return with donation

Siberian Bridges Contribution Form

By check:

Return this panel filled out with your check payable to "Siberian Bridges" to:

Siberian Bridges
3212 18th Ave S
Minneapolis, MN 55407

By credit card or Paypal:

Go online to www.siberianbridges.org and click on the "Donate" button.

*Siberian Bridges is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation.
All donations are 100% tax-deductible.*

\$200 match

offered by "A Longtime Fan"

Earmark your donation for (optional):
Mailing an encyclopedia (\$300)
Bi-monthly Children's Home box (\$75)
Children's Home box contents (\$25)
Monthly Book shipment (\$75)

Contribution amount

Siberian Bridges in the 21st Century!

- **Would you switch to email?** Postage for each newsletter is at 46 cents and rising, and the largest single item on our shoestring budget is our semi-annual mailings. So, anyone who prefers to be contacted by email and receive our newsletters (*in color!*) as email attachments printable at home, please let us know.
- **We are now on youtube!** Search "Siberian Bridges in Zabaikalye" at youtube.com to view our own channel of videos, from the newest about our 20 years of work, to videos of children at the Children's Home.
- **New, classier website is nearly ready.** Our Secretary, Paul Johnson is putting finishing touches on a new site for us. The address will be the same: www.siberianbridges.org
- PLEASE NOTE our new email address:
siberianbridges@gmail.com