



## FALL 2016 NEWSLETTER

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# Siberian Bridges

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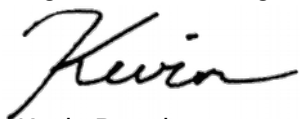
November 2016

It was an incredible stroke of luck for me to find out about Siberian Bridges when I moved back to Minneapolis last year. I had not been back to Russia for several years and had begun to worry that strong connections over such long distances would be hard to maintain over the long term. What Siberian Bridges has accomplished and maintained since Tom Dickinson's first visit to Chita in 1989 proves otherwise: a chance meeting on a train late in the Soviet era became the foundation of a twenty-three year effort to connect through visits, tours, and the flow of much-needed scholarships and donations of funds, books, and information technology.

These accomplishments are all the more important and impressive in light of the fact that, as Tom told the Star Tribune in 2013, "Americans give [money] to places they know about, and nobody knows about" the Zabaikalye. The writer profiling our organization seemed to agree, calling the Zabaikalye an "obscure part of the world." I admit it's hard to dispute that. The Zabaikalye is remote even relative to the rest of Siberia—which most Americans (or maybe even most non-Siberians) imagine as a featureless frozen land mass somewhere east of Moscow.

Of course, even brief contact with the real Siberia is enough to dispel that idea. My own experience of Siberia started in Novosibirsk, where I was assigned to teach on a Fulbright Scholarship in 2009. Far from seeming remote and desolate, Novosibirsk was a prosperous, sprawling, bustling metropolis with theaters, museums, a thriving arts community, and higher education and research institutes to rival anything west of the Urals. On breaks from my teaching, I traveled and saw more of Siberia: Krasnoyarsk with its mix of new skyscrapers, Brezhnev-era apartment blocks and pre-revolutionary log architecture; the vibrant university city of Tomsk; preserved sites and memorials to the victims of the Gulags in nearby Kemerovo oblast; the surpassingly beautiful Altai Mountains; and the pastures and temples of Tuva, Russia's only region with a Buddhist majority. In all those travels, I unfortunately never made it to the Zabaikalye (although I know I will someday). If I had, I'm sure it would only have strengthened my impression of the diversity, natural beauty, and fascinating cultural history that, for better and for worse, have gone largely unnoticed by the rest of the world.

But while this may have posed some challenge to the organization's work in the past, it becomes less of an obstacle with each new member joining the group and contributing to shaping its goals. Chuck Ritchie's enthusiasm soon after he joined SB for a local Chita initiative already underway, expanded the organization's commitment to aiding a remote orphanage. Marie Nicholas, who spent last summer teaching at a children's summer camp outside Chita, had the idea of starting outreach in the Minneapolis public schools to urge students there to take advantage of the same opportunity. Personally, I see potential for Minnesotan scholars interested in researching the region to benefit from Siberian Bridges' contacts at local libraries and educational institutions. As a new member, I'm excited to see the new kinds of connection the organization will forge with Chita and the Zabaikalye as its membership grows.



Kevin Brondum  
New member of the Siberian Bridges Board

## **FALL 2016 UPDATE**

### **Children's Center in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky**

- All of last spring's graduates are continuing their education. This wonderful news fulfills a major goal of the director and staff.



*2016 grads of the Children's Center. Поздравляем! Congratulations!*

- With financial help from Siberian Bridges, **Natalya Skliarova, director**, purchased several items that add to the quality of life at the Center. These include an inflatable slide—the odds-on favorite of the children—a massage table, a flat screen television for the psychologist's office, a drawing board made of sand, and a machine to make "oxygen cocktails"—also a favorite of the kids.



### **New project with another Children's Center**

- In addition to our ongoing work with the Center we now support volunteer work by **Michael and Irina Shipley** with older children at a Center in **Chernovsky, a town near Chita**. Michael, an American, first went to Siberia on a Baha'i service trip in 1991 where he met his future wife, Irina who is from Chita. They settled there in 1992. In the past, Michael assisted Siberian Bridges by arranging a tour of the region for an American family, and also with the teacher program we had

earlier in our history. For more than two years now on a weekly basis, Michael and Irina—Michael says Irina really leads the work—bring some of the teenagers from Chernovsky to their apartment, hold birthday parties, excursions, and even help two of the boys learn to play guitar. The group is: Edik, Artyom, Alexei L., Alexei K., Anton, Boris, Ivan, Anastasia, Andrei, Vitya, and sometimes Alexander.

- One boy in particular, Vitya Nefyodov, is studying to be an artist, and Michael and Irina help with his tuition. Our contribution to his education encouraged him to get an after school job to supplement our small grant. They are good friends of Siberian Bridges and we are delighted to be able to support their efforts to make life a little better for some of the young people in another orphanage.



*Center's soccer team placed 4th nationally among orphanage teams. These are among the teens Irina and Michael mentor.*



*Vitya (nearest painter) and two of his works.*



*Irina and Michael with their daughter, Katya*

**English teachers at summer camps** – read in this newsletter about the “pioneering” entrepreneurs that started the schools that held the camps, and from the “pioneer” teachers who went there as their first invited foreign teachers.

## **TWO ENTREPRENEURS OF CHITA**

These women started schools in the young economy of Chita. One is for languages. One is for early childhood support and supplementary education. We helped three English speakers become their first hired foreign teachers for each school's first summer camp.



**ELENA PRUSAKOVA**  
**DIRECTOR**

**CITY OF CHILDREN (ГОРОД ДЕТСТВА)**

Ms Prusakova founded her school in 2011 while on leave from teaching due to health reasons. From the original early childhood education classes with only four students in the first year, its enrollment is now more than 100 as it has expanded to offer a wide variety of subjects including math and English for ages from 1 to 14. The summer English camp of 2016 was the second summer offering, but the first in a rustic setting. Michael Shipley, a native English speaker, but permanent resident of Chita, was the first native speaker to teach there in 2015. Marie Nicholas came from Minneapolis in 2016 as the second.

A native of Chita, Ms. Prusakova received her teaching degree locally, then taught 26 years in the public schools, first at the primary level, and later as a History teacher in the upper levels. Her husband, Sergey, is an engineer and they have two sons, Kiril, age 23, and Maxim, age 15. Her hobbies are gardening and travelling. She is esteemed by her staff for her energy and positivity.



*Ms Zaitseva with some of her staff*

**NATALIA ZAITSEVA**  
**DIRECTOR**

**DIPLOMAT LANGUAGE SCHOOL**

Diplomat Language School was founded in 2009 by Ms Zaitseva after working as Deputy Director for Foreign Affairs in a local firm. She long wished to form a school based on the appreciation for her private teaching, and her interest in entrepreneurship. She graduated with honors in American Studies from Chita State Technical University and received a degree in Entrepreneurship from the Chita University of the Baikal State Academy of Economics.

The Diplomat Language School is licensed to teach six languages, English, Chinese, German, French, Spanish and Italian in more than 20 programs for both children and adults, including training for international exams like PET, TOEFL and IELTS. John Crust and Janet Stewart taught at Diplomat's first camp offering, though it runs summer teaching within the city. And while visitors passing through Chita have taught at Diplomat, John and Janet were the first expressly invited to Chita by the School.

Born in Chita, Ms Zaitseva loves travel and has many hobbies including sewing, crochet and exercise. She lives with her young daughter.



*ДОБРО ПОЖАЛОВАТЬ! WELCOME!*



[LINK to youtube video greeting by Natalia Zaitseva](#)



*The Director with friends and her English teachers, Raisa and Julia, in front.*



## ***Teacher impressions of last summer in Zabaikalye***

Janet Stewart and John Crust were at Diplomat School's summer camp, Marie Nicholas was at City of Children's. Here are some memories.



*Janet taking the restorative waters at Malakovka mineral spring near Chita with camp counselor Sasha*

discussing family values, handsome male celebrities, and the disappointing fact that life in the US typically does not involve running into famous actors at the grocery store!

**JOHN CRUST:** The evening performance ended and a few stragglers made their way up the hill, up the wood steps, back to the hub of the camp. A brilliant glow of purple and red and orange fused the western sky,

gradually extinguishing as a thick layer of night

descended. The amphitheater down below was quiet, a ghostly light illuminating a few figures packing up the sound equipment. Russian whispers and murmurs and a distant shout traversed the onset of night. The curtain was closing, marking the end of the day at this summer camp in Siberia. Shadows in the dark moved from the dining hall, hands clutching trays layered with late-night snacks, hopefully those wonderful sweet rolls.

Gradually, lights blinked out. A bohemian cool stitched to his brow, Slava glanced at the time – 11pm. A light beaming from his forehead, guitar in hand, the fifty-something musician headed out. In minutes, he was in a dorm room, girls looking up from their beds in the darkness, some with a



*John and campers*

**JANET STEWART:** No one who chooses to spend a summer in Siberia expects to have a run-of-the-mill experience. I'd traveled to Russia before—sightseeing in St. Petersburg, studying in Moscow, teaching in Ryazan, camping in Vladimir, and I'd even spent a year living in Kazakhstan. However, I had never set foot in a summer camp in Siberia. Arriving in Chita in July, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew the experience would be one of my most interesting yet.

I was not disappointed. My trip was not without its challenges: my suitcase never arrived, I didn't teach English class as often as I would have liked, and most of the campers and camp staff were stumped as to why some American girl was sitting on a bench at their remote Siberian campground. Nevertheless, some of these challenges opened up dialogues I may have otherwise never had. On my second day, the camp truck driver kindly took me into town so I could buy some essentials such as clothing and soap. During the ride, we laughed over stereotypes, American cars, and beer. He invited me to continue the conversation over a dinner of *shashlik* with his family.

Another afternoon, when I would have been teaching, one of the counselors' wives took me to the beach. We spent the day



*Janet with fellow camp staff*

stuffed animal close by. Slava spoke gently, in a soft, fatherly tone, and he strummed his guitar, releasing music magic. He sang, his words sculpting images that waltzed in the dark, songs filled with grandeur, grace, lyrics steeped in the land. Another song drifted through the room, the young faces mesmerized. A chorus of good-nights followed him out. He entered another dark room, his voice greeting the boys curiously looking up from their beds, and he began to strum his guitar.

In a building nearby, the nightly staff meeting began. Counsellors wearing the length of the day, smiles still buoyant, but maybe down a notch or two, squeezed into seats around the room. Plans were outlined for tomorrow. A tray of those wonderful sweet rolls was passed around.

**MARIE NICHOLAS:** Last June I was guest teacher at the City of Children camp a couple hours drive from Chita. It was incredible. The second I got there I was rushed by all my students. I was a celebrity. Even the kids who weren't part of the English section of camp would strain to use all the English they could just to know more about me.

One little boy, Matvey G., stood out partly because he had a stronger grasp of English, but also because he was so enthusiastic. He was a little chubbier and not very popular with the rest of the kids so he followed me around a bit. One day he asked me about Legos. He wanted to know if I had seen the movie. I hadn't but I loved Legos as a kid, so I told him about going to *Lego Land* at the Mall of America and his face just lit up. He could not believe the words that were coming out of my mouth, that there were massive dinosaurs and planes made completely out of Legos literally hanging from the ceiling. Or that there was a wall of shelves were you could buy any piece of Lego from any set ever made in any color. He ran and found four more kids so they could hear about it. Then they all went and told their friends.



Where's ~~Waldo~~ Marie?

Chita is no longer a closed city, but I got this sense that both the adults and the kids still feel closed off from the rest of the world. There was a longing just to connect and share. My visit was so much more poignant when I saw what relationships to these kids meant to them.



*Join our Chair Chuck Ritchie and President Tom Dickinson for a tour of our favorite far side of the globe*

# **Taste of Zabaikalye Tour**

*July 1-13 2017*

**(July 1-15 with Lake Baikal add-on).**



- Estimated all-inclusive cost from arrival at Domodedovo airport in Moscow to departure from the same): \$4500 (inquire about cost of the Lake Baikal add-on)
- Double occupancy in a simple but comfortable tour.
- Features the Krasny Chikoi region on the western edge of the region. It is noted for the beauty of its forests, hills and rivers, the Old Believer communities, the indigenous Buryat culture, and the archeological digs uncovering the source of our own continent's indigenous ancestors who migrated across the Bering Land-Bridge more than 10,000 years ago.
- *Color brochure available at our website by email or at [THIS LINK](#)*

# Siberian Bridges

## *Annual Fundraising Get-Together*

December 4, 2016, 3-5pm, Mayflower Church, 106 E Diamond Lake Rd, Minneapolis  
(please RSVP: [siberianbridges@gmail.com](mailto:siberianbridges@gmail.com), (952) 473-1790)

Docent Tour (Fabergé exhibit) at 2pm at The Museum of Russian Art across the street  
Open to the public, free to museum members, \$10 (\$8 seniors) non-members

*Back by popular demand!*

## *The Encampment River Boys*



**Also:**

Stories from two local women who went to Siberia this summer to teach  
Updates about the Children's Home, the 2017 Tour and other projects  
Taste Russian homestyle cooking including *pelmeni* and *blini*.



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***DONATION INFORMATION:***

- ***Credit card:*** at *siberianbridges.org*, click "[DONATE.](#)"
- ***Checks:*** write to "**Siberian Bridges**" and mail to our address.
- *Siberian Bridges is a 501c3 non-profit registered in Minnesota.  
Donations are 100% tax-deductible.*