

Siberian Bridges



FALL 2019 NEWSLETTER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- page 2 Cover letter by Isabella Saldana Haworth, Volunteer
- page 3-10 Spring Update: *Children's Home, Olga and Elena's visit, Shipley project, Tour to Siberia, Children's tour to Minneapolis*
- page 11-12 Profile: Alexandra Koullick, SB volunteer



Siberian Bridges

3212 18th Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55407

siberianbridges@gmail.com www.siberianbridges.org

DONATION INFORMATION:

- To donate with a credit card, go to siberianbridges.org and click the [DONATE](#) link under "About".
- Write checks to "Siberian Bridges" and mail to the address listed here.
- Siberian Bridges is a 501c3 non-profit registered in Minnesota. Donations are 100% tax-deductible.

Message from Isabella Saldana Haworth, Siberian Bridges Volunteer

I am often asked to explain my passion for Russian culture. As a high school senior, I surprise people by discussing the intricacies of the Russian language, the best Soviet rock bands, or my awesome volunteering position at Siberian Bridges.

In 10th grade, I decided to write a paper on the Russian classical composer Dmitri Shostakovich. I had so much fun that I enrolled the following September in Beginner's Russian at the University of Minnesota, where I study through a dual enrollment program. Starting Russian class was so exciting that I labeled everything in the house with sticky notes showing their names in Russian as a way to learn the Cyrillic alphabet! Luckily, Russian class did not disappoint me. I especially loved singing folk songs and conversing with my new friends.

Russian class was so enjoyable that I then joined a Russian folk dancing group with the Russian Cultural Center. That was when my family realized the depth of my interest, and my aunt discovered the Facebook event for Siberian Bridges' Tusovka last December, which I attended with her. I was expecting to have fun, but was surprised to find also a beautiful community of like-minded people who then offered me a fantastic volunteering opportunity.

I have now been volunteering with Siberian Bridges for six months, helping out wherever I can, including being on the committee planning for the visit in the fall of 2020 by a group of young children learning English. I have met some great people (and cats!--the monthly meetings are at Tom's house, and he has two very sweet cats) who have all helped me develop a deeper purpose for learning Russian language and culture: to build my own understanding of the Zabaikalye culture so that I can spread empathy and respect.

And with the support of Siberian Bridges, I just learned I will be taking the first big step of my new purpose. This summer, I will travel to Chita to teach English at a summer camp! I am beyond excited, and cannot wait to share my adventure!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Isabella Saldana Haworth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'I' and 'S'.

FALL 2019 UPDATE

Chuck Ritchie, Irene Duranczyk, Tom Dickinson, Janet Stewart and Irina Shipley reporting...

- **News from the Children’s Center “Unity” in Petrovsk-Zabaikalsky** arrived this fall in the form of a slide presentation of over thirty different activities in which the children have participated since the beginning of the year. Some of the events were celebrations of national holidays such as Woman’s Day (March 8), Maslenitsa (Shrovetide), Victory Day (May 9), and the Day of the City. During these the children were involved in parades in the town, they performed, and they did art work and crafts to commemorate these occasions. There were other celebrations



such as the Day of the Teacher, Senior Citizen Day, Knowledge Day, and others. There were also activities about Fire Prevention, Say No to Drugs, Self-Government, and then others that committed the children to service projects such as town clean-up, work around the Center, and growing food for the Center. There were sports competitions, a local beauty contest, and regional competitions of different kinds. They also created their own version of “KVN” (Club of Funny and Inventive People). KVN is a long-standing humor show and competition on TV—begun back in the time of the Soviet Union—where teams, usually college students, compete by giving comic answers to questions and performing prepared sketches. The children’s own KVN demonstrates the creativity and imaginative play that **Natalya Skliarova**, the Center’s Director, and her staff are developing in these

children. In short there is a myriad of activities, and one wonders how she and the talented staff can possibly muster the energy to do all of this! What underlies these efforts is the desire to afford these children a chance to develop skills and talents, and to expose them to the outside world as much as possible to prepare them for the challenges they'll face when they leave the Center. It is not just the breadth of the activities, it is their quality and the achievements that ensue that are equally impressive. *(Chuck reporting)*

- **Olga Fleshler and Elena Pishcherskaia** are in the US as this is being written (Dec 1) and will be guests of honor at our 2nd annual "Tusovka" dinner party/fundraiser on Dec 15th. They presented a paper in Nov at the annual ASEEES convention on "The Russian Orthodox Mission in the US in the 19th Century", their second time presenting (first in 2014). *(Tom reporting)*



- **Irina Shipley just gave us an update on their work helping orphans** in and graduated from centers near Chita. As a special to the online version of our newsletter, her entire email is copied here (“...” in lieu of paragraphs): *Dear friends, I am sorry, I haven't been writing. I want to give you an update for the last 6 months! Everything is going really well. We keep doing all the same things we did all the time. Now we are in contact with 11 youth, with 7 of them very close. ...Let's begin with Lyosha. As many of you know, he started his service in the army two weeks ago. He is serving in Ulan-Ude. He is doing fine so far. He is not allowed to use the phone on a regular basis, but they give it to him in the evening and he calls when he can. Before he left to the army he continued studying English and made significant progress, He also, as I mentioned before, studied to get his driving license. Unfortunately he didn't manage to get the license yet. The exam consists of three parts, he passed two of them and didn't pass the third. He really tried but they make it unnecessarily difficult here (as with many things in Russia). Anyway, this has to be finished after he comes back. ...Next is Vitya. There are a lot of questions with him still. He is still "with us", what I mean, he is not lost. He studies, comes regularly to visit. But the main problem is he can't figure out where he is going. He has no particular plan and we are trying to help him get an idea what he would like to do with himself in terms of profession but didn't yet. And Vitya has a passive side to him*



A big party of orphanage youth at the Shipley's to send Lyosha off to the Army. (Lyosha is 2nd from R in the back.) The sign reads (in English!) "You're in the army now!"

and it is difficult for him to get motivated. So we continue with him! ...One "victory" we can share is connected with Anton. He is from the original group of kids, who came together with Vitya and Lyosha. And he seemed very promising from the very beginning. But then he had troubles with his studies at college despite having very high intelligence. The problem was with his discipline. He played computer games and missed classes. This has been going on for two years. And then suddenly about

three months ago he stopped by and Michael had a talk with him about his studies and his abilities and that he could, if he wanted, get higher education. And he got excited. Probably it was the right time and he was ready to hear that. So the result is he went back to study at college and now we see a completely changed approach! He doesn't miss any classes, does all homework, does extra work. He comes to us every day after studies and does homework, play the piano and so on. He studies computer programming. We are very happy about it because he is really smart. And his character is very positive and pleasant. ...Ilya and Sergei come every day. They started their studies at the vocational school. Sergei is a very quiet guy but every day opens up more and more. Ilya is just amazing. Very energetic, studies English with the program I have on the computer and reads books which is just great. ...Vanya, Ilya's younger brother, is becoming a little more difficult to handle lately. Might be just the age thing. He transferred from the orphanage in town to one



A summer 2019 weekend expedition for some of the boys.

in the region, he still can get into town but with difficulties and we can't really drive there often. So he started leaving the orphanage without permission, spending the nights at some relatives in town. We are trying to have some talks with him about obeying but he is not very open at the moment. But he still comes over and spends time at our place on Sundays. ...Andrey is continuing with his studies, works and in general is doing well. When we had a goodbye meeting for Lyosha, there were about ten guys at our place and Andrey was very appreciative, mentioning that they probably wouldn't have been able to maintain such close relationships with each other if we hadn't offered our home for them to get together from time to time. It was

nice and reassuring. ...I just wanted to mention that we are taking 4 guys to Moscow next week, because there was a great sale on the tickets for youth and they were able to buy tickets. These are the guys who are really trying this year (Anton, Sergey, Ilya and Andrey) so we decided to use SB money to help with housing and some other expenses of the trip because we feel they deserved it. ...In general I will try to send the financial report soon but I will only mention now that this year we spent more money on food because the boys are at our place almost every day, then we help them with transportation, and had some birthdays and outings in the woods.

- **Our 3rd Taste of Zabaikalye tour is taking place August 1–15, 2020.** It will feature Russian English learners from Chita joining us Americans for an intimate tour of Lake Baikal and notable scenic and historical places in Zabaikalye. Places are still available for this unique and very reasonably priced tour. Contact us for more info. *(Tom reporting)*
- **The 3rd annual International Students Day video conference** was held Nov. 12-13 (evening of the 12th in St Paul, morning of the 13th in Chita and Shenyang). It brought together students from **The Chita Institute of Baikal State University in Chita, Russia, Shenyang University of Technology in Shenyang, China, and the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Minnesota.** During the conference students made researched presentations on the education systems of their home countries, shared entertaining cultural quizzes, and engaged in lively questioning and friendly conversation for nearly three hours. The event was collaboratively designed by **Professors**



SB Chair Chuck Ritchie moderates the conference in St Paul with the UMN students in front and guests in back. Chita and Shenyang groups can be seen on the screen in the back.



Shenyang group on left, Chita group on right.

Irene Duranczyk (St Paul, USA) Elena Pishcherskaia (Chita, RU) and Chuhan Wang (Shenyang, CN) and their students. It was moderated by **Siberian Bridges Chair Chuck Ritchie.** Also in attendance were other Siberian Bridges Board members and a student

from Macalester College in St. Paul, MN. For the first time, the University of Minnesota students were all freshmen enrolled in a new undergraduate class designed to explore an international approach to their education, a course that was itself developed based on experiences from the previous two conferences and other collaborations with Prof. Pishcherskaia and her students. The conference achieved ongoing relationships between college-age students in the three countries with the promise to continue the annual event and explore other avenues to promote international education. *(Irene reporting)*

- **Young English learners of Chita to visit the Twin Cities in Fall 2020.**

Siberian Bridges is excitedly planning to host a group of about twelve children between the ages of 11 and 17, all English students at **City of Childhood** (see **profile of its founder-director, Elena Prusakova, in this newsletter**). They will come to the Twin Cities for a 10-day visit in Fall 2020. The aim of the visit is



City of Childhood English Language summer camp 2019 with Elena Prusakova on the left and Tom Dickinson on the right. Many of these kids will come in Fall 2020. This is one of the camps where Isabella will teach next summer.

educational - both linguistically and culturally. The ten days luckily include Halloween! Throughout the visit, the kids will experience American culture through home stays, visiting Minnesotan landmarks, and as many interactions with Twin Cities kids as possible. We hope our visitors will gain insight into US culture, while also teaching their US peers about their own customs and culture. We are still in the beginning phases of planning—strategizing, contacting schools, finding sponsors (free tickets to a Minnesota Wild game would be fantastic!), etc. We could not be

more thrilled about this upcoming intercultural exchange! And if you have ideas for the visit, let us know! *(Committee Chair Janet reporting)*

- **Isabella Saldana Haworth will teach in Chita next summer!**

We just learned that one of our Siberian Bridges high school volunteers, Isabella, has been accepted by **City of Childhood** to teach this summer at their summer camps in Chita next June and July.

(Our other beloved high school volunteer, **Alexandra Koullick**, is immersed in college applications and exams from

which we look forward to her emerging unscathed in January!) Isabella will live with **Elena Prusakova**. Isabella and Alexandra both graduate in May—a bit of a bummer for us here at SB to see them leave! Read Isabella's cover letter to this newsletter. *(Tom reporting)*



Isabella on the right with SB board members Janet Stewart and Kevin Brondum

PROFILE
ELENA PRUSAKOVA



By Tom Dickinson

I first met **Elena Prusakova** in 2015 when invited to help pass out diplomas at the "graduation" of her "City of Childhood" after-school program's beginning English students, all aged between 7-11. It was very impressive. With their parents watching from the side, the children first gave a demonstration lesson with their teachers, held entirely in English, and then they put on little plays in English based on story books in their course, Chicken Licken and Stone Soup. After that we passed out the certificates for achievement. The next summer, Siberian Bridges provided a native speaker for their three-week summer program, **Marie Nicholas** of Minneapolis, and I took over for Marie in 2017 and taught again this past summer. The success of the students, the hard work they put in, and their

enjoyment of it all at these camps is due to the vision and leadership of Ms Prusakova, and her devoted and intelligent team of teachers and staff.

Prusakova, a former Social Studies teacher and Assistant Principal, left public school teaching due to health issues, but then earned two masters degrees in general and clinical psychology while she started her own private educational project focusing on child development and parenting support: **City of Childhood Child Development Center**. Begun in 2011 with 38 students and a staff of one, it now has 400 students, a staff of 17 and three locations around Chita. Offerings include school readiness, speech therapy, fine arts, dance, math and English and counseling. There are students as young as one year old with their mothers, and at five, children can begin English, the Center's single largest offering with 250 students enrolled (so popular that they now offer adult English classes, too.) Learning English is very popular in Chita, and The City of Childhood's school-year and summer camp programs have become the premier private programs in the last few years.

This past summer City of Childhood proposed a very exciting project: bring a group of young English learners to the United States for some on-the-ground language practice, and Siberian Bridges is thrilled by the project--a very big one for us. Read about this in the "Update" section of this newsletter.

On a personal note, having enjoyed Elena and her staff, two things impress me. Though Elena is a strong and imaginative leader, the staff is clearly empowered to speak and act on

their own initiative--it is really a team effort. And she is a terrific story-teller! In fact, one big reason I want my Russian to improve is to know why she has everyone cracking up all the time! And of course, she actually does have a life outside of The City of Childhood. Her husband Sergey works for the region's energy department as a supervisor and they have two grown sons, Kirill, working in Novosibirsk, and Maxim, an economics student at a new branch of Moscow State University in Shenzhen, China.