



SPRING 2018 NEWSLETTER ONLINE VERSION
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SPRING 2018 UPDATE

- **Irina Shipley** submits semi-annual reports about the deeply committed volunteer work she and her husband Michael do for young men who've just left one Children's Home near Chita. Read one of those reports [here](#). It really gives a feeling for the day to day concerns and the hurdles these parentless boys face.

- The second article is by SB board member **Kevin Brondum** about an examination of the US economy by students in eChita that included direct personal input from Americans. It is the first follow-up to last November's Tri-Country Video Conference.

- There is also a profile of another impressive graduate of the Children's Home in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky, **Tanya Kolodeznikova**, written by Board Chair, Chuck Ritchie.

- And last, but not least, the long-awaited tour to the region is finally taking place this August. *See a few more tour photos toward the end of the newsletter.* Look for postings by the tourists at our website in the 2nd half of August. It will be an historic tour, too, because it includes four of the six board members of Siberian Bridges, a quorum! Board Members **Chuck Ritchie, Judy Boudreau, Irene Duranczyk (ex-officio) and I** will be joined by Irene's partner, **Tom Lonergan** and world traveler and recent friend of ours, **Virginia Redgrave**. Afterwards, Irene and Tom will continue on to Harbin, China where Irene will give a presentation and work on the *Second Annual* Tri-Country Video Conference coming up in November!



We'll visit local poet Slava Vyunov, seen here with his charcoal heated samovars, at his rustic home near Lake Ivan.

Tom Dickinson, President

Spring Report from Irina Shipley

For the past several years Michael and Irina have volunteered to help [mostly] boys who have "graduated" from the Chernovsky Children's Home, 30 minutes outside Chita. They requested help from SB two years ago.

We are still helping 10-11 kids. Three of the boys have been most responsive and ready to accept our support and advice. Those three, Vitya, Lyosha, Andrei Yashnov, plus a new boy, Afanasy (*ah-fuh-NA-see*), a friend of Vitya's, are going to school, trying to pass exams and do other things which help them develop. Lyosha is taking piano lessons (paid by Siberian Bridges) and he is making a very good progress! He also reads quite a bit, including on the Kindle you sent, which he was surprised and happy to receive. And he goes to the gym regularly. Vitya and Lyosha are both studying English partly with the help of an Internet site and partly with me and Michael. So they come by regularly. When they study English on the computer, I try to see what they are studying so we can practice it later.

Unfortunately, as mentioned in previous letters, some are less successful. We keep trying to helping those who lose direction and start having problems. I cannot say what the result will be and if they will gain enough strength to develop good habits and strong character, but we are trying. There were two instances of that in the last couple of months.

Anton had real troubles and was nearly expelled from trade school for skipping class. We invited him to stay with us. During this time, he started going to classes again, passed his exams, and was able to continue his studies. However, when he went back to the dormitory he again started missing classes. We are still trying to support him whenever he is available. In the end he has to decide, but we feel everybody at this age (late teens) has the right to some "parental" advice and support, which these kids have been deprived of across their whole childhoods.

A second boy, Edik (both of these guys are smart and very nice boys), was expelled from trade school last summer for poor attendance and failing exams. In September, he started studying in another school but didn't manage again, and we didn't see him for a couple of months. Then he reappeared and came to us for advice. We went over several options, like army, work and so on. He decided to try trade school one more time. I went to the school and spoke on his behalf because I felt he was growing up and thinking about his life and it was ok to help him try again. We'll see. But he is in school now and not on the street. Keep in mind that it is quite difficult to find a job in Chita.



Lyosha, one of Irina and Michael's "boys" practices the Shipley's piano

There are some boys who maybe feel there is no place for them in the society, some lack discipline or determination. Some of them have graduated and can't find a job, some of them didn't want to study and now have no jobs or a place to stay. And so on. A few of those often show up at our apartment. We offer them something to eat, ask around about jobs. They use our Internet connection to look for jobs, I talk to them, try to encourage them not to give up or just listen to them, which is important.



2016: Lonya, Edik and Anton

I realize that there are thousands of such kids running in the city and that we can't help all of them. But we are at least trying to help these few and hopefully it will produce results. And we already see it with the ones I mentioned at the beginning of this letter. With them, there is definite hope that they will become contributing members of society.

We are grateful for Siberian Bridges' support. We contribute ourselves, too, but we couldn't manage without you.

We even get calls from the orphanage with requests. It has asked for money to take kids into town and often it doesn't have it. We've helped with that. This month, a soccer team from the orphanage won a competition among orphanages and was sent to



At the lake in 2017, left to right: Vitya, Lyosha, Shipley's nephew, Michael and Irina, Artyom, Sergey, Tom, Katya Shipley

Vladivostok to compete at the regional level. We contributed to the cost of the necessary insurance for the trip.

This winter we presented three boys who are doing well with a ski vacation. I took them to Baikalsk (Michael had to stay home and work), a town where there is good skiing and they enjoyed it very much. They paid part of the price from the government stipend they get for their studies, and I added some from the Siberian Bridges fund. I felt that it is important for them to travel a little, get new experience. And simply have fun!

University Students in Chita Hear American Perspectives on the US Economy by Kevin Brondum, SB board member

In February, Siberian Bridges helped university students in Chita deepen their understanding of the US economy by asking Americans directly about their personal experiences living in it. As one of the Americans offering a perspective, this was a learning experience for me, too. I was fascinated to see what these Siberian students wanted to know about how our economy operates.

The project was the brainstorm of Elena Nikolaevna Pishcherskaya (*nih-kuh-LAH-yev-nah pih-SHARE-skuh-yuh*), teacher of English at the Chita Institute of Baikal State University and longtime friend of SB. Her students, enrolled in a special course on the US economy, prepared presentations on topics chosen under her guidance. They identified five broad topics: social programs, income inequality, foreign trade, *The American Dream*, and *Manifest Destiny*. As required research they viewed the State of the Union addresses of Barack Obama in 2016 and Donald Trump in 2018.

A Facebook group was set up, and Siberian Bridges board members were invited to join the conversation there. Irene Duranczyk, professor of education at the University of Minnesota and ex-officio board member, worked to involve the Chita students' counterparts studying at UMN. The presentations were posted on Facebook, along with questions to foster discussion. Elena Nikolaevna also scheduled video conference calls during the students' class time for anyone here to join in a live give-and-take. (As always, the fourteen-hour time difference between Chita and the Twin Cities limited, but did not preclude, such face-to-face contact.)

I volunteered to comment on all five topics chosen by the students as did Tom Dickinson. At first, I was unsure what to expect. I wondered, for instance, what Russian students could have wanted to know about *Manifest Destiny*? It seemed like an archaic concept that had lost any relevance for US politics and economics more than a century ago. And the topic "social programs" was quite broad. It was unclear what the focus of discussion would be until the students posted their essays on Facebook.

Once the essays were posted, however, a lively discussion arose in the comments section. Among the American participants, what stood out in particular was a certain ambivalence about foreign trade. While no one advocated isolationism or protectionism, some comments expressed unease about conditions for workers hired by American companies abroad, and other potentially adverse consequences of American businesses operating largely outside American jurisdiction. The discussion ended before the students had a chance to respond to these comments, but it would be interesting to see whether these attitudes were what they expected, and how they felt about the same issue regarding their own country and multinational corporations.

It became clear that by “social programs,” the students meant our country’s social safety net, especially Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and the Affordable Care Act. During one of the video conference sessions with Elena’s class, I had the chance to explain how the Affordable Care Act had enabled me to keep health insurance coverage when I was unemployed. At that session, it also emerged that “Manifest Destiny,” meant something broader to the students: the expansionism, imperialism, and projection of power by the United States over the last two centuries. They were interested in whether Americans believed an American empire existed (speaking for myself, “yes”) and whether Americans supported strengthening or expanding it (my answer was “no,” especially American influence abroad via coercion rather than cooperation or aid).

The most fascinating topic, however, was *The American Dream*. One of their essays suggested that it had changed over time, but another American participant and I expressed a similar response: *The American Dream* had always been, for better or worse, about upward economic mobility—the kind of mobility described by the phrase “rags to riches.” After these comments, one of the students contacted me personally on Facebook to ask me to elaborate. We chatted, comparing American and Russian experiences of upward mobility. I suggested that, while *The American Dream* as a concept had not changed, people’s enthusiasm about it and willingness to take it seriously had probably deteriorated, and politicians were probably evoking it less often now than they used to. For example, Obama only mentioned *The American Dream* in his State of the Union Address when referring to veterans. She responded that she thought the benefits the Russian state offered for military service sometimes incentivize young men to enlist when it would be better for them not to. It was fascinating to learn this perspective of a student from Chita, and it also gave us a point of comparison, shedding light on something Russians and Americans have in common.

We applaud Elena Pishcherskaya! She pioneered this use of relatively low tech and free online resources so her students could learn through direct contact with us, and use primary sources from the other side of the globe. We hope to pursue similar collaborations at the soonest opportunity. This inspired me, especially the chance to help young people from a wholly different culture critically examine concepts central to our own self-understanding like *The American Dream*. I hope that the same curiosity about us evinced by these students in Chita develops here in the US about Russian culture, direction and aspirations. Siberian Bridges enthusiastically supports such contact and aims to involve as many people as possible from all parts of society in such crucial cross-cultural discussion.

MEET TANYA KOLODEZNIKOVA! **by Chuck Ritchie, SB board chair**

Meet Tatyana Kolodeznikova (kuh-luh-dez-NEE-kuh-vuh), a 2017 graduate of the Children's Home "Unity" in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky. At age 11, Tanya and her little brother came to the Center when her mother in Tanya's words "did not live a very good life" and her stepfather was unable to cope. Although she cried at first, she soon had no regrets as she became quite involved in her studies and the activities of the program.

Upon arrival in the assembly hall the music specialist casually asked her whether she knew how to sing. "Sort of," she replied, and thus began her musical training which has afforded her

considerable success in local and international

competitions. She chanced upon the gym one day where they were playing volleyball and basketball, and she expressed a desire to play; soccer also attracted her in the same way, the result of which was the chance to participate in competitions in several sports, winning first place on several occasions. She even decided to learn how to shoot an air rifle and trained for shooting competitions. In fact, she took first place in the city competition for girls. Dance was also a part of her life at the Home, something she did for her own enjoyment and for the Center. Perhaps her most telling involvement was her election to the Student Council "Rainbow," a very high honor bestowed by her peers. That she served as President speaks highly of her character and commitment to both her peers and to the Home itself. She recognizes very clearly the skills and experiences that the Home has afforded her and is very grateful for her experience there.



What one senses very quickly with Tanya is composure and self-confidence, which have allowed her to adapt to difficult circumstances with a positive attitude. She does well at whatever she sets her mind to doing, yet she tempers her successes with a very becoming modesty. When asked what her dream might be, she replied, “At this point, I don’t really know what I want, but I have set myself the goal of finishing my studies and then little by little achieving some accomplishments through good effort.”

Now 17 years old, Tanya is studying at the Railroad College in Ulan-Ude in the Services department. She is yet another wonderful success story in the work of Natalia Skliarova and her committed staff at the Children’s Home. By the way, Tanya is the proud older sister of Vitaly Tolochkin (his stage name), the 2nd place winner last year of the nationally televised children’s singing competition, *Ты Супер!* (“You’re Super!”) whom we talked about in our 2017 newsletters. A talented and impressive family!



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Tour 2018: Victor and Elena's dacha where we'll spend a relaxing day noshing and having a banya (Russian bath).



Tour 2018: Chita city viewed from the mountain to the east, Visakagorye



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