

Siberian Bridges, Inc.

*Also known as Siberian Intercultural Bridges, Inc.
Since 1993*

Access, Opportunity And Good Neighbors Through Cultural Exchange

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A 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to bringing access and opportunity to isolated communities in Zabaikalye (the region Beyond Lake Baikal)



Goodbye...For Now.

A message from Tom Dickinson, founder and President

Siberian Bridges, founded in 1993 is now ceasing operations. We are not closing permanently--rather we are waiting to see what develops among our friends in Chita, Russia. If they can show us how Siberian Bridges remains useful to their city and area, including initiating and carrying through on project development and fund-raising support, the board of Siberian Bridges will be able to study how it can be revived in a new form.

The main challenge we will face is developing new major sources of funding. Last September, after completion of a major grant by our primary donors, Charles and Jean Dickinson, a new effort was begun to revamp Siberian Bridges to better fit its new situation. Being intimately connected with Siberian Bridges from its inception, Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson needed no additional convincing. However, any new source would have to be sold on the value of our organization.



Concert following press conference

there, and identifying what texts and input we needed for the next steps. It was a most encouraging visit.

First there was a press conference at the regional art museum followed by a wonderful concert showcasing music and dance talent of the city. Later, I met with two of Chita's most successful businessmen to discuss what commercial contacts SB might be able to encourage. I met with the heads of education for both Chita Oblast and the Aginsk Buryat Autonomous District (where several of our teachers have taught in village schools) and was told how important our English teachers have been, and I in turn asked that they provide SB with documents attesting to the value.

I visited the village of Uzon again, following stops in 2000 and 2005. It now has a music school, a language lab paid for by a grant they won, and they were about to build a new school building. They produced two college English majors for the first time. All these accomplishments, they pointed out, were directly or



Press Conference



Teachers and officials in Uzon School's language lab

A new approach and a spring trip to Chita

This past March, I traveled to Chita for a ten day visit with the express purpose of explaining the changes, broadening SB's active support group

in spirit attributable to the SB teachers and their can-do energy.

I was invited to speak in a conference on security at Chita State University. I had not considered SB in terms of security previously, but it was not a stretch to see that the “people to people diplomacy” of SB’s grassroots-level efforts contribute to a more secure world.



The new cathedral

Every time I spoke I pointed out that SB wasn’t actually sending any teachers or books at the moment. Yet the enthusiasm and attention I received were strong--clear evidence that SB’s small efforts of the previous fourteen years cast a long shadow. I stressed that from here on, however, all projects need to be developed and supported by the people of Chita. In part this was a strategic consideration. The strongest arguments for the value of SB in Russia would naturally come from the Russians themselves. But also, it was a recognition of SB’s biggest weakness in its previous fourteen years--it needed to involve much more talent in both countries, and a stronger drive of self-determination among the Russians.

As we discussed there, some of the funding now should come from the new wealth in Chita, and that would have the added benefit of attracting funding on the US side. Philanthropic giving occurs in Chita, but laws, envy and distrust, and simply the newness of the concept, make it problematic. Nevertheless, the effort to raise funds locally must be made.

Chita has changed

Chita has changed. Since the late 1990s, Chita has been rising slowly out of Russia’s worst economic period of the past fifty years. Homes have been repaired, new homes with better construction are being built, people have better paying jobs with more disposable income. There is now a small but significant wealthy class. As I was told, there is a change in general mood and even a little optimism. Streets are cleaned up, sidewalks repaired, boulevards planted, Lenin Square in the middle of the city has had a

major makeover. A new cathedral, Russia’s second largest, was constructed. Lenin Street begins to look cosmopolitan, with most first floor apartments now converted to commercial space. But step to the rear of these same buildings to where people access their apartments and major work remains.

The miracle of cellphone technology and the Internet connects Chita with the world in an unprecedented way. Actual contact and exchange, however, remain minimal still, sixteen years into the post-Soviet era. Services are expensive and Russian incomes though improved remain low, prohibiting convenient use of the new technologies by a large part of the population.

The next step

So now, Siberian Bridges is changing as well. The organization moved to Minnesota where I now live and where its board resides. An “Advisory Committee” was formed in Minneapolis along with one in Chita. The Minneapolis group, a talented bunch that included a developer, a graphic artist, the publisher of a small newspaper, a travel writer, among others, helped take a fresh look at Siberian Bridges first phase, from 1993-2006. The Chita Advisory Committee was charged with developing projects and producing written testimony on the value of Siberian Bridges’ efforts. This testimony would then become the core of the effort to develop new funding sources.

In fact, the most important shift in the “new” Siberian Bridges is to move the primary energy to the Russian side and so finally effecting the change SB has aimed at nearly since its inception, from a “charity dispensing” organization to a “resource”.

Because of the overwhelming reception I received this past spring I’m convinced that Siberian Bridges can continue to play a role in Chita and its area. We look forward to our friends in Chita assessing the usefulness of Siberian Bridges in the past, envisioning its usefulness in the future, and taking the lead in its revival.



Receiving nature films of Zabaikalye from Chita filmmaker, Nadezhda Pavlenko

A message from Judy Boudreau, Secretary-Treasurer and Board Member

The efforts to revamp Siberian Bridges have been my best introduction to the non-profit process, as well as the potential for the people in Zabaikalye.

The members of the Minnesota Advisory Committee were full of ideas about resources for our Siberian friends: library assistance, public health, business/commercial development, education, fundraising, service/tourism, legal studies/research. But what was stressed the most was that it was important to get advice and suggestions from the Chita Advisory Committee!

We also had a very informative meeting with Ruth Barrett Rendler of the Center of Victims of Torture, based here in the Twin Cities. Ruth clarified steps and procedures for making the transition from a "Mom and Pop" non-profit to one properly funded and staffed. We hope to use these concepts in the future backed by our friends in Chita.

Introducing SB to Minnesota

This spring we introduced Siberian Bridges to its new home here in Minnesota through two events, advertised and supported by other local non-profits working in Russia: Children's Home Society Family Services and CONNECT US/Russia.

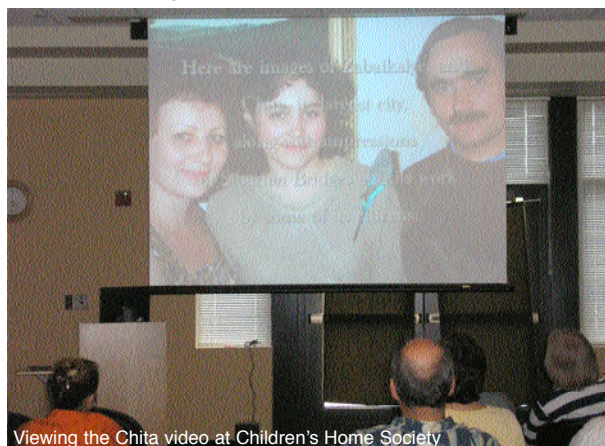
The first presentation was held at the Children's Home Society Family Services headquarters. It was a Siberia-savvy crowd, and many had visited regions



Presentation at Children's Home Society with a photo exhibit by Chita photographers

near Chita. Despite their interest in Siberia, none had ever been to Chita, and several showed interest in making the trip. Speakers at the presentation included:

- Ellen Kennedy, a sociologist and visiting professor at Carleton College. Ellen has been to Siberia several times with her children, and she spoke of the experiences they had as a family and how her kids grew to love the Russian culture.
- Chuck Ritchie is Chairman of the Board of CONNECT US/Russia, a Minnesota non-profit that deals with humanitarian issues (domestic violence, chemical dependency, trafficking of women, and good governance, etc.) Chuck has been excited about Siberian Bridges ever since being introduced to the program. At the presentation he spoke of experiences he's had in Siberia and shared reasons why he would love to visit Chita.
- Tom told how great the people in the Chita are, and presented a short video showing slides of the area interspersed with comments about Siberian Bridges by several people of Chita. They are obviously appreciative of the efforts made by Siberian Bridges over the past 14 years.



The second presentation was to the Carleton College Twin Cities Alumni Club. Attendees listened to Tom's background and stories of Chita with delight and with good follow-up questions. Several showed initial interest in a tour of the area of Chita, perhaps in 2008.

This is a time of transition for many non-profits that work internationally. In fact, CONNECT US/Russia has just announced that, after 27 years, it too is stopping operations due to funding shortfalls. I hope that the unique nature of Siberian Bridges as an American non-profit focused on the people of a remarkable place rather than a particular issue (or already extant funding source) and developing its direction and energy in tandem with its friends in Russia (rather than taking the patronizing stance of "we know what's best for you") will bring us back with gusto. We are keeping the door open. I'm excited to be a part of it!

Our website will continue to be maintained where this newsletter can be downloaded in English and Russian.
www.siberianbridges.org

Many thanks to our donors through the years, first to Jean and Charlie Dickinson for the interest, confidence and humanity their consistent and generous contributions demonstrate. We are grateful for their advice, expertise and common sense during Siberian Bridges' first phase that ended in 2006.

We are also grateful for the many other generous donors of money, talent and books and publications, as well as the teachers who recognized a need and fulfilled it enthusiastically and intelligently.

Finally, we'd like to single out one donor for recognition, Mrs. Doris Cotton (Tom's piano teacher from ages 7-9) whose \$25 checks arrived with reassuring regularity every quarter nearly since Siberian Bridges began.

Thank you!

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Chita guitarist Vitaly Budyak, his son and friend perform at the press conference concert in March.

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