



SIBERIAN/INTERCULTURAL BRIDGES

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 - E-mail: puchkovt@kirtland.edu - Web site: texashousing.org/MB/homepage/index.html

Message from Tom Dickinson, the Founder of SIB.



Siberian Intercultural Bridges continues its transformation. This past August we had to say goodbye with a heartfelt "Thank you!" to Alina Simone. Her year as Executive Director of SIB was marked by unswerving commitment, intelligence and a lot of hard work. Perhaps her greatest gift to us is her complete re-vamping of the teaching program, enlarging and restructuring

it. Her Fall 2001 trip to Chita confirmed our commitment in the midst of organizational changes. But this is not a real goodbye. Alina continues on as an active member of the Board of Directors.

We warmly welcome Tatyana (Tanya) Puchkova as our new Executive Director. She took over Alina's re-

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sponsibilities in August and hit the ground running, handling the

myriad details of getting the teachers to Chita for fall classes. A native of the Ukraine and longtime resident of the United States, Tanya is uniquely qualified to helm SIB, standing as she does between our two cultures. She also comes to us with many years of experience working with a variety of people and organizations to devise exchange programs from the ground up and, most crucially, getting those programs funded.

These are unsettled and unsettling times. Posturing of governments and people being bad to each other fill the news. Fear—of and among our world neighbors—is the real threat to our security. For nearly ten years, Siberian Intercultural Bridges has been practicing peace and promoting security by making contact between two cultures, two former enemies in fact, common and everyday. As Tanya says later in this newsletter, "what had seemed impossible before, is being taken for granted now". What a wonderful thing to be able to say! So, as the world contemplates war, the work of peace-making continues small step by small step and person to person: with the teachers we send, the contacts we make, the exchanges that bring us together, the sharing, and the spirit of neighborliness that says "I'd like to get to know you."

SIB 2002 teachers in Chita region:

Dr. Ann Henry – Zabaikalsky State Pedagogical University, Chita City.

Noel Becker – Uzon Middle School, Village of Uzon, Buryat Autonomous District.

Patrick Findler – Aginsk Gymnasia, Aginsk, Buryat Autonomous District.

Colin McMullan – vocational Lyceum #22, Village of Krasny Chicoy, Southern Chita province.



Help us send a teacher!

\$5000 covers the entire cost of sending one teacher, including travel, stipend and insurance.

\$2500 covers travel expenses for one teacher.

\$1500 covers the stipend for a teacher in Dul'durga or Ugdan.

\$1200 covers the stipend for a teacher within the city of Chita.

\$500 covers one teacher's medical insurance.

\$100 helps a teacher buy much needed teaching materials.

Tatyana Puchkova, Executive Director

My Journey to SIB.

It is my great pleasure and privilege to join the spirited team of Siberian Intercultural Bridges. I feel that in SIB I found a soul mate and that like all the roads that lead to a soul mate, mine was full of miraculous coincidences. It is through a chain of accidental encounters that I first came to the US and eventually ended up doing projects with Russia. Or may be it was fate — you be the judge.

I was born and raised in Kiev, Ukraine, and later graduated from Moscow State Pedagogical University with MA's in Geography and English as a Second Language. My last year in college while volunteering for one day as a Russian-English interpreter for a group of American professors, I met a professor of history from Western Michigan University who thought that I should do graduate work in the US. Five months later without any prior correspondence from him, I got an official letter of invitation and a scholarship to come to WMU to get an MA in history. Just like that. At that time I was a volunteer interpreter for another American group and on the same day that I received the letter from WMU I found out that the lady that I had just made friends with was also from Michigan. She made me promise I'd visit her when studying in Michigan. Several months later, on Christmas Eve 1991 I was on the plane to the US. From the newspapers on the plane I learned that Gorbachev had signed his resignation and that my country as I knew it had ceased to exist. I was up in the air.

My first experience in the US started with arriving to JFK on Christmas Eve one day later than I was supposed to (due to a delayed flight from Moscow) and therefore, missing my connecting flight to Michigan. I was told by US Air that they would honor my ticket to Kalamazoo the next morning, but that I had to spend the night in NY. I had \$60 in my pocket that was a fortune to me as it equaled my Russian salary for 6 months. But the Plaza hotel in JFK cost \$90 so I prepared to sleep on my suitcase. Fifteen minutes later US Air told me they would pay for my hotel, even though they were not at all responsible for the delay of my flight from Moscow on the Russian airline. They did. That was just the beginning of my miraculous journey.

Before graduating from WMU I visited the lady from Northern Michigan I had met earlier in Moscow. She lived in a small town whose main attraction was the local community college. At that point I was not looking for a job and was planning to return to Russia in several months after graduating from WMU. At the college I was introduced to the President and VP for Instruction. Twenty minutes into our conversation they offered me a job that I couldn't resist, to create an International Program in this remote area that had never seen one, instantly creating the position just for me. I have



been in Northern Michigan ever since, now with my husband and 2-year old son.

In these 11 years I have been the Director of International Programs for a consortium of Michigan colleges and have succeeded in building an extensive and ambitious international program in a rural, isolated and economically depressed part of the US. But my heart and mind longed for a similar commitment in Russia. In this past decade both Russia and I grew up. Russia has reached a new level of needs and opportunities, and I wanted to concentrate on the hands-on support for grassroots initiatives in Russia to help facilitate the rapid and yet very fragile changes there.

What a difference these 11 years have made! What had seemed impossible before, was being taken for granted now. What had seemed distant, seemed within reach. But by the same token, the rapid changes only increase the vulnerability of the existing social realities, mentality and cultures, especially in the isolated regions. Those can not be changed over night, but they have to be exposed to a variety of alternatives.

And this is precisely what SIB has been doing in one of the last truly

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remote regions on the planet, Chita region. Naturally isolated, closed for decades for reasons of "strategic importance" and home to one of the most unique mixes of western, indigenous and oriental cultures, the Chita area desperately needs exposure. SIB will continue to do everything possible to provide it. As I said, I've found a soul mate...

Our Prospective Journey Together

I believe that 2003 will be a turning point for SIB. For years Siberian Intercultural Bridges have been accumulating great experience and expertise in working in Chita region. We are a unique organization not only because for many years we have provided that part of Siberia with native-speaking English teachers, but more importantly, because we developed and continue to maintain truly intimate relationships built on trust and cooperation in the region that for decades had not seen foreigners and was taught to distrust them.

We will continue to send teachers to Chita, but we are ready to expand our activities. Specifically, we plan to focus on a variety of exchange projects between Chita region and the US that will involve educators, students, social activists and general community on both sides. Our first short-term cultural exchange of educators between Michigan and Chita will take place in May 2003. We are very excited about it. We also have many exchange ideas for more distant future that will hopefully involve underprivileged parts of the population: orphans, at-risk youth, elderly, handicapped and others. We welcome any contributions from the friends of SIB – all of your ideas, donations, contacts and efforts are always greatly appreciated by SIB and, most importantly, by the people of Chita.



Russia has reached a new level of needs and opportunities.

Colin McMullan is writing to us from Krasny Chikoy, a remote village in Chita region.

"SUPERZVEZDA"* An American in Krasny Chikoy

Though I have been working here over a month already, two things thus far have failed to happen: people haven't stopped staring, and I haven't gotten used to it. One of my colleagues used the term "superstar" about my mysterious and powerful presence in the town, during my first week on the job, and for the most part it still applies. But I am not the first foreigner to live in Chikoy. Several years ago a teacher was brought here from England by a different program, and every summer a group of archaeologists from Europe and America visits a nearby site. This is not to suggest that I haven't made any friends who accept the fact of my nationality and proceed to get to know me on a personal level, but let's just say they are the exceptions to the rule. The all-absorbing topic of conversation favored by most of my acquaintances has been prices and salaries. How much does a kilo of meat cost in the US? What are an average teacher's wages? How much is a house? A car? A cow? What did you earn for your work? How much did you pay for your education? All information is public here.

I received a royal red-carpet welcome. I rode around in the director's Volga for the first week, seeing the sites and meeting people. The first night there was a rich banquet with the administration and foreign-language faculty: VIP only. Workers carried hot water for me daily until the running water came on, and did my laundry for me. They offered me broad access to Banya on any day I felt like it. I lived in the campus hotel for the first month, then moved to the brand-new cottage they had built for me, also on campus, with running water, a western-style toilet, central heating, and a bathtub. The TV and couch are on the way. The director bought slippers and soap for me and brought me all the food products I required, free of charge. On my birthday he bought me a watch and gave me a hug. Four different people baked cakes for me. I often receive gifts of homegrown produce, milk, cheese, jam and honey. My classroom has 15 computers in it. I have nothing to complain about.

I have met wonderfully open and accepting people, eager to go out of their way to help me out. Everyone is primarily concerned with my health,

safety and comfort. The weather and scenery is quite remarkable as well. K r a s n y Chikoy sits in the valley of the Chikoy river, and is surrounded



by birch, pine, and larch-covered mountains. Most days are sunny and fine, though we have had three snowfalls already, and it has been pretty cold since October 10. The stars are breathtaking; last night was a full moon. Before it got cold, I went on several excursions with various school groups into the forest, where we would invariably make soup and tea over an open fire and play a variation of volleyball called "cabbage."

The school here - Vocational Lyceum No. 22 - is a complex, which includes a kindergarten, elementary and high schools, and the equivalent of an American community college or technical school. I work with two groups of first year teachers-in-training, who had English lessons in high school already, each for six hours per week. Some of them will eventually be English teachers too. The aim in the region is for all students to have English lessons beginning in the second grade, but there is a lack of eligible teachers at present. This is the first year such a program will be implemented at this school. I am working with one of the local English teachers to establish a curriculum, etc. I also give optional courses to several different groups, including a conversation hour for the other teachers to exercise their English. Recently, I've been helping prepare an open lesson, to be given during a big conference that's happening here. Our theme is "Bridge Over the Ocean," reflecting, incidentally, SIB's aims of intercultural and interpersonal exchange through foreign language study. Soon I will begin a weekly hour with little 5th graders, where we'll sing American songs, read stories and that kind of thing.

They presumed from the former name of this organization, Musical Bridges, that I am musically gifted, which isn't especially true, as the music teacher soon discovered when he had to accompany me on the accordion. All the same, I've regularly been called on to sing at gala events. Usually I sing a Russian gypsy song called "The Long Road," which seemed an appropriate choice when they first invited me up, considering the 50 hour journey I had recently completed. They all love it, and my tonal confidence is improving rapidly. It's a very musical place, Russia, and especially Krasny Chikoy, it seems to me. N.S. Borodin, the director of the Lyceum, at 68, has the strongest voice I've heard so far in my life. I'm thinking about trying out for the chorus. In general I am anything but bored and lonely here, and I would be hard-pressed to report something negative. Chikoy is a truly remarkable little place I've managed to end up in. I say how thankful I am for this every day. I feel as though I've been blessed, in all honesty. But then again, winter is only just beginning! I'll get back to you when it's over with, six months from now.

*Russian for "superstar".

From behind the scene...

You may not know it, but none of our programs in Chita would have been possible without energy and enthusiasm of Michael Shipley, our "American Russian" (Russian American?) in Chita who for years has been SIB only in-country staff.

Michael grew up in Riverside, California and holds a BFA in Screenwriting from the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television. After graduating in 1987, he travelled the States, and his curious nature eventually led him to hook up with a group of youth visiting Siberia, where he met his future wife, Irina. During his seven years there he has taught English, hosted radio and TV shows, worked as a freelance journalist and as an agent for study abroad. His wife, Irina, was born in Chita and teaches English at a local private school. She has visited the States a few times, and enjoys both the beaches of California and the rugged majesty of Siberia. Michael and Irina have two children: Zhenya, 8, and Katya, 5.



The Shipley family in front of the Russian Grammar School where Irina teaches English and Zhenya attends second grade.

Michael sends us this message:

It has been very rewarding working for Siberian Intercultural Bridges for the last few months. The best part of this job, without a doubt, is meeting the teachers as they come through Chita on their way to their posts. I feel a little like an army field officer sending fresh recruits to the front. Already it has been interesting to see how a few short months of teaching in a remote location has elicited such positive reactions from some teachers. It only confirms what I've always felt about this part of the world-the physical conveniences are sometimes a bit lacking, but the friendships, good will and interesting experiences are never in short supply.

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In 2002 SIB programs would have been impossible without generous support of our recent donors:

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Please, support our cause with donations! By pledging your support you are helping us bridge America and Russia and truly make the world a much better place!

Please, send your contributions to:

SIB, Inc.
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If you or someone you know would like to teach in Siberia or visit the region, please contact Tatyana Puchtova at puchkovt@kirtland.edu