

# ROOF-tops



Newsletter of the Russian Orphan Opportunity Fund

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PROVIDING EDUCATION AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORPHANED YOUTH IN RUSSIA

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## English Clubs and Partnerships Spark Interest

Several of our orphanages now have an "English Club" as part of their ROOF programme. This type of more informal setting enables ROOF's students to gain experience with native English speakers and helps to widen our visibility among the group of expatriates in Moscow. The students probably benefit just as much from the exposure to a variety of people and cultures as from the actual language skills they learn as they strive to communicate. The groups generally meet and discuss a theme or work together on a specific project over tea and snacks. The relaxed atmosphere stresses the vitality and practicality of learning a language by removing it from a strictly classroom framework.

Orphanage No.50, in the north of Moscow near metro Polezhaevskaya, also has this kind of relaxed

group which meets regularly to work on English. In addition to their Club on Tuesdays, Galina Aleksandrovna, ROOF's head teacher at orphanage No.50, has formed an alliance with one of the American schools in Moscow. The school started making regular trips to the orphanage but found that the kids were having trouble talking and relating to one another at first. Some of the visitors felt they were intruding a bit on the orphanage kids' territory and didn't quite know how to go about starting up conversation. This first problem was solved by reversing the situation and inviting the students to come as guests to the American School.

In addition, there was a significant language barrier. The Russian kids knew little English and many of the kids from the American school didn't know much

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## A Range of Volunteer Possibilities with ROOF

We often get emails asking us if we have places for volunteers, and of course the answer is that we do. Because the question seems to come up so frequently we thought it might be interesting to give some ideas in this month's newsletter. Here are a few of the ways in which volunteers can help.

If you are based in Moscow - you can help us with a real need for evening baby-sitters. Some of our Post-Orphanage students have trouble finding anyone to watch their children and therefore cannot attend all of our evening classes. These students are dedicated and hard-working but their responsibilities to their children are adding stumbling blocks to their education. Another need here in Moscow is for volunteers for our various English clubs. A couple of our orphanages have English language clubs where we always have a need for native-speakers. (For a more in-depth explanation of this particular idea, please see the article based upon the English clubs in orphanage No.50 and the Post-Orphanage Education Centre in this edition of the newsletter.)

There are also projects that offer more hands-on, intense volunteer opportunities. Most of these are in the summer-time. One of our main projects during the summer is the Porkhov summer camp. You can get a rough idea of what this is from our web site, specifically at: <http://www.roofnet.org/progs/camp-en.html>. This is a very hands-on opportunity to work with kids in a psycho-neurologi-

cal orphanage. Last year several volunteers came out with us, seven of whom were from abroad.

Porkhov offers a chance to become completely immersed in a project and help a group of kids who really need it. The enormous positive results we received last summer have caused everyone involved to look forward to opening the camp again. This year's camp will be from 9 July to 31 July. Along similar lines we are still looking at other camp ideas and exchanges between various orphanages for the summer. We would like all of our students in Moscow to get out of the city for a while and enjoy the countryside in the summer. Hopefully we will find even more people to help us during the summer, as this season often avails many volunteers with more free time and ROOF has a more flexible schedule.

If you want to help and are based abroad there is also a range of chances. Of course, we can always use help with fundraising and publicity from any location. Just simply by word of mouth we have found various opportunities for our students and a whole range of support. Along these lines, we are also looking into various links with schools or camps for possible future exchanges. While this is looking further into the future it would be a great opportunity for both ROOF students and students abroad.

We have come up with a few of the most obvious ways that volunteers can help us but are interested in any other ideas as well. The

skills and resources that go into running ROOF are very diverse. Even knowledge of Russian is not always a pre-requisite for volunteering with us. If you have some specific knowledge or experience that you think would be particularly helpful for our teachers or students and you have some extra time, we would be very interested in hearing about it from you. **RT**



Children enjoying last summer's camp in Porkhov.

## English Clubs continued...

Russian. The teachers decided to try games and sports with the kids in order to remove the importance of a common language. This worked amazingly well and now kids from orphanage No.50 visit the American School once a week to play sports and get to know the kids there. An additional bonus stemming from the sports-centred activity is that more boys are interested. Initially it was quite difficult to get them inspired enough to make the effort of attending meetings but now the split is about fifty-fifty between boys and girls.

This group and the other English clubs report that the orphanages are very willing to work with them and



An English lesson at orphanage No.50.

## Sharing of Ideas Surprises Staff in Orphanage No.6

A two-day seminar held at Orphanage No.6 lent interesting insight into attitudes of the orphanage staff. The seminar was attended by the director of the orphanage, nine of its house-parents, and a few other staff members of other orphanages where ROOF works. The focus of the weekend was not in giving information but in opening up discussion for the orphanage staff. This may not seem a novel idea on the surface but viewing the reactions of the participants gives pause for thought.

Most interesting was the way this was viewed by those who took part. In the beginning there were several more people in attendance than there were at the end, because almost everyone who came to the seminar was expecting to be told "how to better work in an orphanage." They arrived with notebooks in hand to be given the answers to all the problems they had been seeing with the children. In actuality the seminar had not been set up with this aim in mind and upon learning this several people left.

This gathering of people was meant to initiate dialog between house-parents and staff so that they will go on to discuss their observations and problems with each other. The administration know that they can improve the quality of their work by listening to the perspective of the house-parents, and hope that the latter group will see the value in such an exchange of information and perspectives. The idea of the training was to make everybody peers for a weekend, because ideas coming from one's peers are auto-

very cooperative. They plan on continuing their plans into next year and further, as long as everything stays as positive as it is now. Usually the activities draw a base of students who attend each week and get to know one another well. They form relationships with the volunteers and count on seeing them regularly, not only in an academic capacity but in a social one as well.

In addition to the clubs that take place in the orphanages themselves, we have a Saturday English club that is made up of students who attend our Post-Orphanage Education Centre. The volunteers for this club change more frequently, generally rotating through four or five "regulars." This turn-over has both positive and negative effects on the students. On the one hand, it means the students cannot get completely comfortable with some of the volunteers, as they sometimes don't get past the initial butterflies-in-the-stomach nerves. On the other hand, this mix of people provides for a forever changing, interesting flow of topics and the variety that a visitor would really find in another country.

In any event, the students enjoy the club and find it helpful, as one can tell by the number of people who turn up consistently on Saturdays for a few hours of English. Whether discussing geography, traditions, the news, or any other topic there is rarely very much silence. This seems to be a general rule for ROOF's English groups, which becomes clear when one sees the numbers of talkative children who frequent. **RT**

matically listened to from a different angle than those coming from either an outsider or from further up in the chain of command.

Initial reaction to the seminar's structure and goals was not positive. Volunteers had been especially brought in to watch the children and allow the house-parents to attend. Even so, those taking part initially felt that this type of discussion would really only be a waste of their time. There was also the problem that most of the people were from the same work team. There would be no ability to complain about problems and remain anonymous because most of the people work so closely together. Because of these reasons several of those who initially came to the seminar on the first day did not return on the second. However, the twelve who stayed to attend both sessions (out of seventeen original participants) reported only positive impressions by the end.

The director of Orphanage No.6 was very open and honest during the seminar and willing to share her personal experiences. This automatically improved the tone to one where everyone was on the same side, working for the same cause, with support from all directions. By the second half of the second day everyone was much more openly sharing their opinions and ideas on improving the situation for both the staff and children.

The meeting began to tap the creative problem-solving abilities each individual possesses for an open

## The Roots of ROOF

Encouragingly, the situation seems to be gradually improving for Non-Governmental Organizations in Russia. Attitudes are changing in favour of charity organizations as people become more informed about the problems around them and ways to solve those problems. The number of people who want to help ROOF or want to begin their own charity is growing.

Several individuals and organisations have requested more information about how ROOF was formed and grew into its present shape, so that they might replicate ROOF's work in different regions of Russia. In response to this we are planning to hold a seminar on the topic sometime in May. In this way we will have a better opportunity to gather the information that we have found helpful in the last three years and pass it on to various new people.

If you know of anyone interested in attending this type of informational seminar please feel free to contact us. **RT**

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discussion about the best paths to take to reach a decision or change. In the very end the volunteers brought the kids into the room and invited them to stand near their favourite teachers. Everyone in the room ended up with children around them, again demonstrating that the people who had stayed for the full seminar and found it useful were the same people who are already working hard to improve conditions for these children. **RT**

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