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**Размышляя о судьбах планеты, начни со своего дома.
Think globally, act locally.**

SPRING 2017 NEWSLETTER

Table of Contents

Page 2: Cover letter by Janet Stewart

Page 3: Spring Update

Page 4-5: Children's Home Report

Page 6-7: Profile of Kevin Brondum

Page 8-9: A Summer in Chita

Page 10: Donors, May 2016 – April 2017

Page 11: About SB and how to donate

Page 12: Poem by Slava Vyunov, Zabaikalyan poet



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A NOTE from Janet Stewart, new member of the Siberian Bridges Board:

I started studying Russian during my freshman year of college. I'll never forget the first day of class. Our instructor entered the room with a huge smile and started exclaiming, "Vsem Zdravstvujte! Zdravstvujte, moi studenty!" ("Hello everyone! Hello, my students!"). On her arm was a basket of fresh oranges, which she generously offered to everyone in the room, while continuing to produce sounds, which I had never heard before and that I had no hope of ever replicating.

Fast-forward about seven years. I'm sitting behind a desk in the University of Minnesota's study abroad office, advising students on visa procedures so that their journeys abroad can begin. Pinned to the wall in front of me are some of my favorite photographs from my recent adventures: a standard tourist picture taken in front of St. Basil's in Moscow, a group shot with Russian friends while sailing along the Volga river, a landscape of a camping site in Vladimir, and a photo of my lovely host mother in Kazakhstan cooking up a delicious pot of *plov*. As I was gazing nostalgically at these photographs, daydreaming of hypothetical future adventures, a coworker forwarded me an email from Irene Duranczyk, a professor at the U and one of the board members of Siberian Bridges. She was seeking graduate students interested in participating in an intercultural exchange as an English teacher in the Zabaikalye region for the summer. With my background in Russian language, and interests in teaching English, and international education, I couldn't say no to an opportunity so perfectly tailored to me!

During an initial meeting with SB's President, Tom Dickinson, I was amazed to have stumbled upon a Minneapolis-based organization with relationships and initiatives in a remote region of Russia. The organization's mission of fostering understanding and cooperation between the people of Eastern Siberia and the US is no slight task, but one requiring a great deal of time and dedication. While I haven't been involved with the organization for very long, it is clear to me that the 25 years of work that Siberian Bridges has dedicated to its mission has been fruitful and rewarding for both sides.

Much like how I felt about reproducing Russian sounds seven years ago, there were times during my trip when coming to an intercultural understanding seemed far from my reach. But all it takes is for one little girl to crawl up onto the bench next to you, say "Priviet!" (hello!) and hand you an orange to remind you that the effort is worth it.

Upon my return to the US from a truly unforgettable adventure in Chita last summer, I knew that Siberian Bridges was something I needed to stay involved with. I have been working with the board on some ever since and we have some upcoming projects about which I am very excited.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet Stewart".

Janet Stewart

SPRING 2017 UPDATE

Tom Dickinson reporting

- We welcome new board member **Janet Stewart**, and you can read about our other new (sub-AARP-age!) board member, **Kevin Brondum**, profiled in this newsletter. Janet has accepted the title Web Content Meister to make sure our beautiful new website stays current and informative.
- We have a new website. The address is the same: siberianbridges.org It is slowly being made current. There is a nice gallery of photos from the Children's Center in Petrovsk, and we hope to have many galleries and new posts.
- **Irene Duranczyk, Janet Stewart and Elena Pishcherskaya** in Chita are in the preliminary stages of setting up a global video conference on International Students Day, November 17 (due to timezones, the US side will conference on Nov 16). It will involve the University of Minnesota (UMN), Zabaikalsky State University (ZabGU), the Econ and Law Institute (branch of Irkutsk State University) and, hopefully, a Chinese university as well. Can't say much more yet, except that UMN and the Econ and Law Institute are enthusiastically on board.
- **The Taste of Zabaikalye Tour** is postponed to 2018, but it is SURE to happen then. We have a committed core group of six who will put their schedules together this fall to set the dates (the timing of it has been the stopper in the past). Any and all are welcome to join us. **Board members, Chuck, Irene (ex-officio) and I** are going, and another of the tourists was an SB English teacher in 1999!
- I'll be visiting Chita for two and a half months, leaving very soon. More on this elsewhere in this newsletter.



Elena's 2nd child, Sasha, is now 18 months old, and already studying the English dictionary!



New Year's show at the Children's Home

CHILDREN'S HOME REPORT

Chuck Ritchie reporting

As I was going back through many of the pictures that Andrei Yerofimov has sent us over the years from the Children's Home (now called "Unity" Children's Center), I was struck by the number of different children in front of audiences, sometimes with a microphone in hand, performing for guests, or celebrating the New Year, International Women's Day (March 8th), or participating in a city event or some regional or even international competition.



The significance of this observation is twofold. First is the commitment of the staff to afford the children these many opportunities to perform. That the children do so with such self-confidence, poise, and enthusiasm, speaks to the dedication of both staff and the children themselves. Music and dance become a medium not only for self-expression, but also for confidence building and self-esteem, commodities often in short supply for children in such circumstances.

Secondly, the level of achievement is truly remarkable. The most recent success stories from the Home are Anna (16) and her sister Zoya (12) Chizhkova, and Vitaly Tolochkin (10), all of whom have achieved region-wide fame through their participation—and successes—in the televised

children's competition "You Are Super" aired nationally on the Russian network NTV (see our website to watch Anna's and Zoya's performances). These kids are amazing, and what they have experienced is nothing short of a miracle, given their circumstances.

At the Center, however, music and dance are not the only mediums. You see children blossom in sports, in crafts, in leadership roles through their student organization "Raduga" (Rainbow), in volunteer work that the children do for veterans and the aged, of their town and even in the communal projects of the Home, such as planting and harvesting much of the food they eat.

We at Siberian Bridges are in awe of the way that Natalya and her staff find ways to empower these children and provide them some chance to make the most of, and try to go beyond, the hands they have been dealt to become good, productive citizens.



What makes all of this so impressive is how they do it on such limited resources. At a time when budgets are being cut, there is a constant challenge to provide enough nutritious food, school supplies, craft materials, sports equipment, computers, and, sadly, at times even salaries.

Siberian Bridges has and will continue to help supplement some of these things in a small way, but in the final analysis we cannot match the most important resource they have: the dedicated and inspirational staff (aided by a growing band of volunteers) who give their hearts to these children. This is what moves us to support the "Unity" Children's Center of Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky.

MEET KEVIN BRONDUM

by Chuck Ritchie

We are delighted to introduce to you Kevin Brondum, one of our two recent additions to the Board. Kevin not only represents youthfulness on the Board, but he also brings with him a notable background and interest in politics and international affairs. His undergraduate work was done at Oberlin where he earned a BA in Politics and in Russian and East European Studies; he then went on to do his graduate work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, achieving an MA degree in Politics.

Of particular note for our organization is Kevin's experience in Russia, working as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language at the University of the Humanities and Social Sciences in St. Petersburg, as well as the Siberian Academy of Public Administration in Novosibirsk. While in Novosibirsk he also volunteered his time at the Novosibirsk Regional Universal Research Library, giving lectures on American culture and English-language literature, and serving as an advisor to Russian students seeking study abroad opportunities in the US. At the time of the 2011 parliamentary elections in Russia, Kevin was working as a volunteer for the Fund for Democracy in Washington, DC, doing statistical analysis of the election results, looking for evidence of fraud.

His language and research skills are not limited just to Russia, however, as he also speaks Spanish and has done major research in Mexico City, conducting interviews with legislators and other officials on federal policy and distribution of public funds in Mexico.

Kevin started studying Russian in college mainly out of curiosity, but one of his professors took note of his language ability and encouraged him to study abroad in Russia. As he became more immersed in the culture he realized that despite the seeming trappings of Western European culture on the surface, Russian culture represents something quite different. He developed a deeper interest in wanting to know how people think differently than he does. He has come to the conviction we have much to learn from other cultures, and the more contact we have, the less suspicion there is and the greater the chances for mutual understanding.

I asked him what he loved about Russia, and I enjoyed his answers very much:

- *Russians' patience is endless. Americans moan about a simple trip to the DMV. The red tape Russians have to face on a daily basis seems so much worse. The process you have to go through in Russia to get access to a library book or renew your ID (and you're expected to*



carry more forms of ID there) seems to require a stamp on every document, a signature from two different offices, and so on. At most, they sigh or shrug, but they just accept it and never complain.

- *I love that you can travel in an open train car for days on end, chatting with your neighbors, sleeping on your seat like a bunk, eating the cheap noodles you brought with you and drinking tea out of a glass in a pewter podstakannik. I love the birch forests, the Altai Mountains, the high steppes north of Mongolia, the beautiful center of Saint Petersburg, and the hustle in Moscow.*
- *I love Russian literature. I got my first picture of Russia before I even spoke any Russian, from reading Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and a little Tolstoy in translation. After learning Russian, I read Pushkin, Turgenev, Lermontov and other stuff that's much better in the original and hard to translate, and I read some post-revolutionary and contemporary stuff: Babel, Bulgakov, Strugatsky, Zamyatin, Sorokin. I love Russian books for the simple reason that they're good reads. But besides that, what's unique about Russian lit is what's unique about the country: At its best it matches or surpasses anything in the West. At the same time, the reason it stands out in Europe as a whole is that it's trying to adapt to change and modernity despite a set of hierarchies, institutions, attitudes and values that were outmoded generations ago in the West. In Russia, the social problems are bigger, starker, and more insurmountable, which is why the people dealing with them have to be so capable, resilient, patient, and resourceful. (That's a big part of why all cultures can and should try to learn from each other. Some countries ARE, frankly, better organized, more peaceful, more prosperous, and better adapted to the modern world than Russia. But up against the same problems Russians have to deal with routinely, I think a lot of Westerners would be at a loss.)*

Kevin lives in Minneapolis and currently works as a Loan Servicing Specialist for Wells Fargo.

A SUMMER IN CHITA

Tom Dickinson reporting

I'm looking forward to spending most of this summer in Chita. I've wanted to do this for a long time. One of my happiest summers (in a long list of happy summers) was the one I spent in 1995 as SB's first teacher to Chita. I loved the slow pace and mild dry weather with long, long hours of sunlight and my gracious friends.

And I remember especially going mushrooming in August! We were hunting "Pod Beriozovik" mushrooms that are the only ones at the foot of white birch trees, hence the name—very easy to identify! It meant long slow strolling through sun-dappled birch woods whose white columns were shielded by a green leafy ceiling, the smells and air, spotting friends from long distances across this natural "interior" space. The days ended with a banya, a dip in Lake Arakhlei and feast of sautéed mushrooms with a bottle of conviviality.

There will also be work!

- I'll be teaching at City of Children where Marie taught, and at the Diplomat Language School where John and Janet taught.
- There will be a visit to the Children's Center in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky. I hope to play a little recital in that town's music school again.
- And I know that Natalia Petrenko is trying to arrange a long wished for meeting with her fellow village school English teachers to find out what they really want so we can try to supplement their teaching materials beyond the handful of books we've provided so far.
- I'll be visiting with Michael and Irina Shipley to learn more firsthand about the volunteering they do with the Children's Center in Chernovsky, 30 minutes outside Chita.
- Elena Pishcherskaya and I will work on details of a first time video conference on International Students Day, November 17, 2107. Irene Duranczyk, ex officio on SB's Board and professor at the University of Minnesota (UMN) heads up the US side and Janet Stewart will be helping. It'll be between institutions in Chita, UMN, and possibly



Tanya Sukhanova with some of her 2015 mushroom haul

a Chinese university. The origins of International Students Day are in student activism, and what better action than building amicable relationships for a peaceful future!

- I'll also be available to other ways of "contact and cooperation" (I'd still like to find a way to assist in the restoration of some village memorials to the Decembrists exiled to the region in the early 19th century, those models of moral agency to us all.)

I will also work on a personal project with local historian Alexey Solovyov about the history of our Soviet allies at the end of World War II who—I recently learned— massed their forces in Zabaikalye coming to the aid of the US forces battling Japan. And Olga Fleshler will be teaching me Russian. Finally, I might become a good neighbor language-wise!

So if I'm dutiful, you will be able to read updates at our revamped website across the summer, and you can always contact me with questions and curiosity at the SB email address.



Taste of Zabaikalye tourists visiting Chita's Decembrist Museum in 2014



Chita in September: looking west across Lenin Square at a military headquarters building with the new (2005) cathedral behind and the hills beyond.

DONORS, MAY 2016 – APRIL 2017

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ПОЕМ

by Vyacheslav Vyunov,
Zabaikalyan poet



Slava Vyunov with his wife Natasha at their home

ЗА ГРИБАМИ

Стихотворение
ВЮНОВА Вячеслава Александровича

Острее чувствуешь с годами
И проще думаешь, притом.
Мы за последними грибами
Чуть свет с товарищем идём.

Мы ждём паром у перевоза.
И проступают деревья.
Полупрозрачная берёза
В тумане светится едва.

И грани нет определённой,
И не узнаешь никогда,
Где берег кончился наклонный,
Где начинается вода.

Одно в другое переходит,
Одно становится другим -
Вода, деревья, трап у сходен
И мы с товарищем моим.

И мы уже не ронимаем,
Зачем мы здесь в рассветный час.
Мы растворяемся в тумане,
И он пронизывает нас.

И, чувствуя, как это важно,
Мы рядом держимся – вдвоём,
Мы тоже как бы часть пейзажа,
Как бы кусты или паром.

Так вот что тщательно скрывала
Природа,
И на чём стоит:
Из одного материала
Всё в этой жизни состоит!

OUT FOR MUSHROOMS

by Vyacheslav Vyunov, translation by Chuck Ritchie

With age we feel more keenly,
And we think more simply as well.
At the crack of dawn, my friend and I,
Set out to find the last morel.

We stand, waiting for the ferry.
The trees are barely seen.
The half-translucent birch
Hardly shimmers in the mist.

There is no well-defined border,
You never know just where,
The sloping bank comes to an end,
Where the water starts to dare.

One into another merges,
One becomes the other -
The water, the trees, the loading plank,
My friend and I.

We have no understanding,
Why so early we are here.
We dissolve into the haze
And it chills us to the bone.

Feeling it important,
To the other we hold on,
We too a part of this landscape,
Like the bushes or the ferry.

So this is the secret
Nature so carefully hides,
And on it she firmly stands:
Everything in this life
Comes from the same source!