



September 10, 2011

This year's summer program in Russia was a huge success! In only two weeks, we managed to work with even more kids and do more activities than during any previous program (and I'm more physically and emotionally exhausted than usual to prove it!).

After 24 hours of airports and airplanes followed by a seven hour bus ride, we arrived in Kostroma with four large suitcases, two small suitcases, and two backpacks. Five of the six suitcases were filled with donated clothing for the kids living in the foster families and in the orphanages. We transported almost 250 pounds of suitcases to a community center on the other side of town where the foster families could meet us. Over the course of two days, we spent several hours with almost a dozen families coming by. There was not a single article of clothing left, and we saw the kids throughout our stay wearing these clothes and the clothing we brought last year.



Unlike previous years, we did not stay at one of the orphanages since many of the kids were either at government run camps or working at those camps. Although at first we saw this as a problem, we realized that it

would actually allow us to work with more kids and different groups; whereas in previous years, we spent most of the time with the kids at the orphanage where we were staying. This gave us the opportunity to work with kids from three orphanages, over a half dozen foster families, and a handful of orphanage graduates.



This year, we focused a great deal of our time working with orphans living in

foster families. The Russian government is attempting to eliminate orphanages. Initially, they gave kids to anyone who wanted one just to get them out of the orphanages. You can imagine the problems and

abuse that resulted. Most of those kids were brought back into the orphanage system, and they've started with a new model where they identify potential foster parents who actually have the skills and desire to work with these kids. Many of these foster parents are older, their biological children have grown up, and they are able to handle the issues involved in raising kids who have been institutionalized and often abused. Our friend, Tatiana, actually oversees 58 foster kids as the orphanage social

worker, which is how we got involved with these families. These families generally consist of two foster parents and up to 12 kids. We actually visited the home of one foster family that has two parents, 16 kids (foster and biological), and a giant dog! Essentially, they are replacing orphanages with large foster homes. Although I initially thought this was yet another poorly designed model, after working with them and discussing it with Tatiana, I could not be more impressed! The kids are very different from kids living in the orphanages. They are receiving love and attention, they seem quite happy, and they see themselves as part of a family (unlike the U.S. foster care program, which is really just a temporary placement until the child can be adopted, the Russian program actually removes them from the adoption list allowing them the stability of being with one family).

Since our big event this summer was a short trip to the Black Sea with three foster families, we thought it would be helpful to get to know these families before the trip. We spent an entire day with them at an amusement park, eating lunch at McDonald's, bowling, playing in an arcade, and eating ice cream. We were then invited



to visit their village, which nobody told us was an hour away. After a long, hot, and bumpy ride packed in a little bus like sardines, we poured out of the bus in one sweaty mob. We visited each family's home, getting just a glimpse of their daily lives. As we went from house to house, our entourage continued to

grow. As we walked to the river to swim to cool off, it looked as though a parade was now moving through the center of the village! It was quite interesting to visit a small village since I had spent much of my time the last few years in the city, and I had almost forgotten how dramatic the difference is between life in Kostroma and life in the villages.

The children from Volzsky, the orphanage where we stayed in 2008 and 2009, were all at a government run camp. Since it was not too far from Kostroma, the orphanage director offered to arrange for the kids to come back to Kostroma for the day as long as we took them for the entire

day. Of course, we accepted! Little did we realize that their choice of activities would be the same as the kids from the first set of foster families, so we spent the entire day again at the amusement park, McDonald's (the manager the previous day was wide eyed when we ordered 21 Happy Meals, so you can imagine her surprise when we ordered 23 this time!), bowling, the arcade, and eating ice cream. We managed to return them to the bus station to catch their bus with only minutes to spare. Most of the kids who lived at the orphanage in 2009 had either graduated or had been placed in foster families, so we only knew one of the kids from previous trips. But within minutes, it was as though we had been friends for years! We love that about the kids in the orphanages, but we also realize that it shows how desperate they are for love and attention.

With little sleep (an 8 time zone change along with it not getting dark during the summer that far north) and feeling ill (two times to McDonald's too many!), Tatiana insisted that we relax for the rest of the night at her family's small cottage. We visit there each year, which gives us a chance to not only spend time with Tatiana and her family but also to meet many new people who generally become involved in helping us both during the



stay and in the future. It also gave us time to come up with a plan for feeding and entertaining the foster kids during their train ride to the Black Sea the next day.

The three foster families and Tatiana then started their 38 hour train ride (yes, 38 hours!) to the Black Sea, while we spent the day with another set of kids from other foster families in Kostroma. We took them to see the newly released Harry Potter movie, bowling (Russian's love to bowl!), pizza, and ice cream.

The kids from the orphanage in Chentsy were

scattered among many different camps since they are all now teenagers and able to work. So it was impossible for us to see them all, but the orphanage director offered to arrange for us to see some of them. We met in town and spent the day with them, catching up on their lives and their future plans

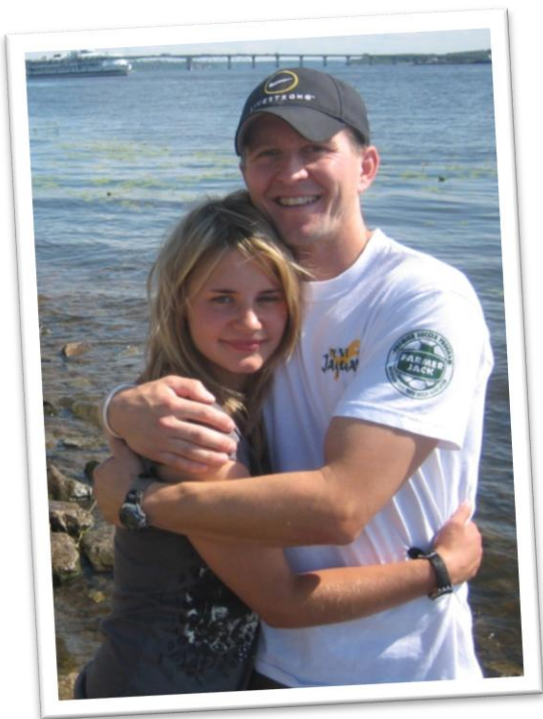


while hanging out by the river and stopping by a café. They all intend to continue their educations at technical schools in the fall, and we know the orphanage director will stay on them even though they will no longer be her responsibility. She's the only director I've heard refer to them as "her" kids rather than "these" kids.

We then took an 11 hour train overnight to Moscow with Ira, our translator/chaperone. After taking the metro, and another train, we flew to the Black Sea to meet up with the newly arrived foster families for a 5 day stay. Our group consisted of 19 people—three foster moms, nine foster kids, two orphanage graduates, Tatiana, Danil (Tatiana's son who is also our translator), Tom, Ira, and me. We also had five others plan their trip at the same time—the biological daughter and grandson of one of the foster moms, a woman that works at the Volzsky orphanage who offered to come to help with the

kids (remarkably, she managed to save a child [not one of ours!] from drowning one evening while she was walking down by the sea!), and two of Danil's friends who had also helped us throughout the week with the foster kids and orphans! It was like a rock band with groupies following us halfway across the country!

The kids had never even dreamed of being able to take a trip like this, and they had never seen a body of



water larger than the river that cuts through their village. So you can imagine their excitement when they arrived at the Black Sea, with water and beach as far as the eye could see. They especially loved the waves, which were so big one day that they wouldn't let anyone swim.



Our days were pretty predictable, revolving around the beach. After breakfast at 8:30, we would go to the beach until lunch at 1:00, then back to the beach until dinner at 6:00. The kids were like fish! They couldn't get enough of the beach and offered not to eat if that meant they could stay longer.

We took a bus tour and visited a World War II museum the day the waves were too big. The town where we stayed was a major battlefield of the war since the largest seaport on the Black Sea is located there. This gave the kids a chance to see more of the city and learn more about Russian history.

We also took them to a giant water park. The night before, I asked the foster moms if the kids were excited. One replied, "They are very excited, even though they have no idea what a water park is!" This is a pretty common experience for me in Russia, realizing that things we take for granted are amazing and new to these kids. They absolutely loved it, even more than spending all day in the Black Sea.



The foster families returned to Kostroma by train while Tom and I flew to Moscow to catch our morning flight back to the U.S. We had to get from one airport to our hotel at another airport on the other side of Moscow, which required us to fly, take a train, the metro, then another train, and walk, which was quite exciting for us since we had to do so without our translator who returned directly to Kostroma. I am quite proud to say that not only did we manage to get to the hotel on our own, I even managed to order us two waters and two ice creams from a woman that thought my grasp of the Russian language and hand gestures were quite comical!

As I look to begin planning for the future of the program, we are fortunate to have the orphanage director from Volzsky begging for us to return their next summer, and the foster families say they are counting the days until our return. In order to take advantage of all the opportunities and to simplify both the coordination and the funding, we've taken the summer program, the post-orphanage program, and the foster family program and wrapped them into one program called the Kostroma Kids Program. It is due to the continued generosity of our donors that we are able to continue and to expand our programs to reach more and more kids each year. **And for your continued generosity, caring, and support, I thank you!**

Together, we are *making a difference, one orphanage and one orphan at a time...*

Best regards,

Jody Payne

Director, Kostroma Kids Program
Ascent Russian Orphan Aid Foundation
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