

A Brief History of “The American Home”



American Home 20th Anniversary
July 4, 2012

The American Home was built to promote the development of mutually beneficial Russian-American relations.

As he watched the Soviet system collapse, Dr. Ronald (Ron) Pope decided that he did not want to stand on the sidelines giving interviews, lecturing, organizing educational tours, and writing articles. He wanted to get directly involved in the transition that needed to be made from a largely closed command system to what would hopefully ultimately become a stable pluralist system. To promote this goal, he incorporated Serendipity: Russian Consulting and Development Ltd in 1991 – now doing business as Serendipity-Russia (The American Home).

“Serendipity” was chosen because of the unexpected opportunities that were presenting themselves as Russia made major changes.

In addition to the contribution he hoped to be able to make at the grassroots level in Vladimir and the surrounding area, Dr. Pope was confident that his firsthand experience with events in the former Soviet Union could be used to enrich the classes he taught in the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, as well as give an added dimensions to whatever he had the time to produce for publication.

Dr. Pope had been hired by ISU in 1976 as a specialist on Soviet politics. He retired from teaching in 2009. Prior to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, he had traveled to the Soviet Union nine times. He subsequently made more than 40 additional trips to what is now the Russian Federation. Primarily for health reasons, he now “visits” via email and Skype.

In April 1989 Dr. Pope had acted as one of the interpreters for a visiting delegation from Vladimir, Russia that had come to the twin cities of Bloomington and Normal, Illinois to sign a Sister City agreement. The Russian delegation included the “First Secretary” of the Communist Party organization for the City of Vladimir -- which meant that he was among the community's de facto political elite. From this contact, Dr. Pope received an official invitation to observe Vladimir's first competitive local elections in March 1990. He returned that May to observe the newly elected “city council” in action. He also accepted invitations to present his views on the changes that Russia was undergoing in a variety of forums ranging from factories to universities – and he gave numerous interviews to both print and broadcast media in Vladimir.

In addition to observing firsthand the changes Russia was undergoing, he was able to conduct interviews of his own, and administer two public opinion surveys. At the same time, he remained on the lookout for ways to pursue the direct involvement he desired.

The Building of the "First American Home in Russia"

As a first step in the effort to promote cooperation between Americans and Russians after the collapse of the Communist Party's political control at the end of 1989, Dr. Pope arranged for a summer 1990 trip to Vladimir by two ISU agricultural faculty members, Dr. Randy Winter and Dr. Rick Whitacre, along with two area farmers. Dr. Whitacre, who had worked his way through college building houses with his father and brother, was particularly struck by the poor quality of the construction materials and work he saw in Russia. Dr. Whitacre suggested building a model American home as a demonstration project. Dr. Pope immediately recognized that this could prove to be exactly the type of project he was looking for. At the suggestion of Dr. Whitacre, he invited ISU Professor of Industrial Technology and energy-efficient construction specialist, Dr. Ed Francis, to get involved.

Dr. Francis was interested. He and IT Department Chair, Dr. Franzi Loepp, traveled to Vladimir in June 1991 for a first-hand look at the project's feasibility. Their report was favorable, and Dr. Pope and Dr. Francis began the search for volunteer builders and donated materials. Dr. Francis designed the home and persuaded eight ISU IT students plus members of the Bloomington-Normal Home Builders Association, led by Randy Raper, to participate, along with Rick Whitacre. They were joined by some additional Illinois volunteers, and two high-end audio specialists from California. (For the list of the contributors and participants, click [here](#).)

According to an article on the American Home project published in Bloomington-Normal's daily paper, the Pantagraph (June 6, 2008), Dr. Whitacre said that "he saw [the project] as building cross-culture relations. While it showed American construction techniques, it didn't demonstrate capitalism so much as the ability of Americans to pool resources for a project. It also built good will."

A number of obstacles were encountered along the way. These included the increasingly unreasonable demands for information on project details that were being made by the head of the of the City of Vladimir's new International Department, Igor Erameev. Mr. Erameev was supposed to be coordinating the project on the Russian side. He sent several telexes insisting that the American side had to provide "more information" -- but without specifying what specific information he "had to have." Finally he sent a telex stating that he needed to receive a list of everything required for the project, down to the nails, where these items were going to be obtained, and how much they were going to cost.

Erameev's demands were clearly excessive. By no stretch of the imagination was this detailed information needed in order for the house to be built. Dr. Pope decided to ignore the most recent telex until he could take the matter up directly with the Mayor during a trip to Vladimir that had been scheduled for the beginning of January.

Mr. Erameev appeared to be trying to kill the project. He was apparently afraid of the amount of work and responsibility it was going to entail -- along with the high probability that he would not be able to gain anything personally from the successful completion of the project.

Another significant problem was that due to the substantial inflation that resulted when the Yeltsin government decided to eliminate most price controls on consumer goods beginning January 1, 1992, the Vladimir City Administration was not going to be able to cover its agreed upon share of the costs on the Russian side.

At the January meeting Dr. Pope and Dr. Francis handed the Mayor a number of letters from participants in and supporters of the project which made it clear that Mr. Erameev was being unreasonable. The Mayor dealt with this problem by transferring responsibility for the project to the City's Deputy Mayor for construction, Valeri Siderov.

The Mayor gave permission for the project to go forward provided the financial support the City had initially agreed to provide could be obtained from another source -- which Dr. Pope indicated he would do his best to arrange. Ultimately, his father, Russell Pope, offered to provide the needed financing. (See below.)

Serendipity ended up investing more than \$125,000 in the American Home project; it cost the people of Vladimir nothing. In-kind contributions were received from more than 50 North American firms, volunteer builders, and Dr. Francis. ([Click here](#) for the list of contributors and participants.) Important assistance was provided by a number of Russians. As mentioned above, the project had the support of Vladimir Mayor Igor Shamov; the Deputy Mayor for construction, Valeri Siderov; and a number of other Russians. These included Slava Morozov who had been a member of the delegation that had signed the Sister City agreement three years earlier. He arranged for warehouse space for the building materials, for trucks to transport the materials to the building site, and for transportation from and to Moscow for the volunteer American builders. (Providing transportation was more of a challenge than might be assumed since gas for the vehicles was in exceedingly short supply. Fortunately, Slava Morozov proved to be a very effective “expediter.” Without his help, along with the assistance of a number of additional people on both sides of the ocean, the American Home could not have been built.

4th of July Dedication

Under construction



Mayor Igor Shamov speaking at the 4th of July dedication

The ground-breaking ceremony was held May 18, 1992, the same day that word was received that the first 40-foot container of building materials, which had been shipped from Florida, had arrived in Helsinki and was ready to be delivered by truck to Vladimir. By the time the container arrived, the excavation for the foundation and basement was well underway.

With the delivery of 4 more containers, work proceeded on schedule, and the American Home was officially dedicated July 4 as planned. The rapid completion of the work surprised many Russians. They were used to construction projects taking a number of years to complete—if they were finished at all. When one individual was told that work would begin in May and the home would be dedicated on the American Independence Day, he wanted to know, “July 4 of what year?” Another interesting anecdote: Russians who witnessed the construction of this “flimsy” wood-frame house were sure the occupants would freeze during the Russian winter. They were used to thick concrete or brick walls. There was a lack of knowledge of modern energy-efficient building materials and construction methods. Dr. Francis, one of whose specialties was energy efficient construction, made sure that the American Home would be warm and comfortable throughout the long Russian winter. [See [AH Facts](#)]

The 4th of July dedication was a gala affair with first-rate Russian performing groups, plenty of food and drink, a large contingent of local dignitaries—and very high hopes for the future.

The English Program



First day of class, September 1992



A class in the kitchen, 2009



Attic room – Building code restrictions ultimately limited its use for classes

In September 1992, Serendipity began offering English classes taught by three young Americans: Alison Kitzman, Sandi (Schneider) Wulf, and Christina (Tereze) Boywid. This program quickly grew from 70 to more than 350 students—close to Home's physical capacity at the time. Staffing expanded to employ eight and then nine full-time American teachers each year, plus two Russian Teacher Supervisors, both of whom have taught our Z1 class, that is, the first term of the beginning level course. From the beginning, the English program has been managed by Galina (Galya) Altonen. Dr. Pope had met Mrs. Altonen – and her husband Alexei – during his first trip to Vladimir in March 1990. He was impressed by their openness, and their desire to be involved in the changes that were taking place. At the same time, they were quite understandably unsure of what the future held. As a result, Galya did not officially quit her teaching position at a local school. For a number of months she held down two jobs.

After a fire at an overcrowded nightclub in another part of Russia resulted in a number of deaths, the Vladimir "Fire Marshal's" staff conducted a thorough inspection of the American Home in 2010, and reasonably determined that it was overcrowded and needed some "safety upgrades." Chief among these was the addition of a second exit from the basement and the moving of the furnace to a new ground-level room. The new stairwell was clearly needed. But it was not clear how the addition of a separate room for the furnace made the building safer. However, there was no sense in appealing the decision.

Even after these changes, the maximum allowed occupancy of the American Home was not enough to accommodate everyone who wanted to learn English from native speakers. But thanks to the leasing of space in nearby "business centers," the program was able to accommodate the more than 500 students who wanted to enroll each semester.



The American Home's First Teachers

L-R: Alison, Sandi, & Christina

The program's main attractions include energetic native speaking teachers from diverse backgrounds using a variety of carefully selected teaching materials – including fully customized textbooks. In addition, a major effort is made to make the learning process enjoyable. In this connection, not long after the English program was set up, the mother of one student told Dr. Pope that one day when her teenage daughter returned home after her regular classes clearly very tired, she told her that she would not have to attend her English class at the American Home that evening. The daughter immediately replied, "Oh but I *want* to go to the American Home!"

By January 2016 when we moved to 5 Fedoseevo St., more than 16,000 Vladimirites and people from the surrounding communities had participated in the classes taught out of the original American Home. These have included businessmen, educators, medical personnel, law enforcement officers, and others who had a special need to know English. The goal of the program was to help the students improve their ability to communicate with native speakers --

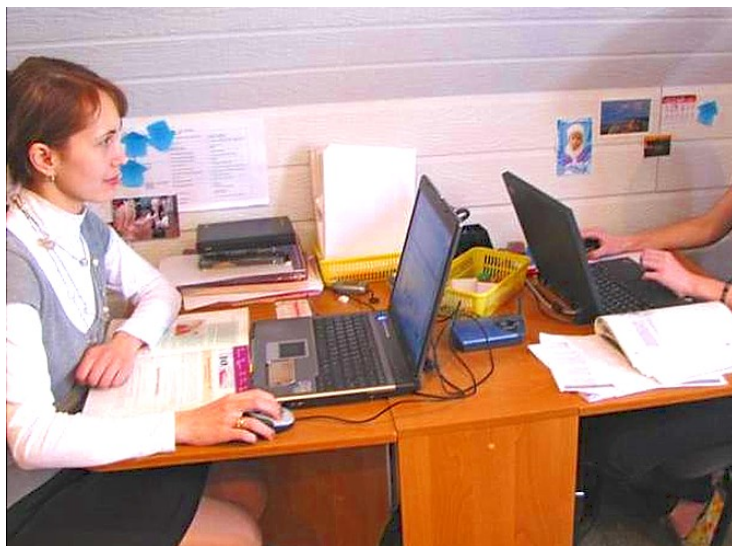
and other individuals who had a good command of English. In 1996 conversation classes were added, along with a special class – when there is sufficient demand – to prepare students to take the TOEFL exam (Test of English as a Foreign Language) required for admission by most American colleges and universities. Other specialized classes have also been taught, when there has been a teacher willing to take on the extra work (for extra pay) and sufficient enrollment.

The American teachers working in this program are recruited nationwide, there are now regularly more serious applicants than openings. In 1997 a Canadian teacher was hired. Then for several years we were restricted by Russian regulations to hiring only American citizens. We can now hire anyone who is eligible for a Russian work visa. However, we will retain our focus on employing energetic people who can teach American English.

In 2002 the secretary-receptionist at that time, Lena Belova, volunteered to start assisting the teachers – and to start organizing the teaching materials. Her efforts proved to be very helpful, so that in 2003 when she left for an extended maternity leave -- up to 18 months was mandated by Russian labor law -- she was replaced by Jenya Kislakova. When Lena came back to work in 2004, Jenya returned to her first love, teaching preschool children, something she has a special talent for. Lena was assigned to work full time with the teachers. She was joined in 2008 by another former secretary-receptionist, Olya Solovkina.

Both Lena and Olya had studied to teach English, and they were delighted to have the opportunity to put to use what they had learned from their Russian university educations that was applicable to the approach to second language acquisition that had been developed by the international English as a Foreign Language community. Lena and Olya immediately began to modify the available teaching materials based on what they were learning from their experience working at the American Home. (More on Lena and Olya below.)

Orientation for new teachers



Special Projects: Playgrounds & Basketball

From the beginning, an effort has always been made to do more with the resources that are available through the American Home than just teach English.

The first "special project" involved taking advantage of the space that was available in the last container of building materials to ship two donated sets of playground equipment. One set was installed at a boarding school for deaf children. The other set was installed at an orphanage.



Installation underway at the boarding school



Installation completed at the orphanage

The setup of the playground equipment at the K. Lubknekht Children's Home [orphanage] was completed in a few days [by workers provided by the American Home]. Strictly speaking, this is not the type of playground we are used to -- with [carved wooden] mushrooms, sand boxes, etc. Instead, it is an unusual configuration of slides and other things in bright red and yellow colors -- in contrast to typical Russian playground equipment which is predominately grey.

-T. Kuzina, "We Have Slid on a Little Slide," *Priziv*, November 4, 1993

For a translation of the complete article, [click here](#).

Also see, "[American Slides](#) Are Not Play Houses on Little Chicken Feet.

Additional Assistance

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought on shortages throughout Russian society -- especially in the area of extracurricular activities such as sports.



Vladimir State Pedagogical University basketball team with donated Western Michigan uniforms

With substantial help from the spousal team of the late Bob Kief (former Illinois State University Athletic Trainer) and Joyce Kief (ISU Physical Education Professor and women's track team head coach -- now retired), the first stage of our efforts to assist the basketball program in Vladimir involved the donation of uniforms and some inexpensive basketballs. The uniforms were provided by Western Michigan University (where former ISU basketball coach Bob Donewald was then coaching) and Illinois State University High School.

In 1996 we sponsored the first American Home "4th of July" Street Ball Tournament -- coinciding with the anniversary of the dedication of the American Home in 1992. The next tournament was held in 1998. From 2000 through 2009, the tournament was held every year on the Saturday before or after the Fourth of July. It was an invitation-only tournament for men's teams. (A special feature of the American Home tournament was that the teams didn't have to pay a participation fee. Tournament expenses were -- and still are -- covered by the American Home.)

In April 2000 we managed to get Illinois State University High School varsity head coach, Cal Hubbard and his wife Vivian, to Vladimir. In the previous



10 years Coach Hubbard's teams had advanced to the state finals seven times, winning the championship in 1995.

Coach Hubbard put on four days of very well attended clinics. In addition to his expertise, he brought a substantial number of good quality balls – which were still very difficult to find in Russia (and very expensive) – an electric pump, T-shirts, and other basketball items.

"I learned about Russian basketball and how they run their programs for high school-age students. In turn, I was able to share high school basketball as it is taught and played in the U.S. During the clinics, we were able to teach fundamentals, American-style, and how to adapt skills and philosophies to fit the game as it is played in Russia. Our entire visit was a great learning experience...." -Cal Hubbard

In June 2001 a senior Vladimir basketball coach, Alexander Vlasov, and an English-speaking student, Alexei Ananiev, who was studying to be a coach, traveled to Illinois to observe Coach Hubbard's spring clinics. They stayed with the Hubbards – and learned a great deal. In February 2002 Coach Vlasov put on a well attended one-day clinic in Vladimir drawing on Coach Hubbard's instructional approach. The demand for the clinic was so great that it had to be repeated in March.

In October 2002 a well received three-day clinic was organized by Coach Vlasov who was teaching at the Vladimir Juridical Institute and was coaching a young women's team.

In 2003 we were given four dozen smaller "girls" balls by the Illinois State University women's team. The balls had been given out during summer clinics -- and were left over after a coaching change.

It took more than two years to get all of the donated balls hand carried to Vladimir – where they were very much appreciated. (Among other places, the colorful balls were given to the Youth Colony (juvenile prison), a basketball summer camp (along with t-shirts and other "prizes" for their tournament), another summer camp, and several different schools.)



Alexander Vlasov, interpreter Nina Akimova, and Cal Hubbard, April 2000

(Nina was able to live with the Hubbards while participating in the Rotary Club's high school exchange program.)



In June 2005 a sixteen-year-old Vladimir basketball player, Roman Mekheikin, spent a month in Bloomington-Normal attending two of Coach Hubbard's clinics, as well as ISU and Illinois Wesleyan University clinics. He had a great experience -- and both of the host families he stayed with wanted him to return. This didn't work out. But he went on to play for one of the best university teams in the Vladimir area. They made it to the Russian national collegiate finals several times while Roman was a member of the team.

As noted above, in 1996 the American Home sponsored its first three-on-three Street Ball Tournament for men's teams. One of the major attractions of this invitation-only tournament was the prizes we were able to come up with. These included good quality "special design"

American basketballs that could not be found in Russia. Many of the prizes were donated. For example, a member of the 2005 "tourism development" tour group who was from Arizona donated several Phoenix Suns items, including some signed photos. (Donated prizes are always greatly appreciated!)



Men's slam-dunk competition circa 1996

Older girls and women's team tournament, 2013



In July 2009 we hosted our final men's Street Ball tournament. We now sponsor an August tournament for boys and girls. In September 2009 we cosponsored a Street Ball tournament for girls' teams with the City of Vladimir sports department and the Vladimir Regional Basketball Association. Ten teams participated, including one from the Moscow region -- which won the tournament. (In 2015 the young ladies representing Vladimir State University made up the first Vladimir team to win the tournament.)The tournament was well received by the players and coaches. It is now an annual event sponsored by The American Home.



Coach Vlasov giving instructions...

Some Significant Challenges and Changes



Andrei Koretsky in the AH garage

Prior to the August 1998 Russian economic crisis, some funds were contributed to the AH's budget by a remodeling business that operated out of the Home's garage and attic. This business was started in 1994 – as soon as decent quality building materials became available in Moscow. It was managed by the American Home's initial Russian Executive Director, Tatyana Veksler. The foreman was Andrei Koretsky. Andrei helped build the American Home, and he had made several trips to the US – e.g., in the fall of 1994 he worked for three months with Bloomington-Normal builder Doug Parker, one of the American volunteers who helped build the American Home.



Installing a suspended ceiling

In late 1995 it was discovered that Mrs. Veksler, who had become increasingly difficult to work with, had embezzled a large sum of money from the remodeling business – which she claimed she had started on her own. She specifically claimed that Dr. Pope had made no investment in this business. She ignored the fact that she was using the staff, facilities, resources, and "prestige" of the American Home to attract and keep track of clients, to store materials, etc. – and that her salary was being covered by funds earned by the English program.

Dr. Pope, who had already decided to not renew her contract for the coming year, immediately terminated Mrs. Veksler's employment when he found out about the embezzlement – but he was strongly advised by a number of Russians to not file a criminal complaint against Mrs. Veksler on the assumption that the former director's "connections" would enable her to avoid successful prosecution. Dr. Pope was informed that if she was not convicted, he would be responsible for all the back taxes on the embezzled funds – plus huge fines and penalties. Rumor had it that the Tax Police were already at work preparing the documents that would allow them to confiscate the Home and all of its contents. (Everyone agreed that the relevant Russian law was counterproductive.) However, as a matter of principle, Dr. Pope insisted that the theft be reported. He noted that not reporting a crime was itself a crime in the US -- and presumably also in Russia.

After considerable time and effort, a conviction was ultimately handed down February 11, 1998 – much to the surprise of most knowledgeable Russians and Americans who did not expect the Russian legal system to function professionally. (For a detailed account of this episode entitled "An Illinois Yankee in Tsar Yeltsin's Court: Justice in Russia," [click here.](#))

With the departure of Mrs. Veksler, Galya Altonen, who had been managing the English program from the beginning, took on the additional responsibility of managing the Home. Her husband, Alexei, took charge of "special projects." The latter includes everything the AH gets involved in that doesn't directly involve the Home's English program. (Alexei teaches English in the Foreign Languages Faculty at Vladimir State University. He holds a Candidate degree -- roughly the equivalent of an American PhD -- in English and Latin.)

This dynamic team, with the support of the rest of the AH's excellent Russian staff, continues to do an excellent job of overseeing Serendipity-Russia's affairs in Russia.

Some "Unforced" Management Changes

When the Home went into operation, Dr. Pope, with substantial help from his wife Susie, managed everything from the American side. Among other things, Susie set up and managed the website. She continues to provide substantial advice and assistance.



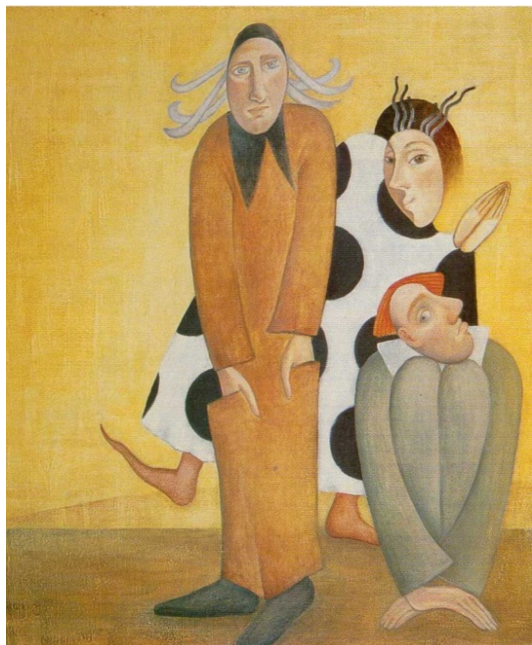
Galya Altonen - AH Director

Initially, Dr. Pope personally recruited and hired the teachers for the English program each year, recruited students for an intensive Russian program, recruited tour participants, and played a significant role in the "special projects." The latter included very successful Fulbright-sponsored trips for American social studies teachers in 2004, 2007, and 2008. Beginning in 2009, three former AH teachers joined the team and took on some significant responsibilities on the American side, while the Russian staff shouldered increased responsibilities on the Russian side. (See below.)

Back to the Chronology

Having survived the embezzlement trial, on July 4, 1997 the American Home celebrated its fifth Anniversary with the help of a 19-member "Sister Cities" group from central Illinois. They were joined for the Independence Day celebration by more than 100 Russians, including members of the Vladimir Partner Cities Association.

Actors, oil on Linen, Olga Gollman



Bell ringer, photo by Sergei Skuratov



From June 2 through August 2, 1998 a collection of paintings, photographs, and ceramics by Vladimir artists entitled "Sound of the Sun" was on exhibit at the Illinois State University Galleries. The collection was curated by Debra Risberg -- with substantial assistance from the AH staff. In January 2001 a part of the exhibit was mounted at the College of DuPage.

For a *Chicago Tribune* feature article on the DuPage exhibit, [click here](#).

Along the way assistance was provided to the excellent choral group, Amadeus, and the colorful work by members of a Vladimir quilt club was sold on ebay -- among other things.



Serendipity Russia
serendipity-russia

Serendipity-Russia is proud to present the Amadeus A-Capella Choir in preparation for their first U.S. tour.

Founded in 1991, the vocal ensemble Amadeus has performed to critical and audience acclaim throughout Russia and Europe. They have given concerts throughout the Vladimir region, and, among other places, in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, and Italy. They have not yet toured the United States, but they have regularly performed for small, but very appreciative American audiences at the American Home in Vladimir.

The group is a unique collection of soloists. This makes it possible for Amadeus to fully explore the potential of a wide variety of choral music and to present concerts of unparalleled variety, depth, and beauty.

In January 2001 the ensemble was among the 20 leading Russian choirs that were invited to participate in the 10th annual International Christmas Festival in St. Petersburg, Russia. (Christmas is celebrated by the Russian Orthodox Church on January 7.)

The ensemble also won the Grand Prix at the choir festival in Sarov, Russia in 2001.



Amadeus A-Capella Choir
Vladimir, Russia



The other remaining founding member of the group, alto Galina Shilova, teaches piano and choir at one of Vladimir's highly regarded special arts schools. Her children's choirs have won numerous prizes over the years, and she has toured widely as a soloist with the Vladimir Chamber Choir and with Amadeus. She is a graduate of the Vladimir Music College and the Moscow State Culture Institute.

Alto Natalya Krutitskaya is also the conductor of a prize-winning children's choir at a competing Vladimir arts school. She is Alexander Kovlegin's assistant. Natalya graduated in 1998 from the Vladimir State Pedagogical University with a degree in conducting.

The group's lead soprano, Natalya Kalynova, is also a graduate of the Vladimir State Pedagogical University. She teaches in the same children's music program at Galina Shilova where she is the conductor of the senior children's choir.

One of the newest members of the group, soprano Olesya Voroshilova, graduated from the Vladimir Pedagogical College with a degree in music and world arts and culture. She is currently a student at the Vladimir State Pedagogical University. She hopes to sing professionally.

Soprano Yuliana Simanenkova, Amadeus' newest female vocalist, graduated from Klitski Pedagogical College in 2000 and is continuing her study of music at the Pedagogical University in Vladimir.

The ensemble's lead tenor, Evgeny Raptsev, was a soloist in the boy's choir at the prestigious Choral Music Center of Vladimir-Suzdal Rus from which he graduated in 1999. He recently graduated from Vladimir State University with a degree in applied mathematics and is currently working in the University's research center.

Anyon Klimentko, the group's lead bass, graduated with honors from the Choral Music Center of Vladimir-Suzdal Rus. He has earned two degrees from Vladimir State University in 1999 and, most recently, from the Faculty of Chemistry and Ecology. He is now working on a graduate degree.

The newest male member of the group, bass Nikolai Polischuk, graduated from Klitski Pedagogical College in 2000 and is currently studying music education at the Vladimir State Pedagogical University.

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English language brochure produced for Amadeus
(For a larger readable copy, [click here](#).)



Sample quilt

In August 1998 Russia suffered a major financial meltdown. In the course of a few weeks the Russian ruble was devalued by 75 percent. Clearly tuition for the English program could not be abruptly increased to fully cover the drop in the value of the ruble. A major effort had to be made to economize. Both the Russians and Americans at the American Home, along with almost everyone else in Vladimir, had to adjust to a substantial decline in their real income. Fortunately, ways were found to keep the AH's doors open.



Russian language article on the attack on the American Home

(For an enlarged view, [click here](#); for an English translation of the article [click here](#).)

This financial blow was followed by a "physical attack." Early on the morning on December 18, 1998—while the US and Britain were bombing Russia's longtime ally, Iraq—so-called Russian "patriots" painted anti-American graffiti on the Home. The vandalism was widely condemned by the local media and by political leaders, as well as by the general public. The American Home received equally strong support when the same group of extremists broke the front windows shortly after NATO planes began bombing Serbia in March 1999--and a "city council" member demanded that the American Home be moved from the historic center of Vladimir to an outlying district.

Even though there was widespread opposition in Vladimir to the bombing, the excellent reputation the American Home had earned over the years kept it from becoming an acceptable target for expressing opposition to US government policy. To the contrary, as demonstrated by the public reaction to the successful 9/11/2001

terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, there was -- and we think still is -- substantial public respect for and empathy with American society -- if not always the US government.

When the staff arrived at the American Home the morning after the 9/11 attacks they found the front porch railing and the area in front of it covered with flowers and candles. This clearly heartfelt show of support helped the American teachers in particular to survive the emotional storm generated by the terrorist attack. For several years after the attack, on the anniversary of this tragic event more flowers and candles anonymously appeared.

Pope Family Visits

The end of June 1999, Russell Pope, who, as noted above, had provided the funding needed to cover all the costs for the American Home project beyond what was donated – more than \$125,000 – and his three children, Ron, Kathy, and Terry and their spouses, plus two of the grandchildren made what for most of them was their first trip to Russia. When the group stopped at the American Home on the way to their Vladimir Hotel, they noticed a sign in the front yard. It said, "House for Sale." This was of course a joke perpetrated by the Russian staff. Ron played along. He asked his father if he might like to buy a house in Russia – to which Russell replied, "I think I've already paid for this one."

The Pope family helped celebrate the 4th of July at the American Home, and visited a variety of places, including the orphanage the American Home had been assisting since 1993. Among other things, they gave each child a stuffed animal. The family also visited the Children's Hospital where they delivered some donated medical equipment and a local TV station. Russell Pope was a retired radio and television engineer.

The next year Russell returned with three more of the grandchildren and Ron and Susie. When Dr. Pope asked his father if he thought the substantial investment in the American Home had turned out to be worthwhile, the reply was: "Absolutely!" The elder Pope acknowledged that he was very impressed – and very pleased – with what was being accomplished through the American Home.



Visit to TV station



Orphanage visit

Beginning in March 2002, a twice-yearly e-mail newsletter was prepared especially for former teachers – there were more than 100 through 2014-15 – and others with a special interest in the American Home. The newsletter was also shared with AH students and Vladimir-area English teachers.

The last issue of the newsletter was put out in the spring of 2009. A replacement [blog](#) was begun the end of 2009 and a [Facebook page](#) was opened. Both of these were set up by former teacher, [Jane Keeler](#). Jane also updated the Serendipity-Russia website for which she is the webmaster.

To access the newsletter archive, [click here](#).

10th Anniversary

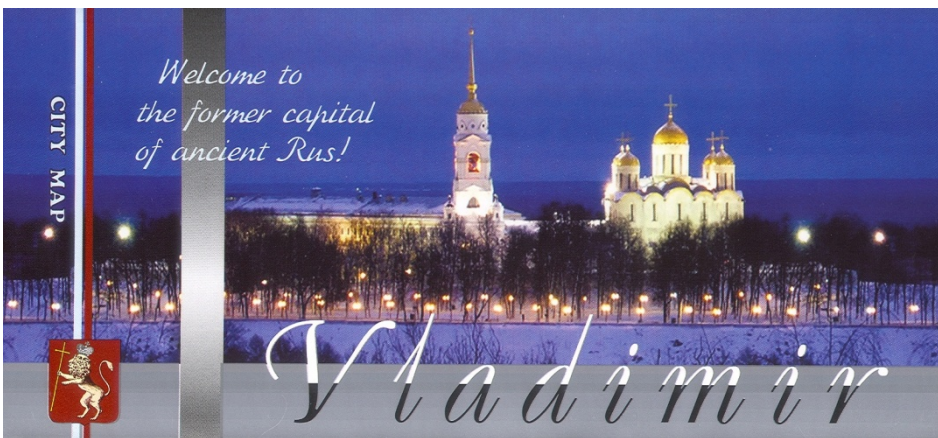
In 2002 the American Home marked its 10th anniversary. The rather extensive media coverage included an April 4 one-and-a-half-page article in Priziv, one of Vladimir's most prominent newspapers. The article noted that the goal of brokering commercial deals didn't work out thanks (in part) to repeated economic shocks in Russia, but that the Home was facilitating the development of useful connections between Russia and America.



Help with Tourism Development – and a Potential Future Project

In 2004, a major effort to assist both the City and the Oblast (region) with tourism development was initiated. This multi-year project was under the direction of Dr. Bruce Wicks, at that time a professor of tourism development at the University of Illinois. (Dr. Wicks is now retired. But he remains willing to provide additional assistance.) In addition to Dr. Wicks, substantial contributions were made to this project by Karen Hasara, a former Illinois state legislator; former Mayor of Springfield, Illinois; and as of this writing, a member of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees; and Katya Laksthanova, a native of Moscow and a University of Illinois tourism development Masters degree recipient.

The City tourist map (below); Karen Hasara (in the center of the photo on the right) with AH Director, Galya Altonen (on the right), and a City official.



Among the initial projects were a map for tourists in English and Russian, an English-language website – which we have taken down, a number of well-received workshops on tourism development topics, *A History of the Vladimir Region for Visitors* ([click here](#)), and a video walking tour of Vladimir ([click here](#)).

Also in 2004 an initial review was conducted of recreation needs in Vladimir by Dr. Marta Moorman (University of Nebraska at Kearney) and Dr. Barb Schlatter (Illinois State University). In their report they concluded that a good deal of work needed to be done to improve recreational opportunities for young people in particular. This remains true today. This is a project we would very much like to return to. (For an article on Dr. Schlatter and Dr. Moorman's evaluation of the situation, [click here](#).)

Our Remodeling Business

By 2003 it was clear that the remodeling business was becoming increasingly "complicated"—and significantly less profitable, thanks to growing competition. Plus, we needed more room for the English program. Our attorney, Valentina Spiridonova, helped Andrei Koretsky set up an independent construction firm—and he moved his equipment and building materials out of the American Home.

NOTE: When the American Home was built in 1992, not only did essentially all the building materials have to be imported, so did the builders. There were no construction workers in Vladimir capable of building an American-style house. Andrei Koretsky, however, was eager to learn, and he quickly developed the ability to do the type of remodeling work local banks and other Russian businesses wanted. This included especially the installation of wall paneling, suspended ceilings, and new lighting.

Fulbright Programs

In summer 2004 the American Home staff, led by the AH's Director of Special Projects, Alexei Altonen, and Dr. Pope made all the in-country arrangements for a very successful one-month trip to Russia for 14 American social studies teachers. This program was made possible by a Fulbright-Hays grant that had been obtained by the University of Illinois Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center – with major input from Dr. Pope and Alexei Altonen.



Alexei answering a question -- 2004 group



Lunch at the City Administration -- 2004 group



Scavenger Hunt, 2007



Some "role playing" at the 2008 4th of July celebration

A very popular lecturer, Prof. Percy Gurvitch



In 2007 the U. of I. Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center received a second Fulbright grant, and in 2008 a third Fulbright grant was awarded to the University of Chicago's Center for Russian and East European Studies. Once again, the American Home staff made all the in-country arrangements for both of these exceptionally successful programs. Funding for a 2009 program was ultimately not obtained—thanks to some classic bureaucratic distortion of the facts concerning an incident that had occurred during the previous year's Fulbright program. (Information on this incident can be provided on request – for appropriate use. A PowerPoint presentation with narration is available – also on request. It was prepared before the 2009 trip was canceled.

Ultimately, the loss of the Fulbright programs has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We have been able to put the time and energy these programs required to good use in our Alternative Spring Break program and our educational tours – often drawing on what we learned from our Fulbright experience.

Note on a Special Presenter

Prof. Percy Gurvitch, shown lecturing to the 2007 Fulbright group, was identified by all three Fulbright social studies teacher groups – and other groups – as a truly excellent presenter. One of the major factors contributing to the success of his presentations was that he had personally lived through everything he discussed. Prof. Gurvitch passed away on April 15, 2011. He is greatly missed by all who knew and respected him. We hope it will be possible to set up a memorial scholarship fund in his name. For a brief video edited together from some of Prof. Gurvitch's presentations at the American Home, [click here](#).

(The complete set of videotapes of Professor Gurvitch's lectures in English, along with substantial additional material -- in Russian -- can be made available to qualified researchers.)



Lecturing



A relaxed discussion in the living room of the American Home

Percy Gurvitch was always a strong supporter of the American Home. In the spirit with which he approached problems, we are determined not to let what we learned and developed through the three Fulbright programs go unused. For example, we have helped initiate and are continuing to assist several “high school exchange” programs. This is now a part of our overall [educational exchange](#) efforts.

Volunteer American Staff – And Other Assistance

As noted above, in 2009 three former American Home teachers volunteered to assist with the AH's activities. David Johnson (2001-04) took on responsibility for the Intensive Russian program and related matters, including communication with Russian language and Russian studies programs around the country--and for developing our first YouTube videos. David now also manages both the Writing Exchange and the Alternative Spring Break programs on the American side, and he has successfully recruited students for Vanderbilt “Russian study tours” for which Alexei has made the bulk of the in-country arrangements. (See below.) Brooke Ricker (2005-06) agreed to help with the English program, including the hiring of new teachers. Jane Keeler (2005-06) took on responsibility for the websites (see below), and she provides valuable assistance with our blog and our Facebook page, both of which she set up. Along with the above three alum, Sarah Rorimer

(2003-05) assisted with acquiring contact information for as many of the AH's previous teachers as possible. Growing responsibilities in the New York City school system's ESL program resulted in her having to substantially reduce her ongoing participation. (Sarah noted that she never would have ended up in her current position -- where she very much enjoys what she is doing -- without her AH experience.)

In addition to these AH alumni, Katya Lakshtanova has also been assi with various projects. Katya was a member of the initial tourism development team. Among other things, she developed a website for the City of Vladimir website. She has also provided help with the Serendipity website and the American Home Russian language website.

This team collectively is making important contributions. In addition to the expanded use of the Web, more than 200 colleges and universities with Russian language and Russian studies programs have been contacted, our first [videos](#) about the American Home project were prepared—and more. David has been a prime mover with these projects.

Some AH Alumni



In 2010, Former AH teacher, Nicole Brun-Mercer (1996-98) published her novel, *The Golden Ring*, which is set in part in Vladimir. The AH and some of its fictional staff are featured.

Nicole has regularly contributed teaching tips and curriculum materials to the AH program while teaching English in France and Africa. When she enrolled in the TESL Masters program in California State University at Fullerton, she was able to arrange to get some academic credit for assisting with the preparation of reading materials for the first semester of our program. In 2013 we assisted her with her research on the significance of activities that provide informal language practice.

Nicole is currently working on a PhD in applied linguistics at the University of Arizona.



Nicole Mercer (far right) was present for US Amb. Thomas Pickering's 1996 visit to the American Home



Yuliana with Quincy Jones

Another AH "associate," Yuliana Rogacheva, began performing at American Home events when she was just 13. She also took English classes when she could find the time in her busy schedule. On July 15, 2010 Yuliana competed in the finals of the very prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival vocal competition. Out of the 75 original entrants from 25 different countries, the audience of jazz aficionados voted Yuliana the most popular vocal contestant. The distinguished panel of judges, headed by Quincy Jones, awarded her second place. Quite an achievement for the youngest contestant!

For more information on Yuliana, with an emphasis on her relationship with the AH, [click here](#). For a video of a live performance of "Your Lovely Smile," an original song with music composed by Yuliana Rogacheva and lyrics written by Ron Pope, [click here](#).

More Basketball – Plus High School Exchanges

In March 2010, working with Tom Murdoch, a participant in the 2004 Fulbright program, we helped organize in Vladimir a basketball clinic led by Becky Henrikson was organized. Becky is the head basketball coach and the coach for the 7th grade girls' team at Mahomet-Seymour Junior High School--where she teaches "language arts." In 2012, Becky's team made it to the State finals competition--the so-called "sweet sixteen." They played well but ultimately lost in the first round. Becky would like to take a "street ball" team (at least 4 girls) to Vladimir in the reasonably near future. The plan is for the girls to participate in the August Street Ball tournament sponsored by the American Home and help Becky present several clinics. ([Click here](#) for the Facebook album on the clinic.)



Becky with Coach Alexander Vlasov



A dribbling exercise

In addition to presenting the basketball clinic, Becky, along with librarian Julie Veazie, and social studies teacher (and trip organizer), Tom Murdoch, participated in discussions and other activities.



School #36 students celebrating Halloween



...and at their host high school

Thanks to the efforts of Tom Murdoch and his colleagues, students, and host families in the States, and the reciprocal efforts on the Russian side, the relationship between the Mahomet-Seymour school system and School #36 in Vladimir has been one of the most productive of the high school exchange programs.

In October 2010, we made arrangements for a research trip to the US for girls' basketball coach and Associate Professor of Physical Training at the Vladimir Juridical Institute, Alexander Vlasov. Alexander was here to do research for his *doktorat* dissertation comparing the Russian and American approaches to teaching physical

education and sports. Thanks especially to the assistance of David Johnson in Nashville and Dr. Mary Henniger, the director of the physical education teacher training program at Illinois State University, Coach Vlasov learned a great deal.

In June 2012 Alexander Vlasov returned to do more research at the University of Illinois--with the assistance of the U of I Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center's Summer Research Lab. Accompanying him was one of his players, 16 year old Maria Ezhkova. Maria's father is also a girls' basketball coach. With the help of Becky Henrikson and especially Tom and Pat Murdoch who hosted her, Maria participated in one high school and two University of Illinois basketball camps--where she was warmly welcomed.

The main goals for this trip were to give Maria the opportunity to improve her English and improve her understanding of the way American coaches teach the game of basketball to the point where during future clinics in Vladimir nothing will be "lost in translation." Maria is back in Vladimir where she is attending Vladimir State University where she is the captain of the school's girls' basketball team. (Four players from the university's team won the 2015 "Vladimir Street" street ball tournament sponsored by the American Home.)



Alexander at the U of I library



Maria testing special flooring at the very impressive Illinois State University Student Rec Center

(For a Facebook album that includes photos of Coach Vlasov and Maria's US trip, [click here.](#))

The Criminal Justice Program Continues

In May 2011 a group of Criminal Justice students from Texas State University made their first study trip to Russia. The group was organized and led by Dr. Donna Vandiver. Donna had led two Illinois State University Criminal Justice trips before accepting a position at TSU. As the article by TSU CJ graduate student Elisha English indicates, they had a very productive trip. ([Click here](#) for the article.)



TSU group at the AH -- where they met with Vladimir Juridical Institute Cadets and were given lectures by JI grads & staff

Some Renovations

In the summer of 2010, in the wake of several fires at overcrowded "night clubs" that resulted in significant loss of life in other parts of Russia, the Vladimir "fire marshal's" office inspected the American Home and determined that we needed to add an additional stair case exit from the basement. This was clearly a reasonable requirement.



New emergency exit from the basement

They also insisted that the furnace for the Home's heating system had to be installed at ground level with no occupied floors above it. While this seemed less reasonable, we had no choice but to comply.



Furnace room

Even with these changes, it was determined that the classroom space available at the American Home was inadequate for the number of students enrolled. As a result, beginning in 2010 more than 40 percent of our students had to be moved to classrooms at the Vladimir Institute for Business (VIB) which, fortunately, was only about a 10-minute walk from the AH. When it became apparent that that space would soon be unavailable, arrangements were made for classes to be taught in the Tekhnika building, which is even more suitable than the previous "off-site" space for teaching purposes -- and it was a little closer to the AH than VIB.

Thanks to even stricter occupancy code requirements for "educational institutions," by 2014, approximately 70% of our students had to take their classes outside the American Home. Office hours, the lectures, the smaller parties, and activities such "game day" and the Spelling Bee were able to take place at the AH. Finally, all administrative matters such as registration for classes and tuition payments are taken care of at the American Home.

It would obviously would have been very nice to have been able to build a new bigger and more efficient American-style home!



Vladimir Institute for Business building and classroom

(The American Home students who had to attend class here did not get to experience "leaving Russia and going to America.")



Tekhnika classrooms

UPDATE – 2016: Although not as the result of our receiving a substantial grant, in January 2016 we did move all of our activities to leased space in a new building. For a discussion of how this came about and how it is working out, see below beginning with page 42.

The Security of the American Home

Returning to the chronology, in May 2011 a brick was thrown through the window in the small room above the garage. The room is being used for Russian lessons and for meeting with students during the teachers' office hours. There were no discernible "political overtones" to the incident. Our best guess is that the brick was thrown by someone who was drunk.

The window was repaired – with our insurance policy once again covering the cost. And a seven-camera high resolution security system was installed, replacing the five-camera video system that had been set up after the 1995-96 anti-American vandalism.



Broken window



Two of the new seven-camera video system



Security monitor--with digital recording system

In December 2014 a driver -- possibly intoxicated -- managed to knock down a substantial section of the fence. While this was caught on video, it turned out that there wasn't a camera angle that showed the license plate on the front of the car. We are considering adding a new camera to cover this "blind spot."

The company that made the fence was able to replace the damaged sections before the end of the year. And the driver was billed for the cost of repairing the damage.

Alternative Spring Break Program



Flyers announcing the Alternative Spring Break opportunities in Vladimir and Murom

Four intrepid American students, recruited and led by David Johnson, Serendipity's "Coordinator of Intensive Russian" and jack of many other trades, flew off to Russia on March 3, 2012 for an intensive Alternative Spring Break week of work and play.

Their main task, with the help of a volunteer group of Alexei Altonen's Vladimir State University English language students, was to renovate a room for the Youth Health and Education Center. The YHEC provides assistance to school children from first grade through high school who are having problems at school or at

home. To this end, the organization also works with parents, teachers, and school administrators.

With their limited budget, the YHEC had not been able to fix up a room intended for indoor sports activities. Thanks to the ASB project, the room is now ready for use.

Along the way, the group learned about the City's Volunteer Service organization--a new city government undertaking; visited School #36 (which has an exchange program with Mahomet-Seymour (Illinois) Senior and Junior High Schools, and, as the photos illustrate, did a few more things.

While the American students were "meeting and touring," professional construction workers installed new lighting fixtures, an Armstrong "suspended ceiling," and did some needed plastering, and some other work. On the fifth day, the American and Russian volunteers returned to do the final painting.

According to one of the participants, "the project was definitely a major success. I hope that I will eventually be able to find the words necessary to do the trip, and the program justice. Everyone should have an experience like this at least once in their lives. Nine excruciatingly long days that passed in the blink of an eye, and will not ever be forgotten." -Jack Ryan Sundar

For an extended essay by one the participants in our first ASB program, [click here](#). The author, Adam Trembl, went on to become one of a limited number of three-year teachers in the American Home's English program.



Setting up for TV interview -- 2012



At work (David Johnson, standing)



2013 ASB -- preparing for a scavenger hunt



2014 ASB -- Russians and Americans painting a mural

Of special note, one of the first-year participants who had been very reluctant to travel to "wild and scary Russia," returned to The College of New Jersey so full of enthusiasm for her experience that the decision was made to apply for a Department of Education grant to provide additional students with the opportunity to

encounter Russia firsthand. The grant application was successful, making it possible over a period of three years for a total of 18 TCNJ students to directly benefit from this opportunity. Hopefully it will be possible to find a way to continue this very successful program beyond the period covered by the grant.



2013 ASB participants – discussion at the AH



2014 Russian and American ASB participants in front of the AH

In addition to the ASB participants who traveled to Vladimir, beginning in 2013 three students traveled to Murom where they were very warmly hosted by English program staff and students from the Murom Institute. The American students provided their Russian hosts with the opportunity to practice their English with native speakers and helped prepare teaching materials. They also did some sightseeing and experienced some aspects of Russian folk culture.



Visit to the Murom Folk Arts Center



Making traditional folk dolls at the Center

Our Murom Connection



In 2004 we invited the English language faculty and students at the Murom Institute to help us host the first Fulbright group of American teachers. The ancient city of Murom is even older than Vladimir. Some of the American teachers at first doubted the value of making the approximately two hour trip to this seldom visited community. But the overwhelming warm hospitality of their hosts quickly dispelled their misgivings. For our Facebook album on this very valuable connection, [click here](#).

In 2004 the Murom Institute welcomed the first group of American teachers to visit their city



Main building, Murom Institute



L - R: ISU Criminal Justice professor, Dr. Frank Morn; Head of the Murom Institute English language program, Elena Pankratova; Dr. Ron Pope

A Pope Family Passage

May 3, 2012 – Russell Pope, the American Home project's primary financial patron and Dr. Ron Pope's father, passed away. On July 4, 2012, at the AH's 20th anniversary celebration, it was announced that the meeting room in the AH basement would be dedicated in his honor.



Russell talking with Galya Altonen at the 4th of July celebration in 1999



The basement meeting room with the dedication information

(The lecture hall in our new building now bears this dedication.)

Shortly before he passed away at age 95, Russell told Ron that the support he had been able to provide for the American Home project was one of the things that he was most proud of doing during a long and productive life.

The American Home's 20th Anniversary, July 2012

July 4, 2012 Marked the 20th anniversary of the dedication of the American Home. It was a truly gala affair! Attendees included Vladimir's Mayor at the time the American home was built, Igor Shamov, and the current Mayor, Sergei Sakharov.



**Former Mayor, Igor Shamov
Current Mayor, Sergei Sakharov
at the 20th anniversary celebration**



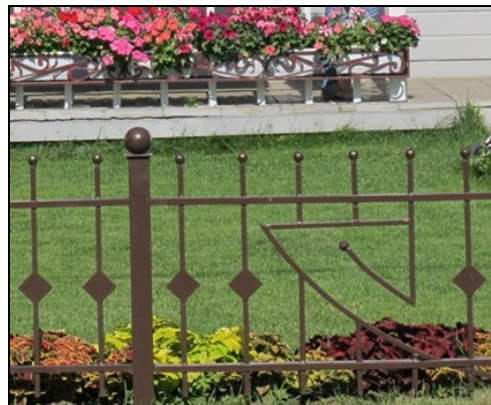
**20th anniversary logo created by Alexei Altonen and
graphic designer, Maria Tarasova
(Based on a 1992 line drawing by Vladimir Ruzin)**



The AH was spruced up for the special event. This included installing a new metal fence, and even replacing the lawn. A banner was made using the 20th anniversary logo and a flag was produced with the Serendipity-Russia logo.



News conference – with banner



New fence



Flag



Some of the TV coverage

Because of the threat of rain, the celebration was held at a very nice restaurant just down the road from the American Home.



Clearly no one starved!

Some of the staff in attendance



David enjoying - Olya seriously contemplating - Ira warning

The English Program

We try to never rest on our laurels. In fact, a lot has been accomplished since 1992. This has included growing the English program from 70 students in the fall of 1992 to approximately 500 for the fall and spring terms and between 100 and 150 for our intensive summer session. We have promoted two secretary-receptionists to the position of Teacher Supervisor. Lena Belova and Olya Solovkina work directly with each group of American teachers. They are also working on customizing the core teaching materials. This customization is proving to be especially valuable. The customized lessons are easier for the generally inexperienced -- but enthusiastic and creative -- young Americans whom we hire to work with and easier for our students to learn from.

NOTE: Both Lena and Olya majored in teaching English in their higher education.



Lena and Olya teaching

(The students like having their class meet in the kitchen. It is the room that is most clearly "American.")

In addition to their supervisory and customizing responsibilities, Lena and Olya teach the very beginning level (Z1) class. (All the rest of our classes are taught by native speakers.) This has worked out well. Specifically, under Lena and Olya's tutelage more students have been going on from Z1 to Z2 than was generally the case before.

The First Lead Teacher "Returns Home"

In August 2012 Alison Kitzman returned to Vladimir. Alison had arrived at the American Home 20 years earlier not sure of what she would do after her one year teaching commitment was completed. She left with the goal of teaching English to non-native speakers. After earning a Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language from the University of Illinois, she found employment at Japan's second largest university where she is now a tenured Associate Professor with responsibility for supervising more than 40 native speaking teachers, planning and developing curriculum, and teaching.

During her 11 day stay in Vladimir she contributed to the training of the 2012-13 AH teachers, provided a two-day workshop ("seminar") for area English teachers, and, with her husband, Tony Silva, who had joined her in Vladimir, provided another workshop for the Vladimir State University English language faculty.

(See the [Facebook album](#) on Alison's visit. Also see the [video clip](#) she made to help with the 2015 crowdfunding appeal that was made to assist with the move from the American Home to new leased space.)

Journey to America

In April-May 2013 Lena and Olya made their first trip to the States. They visited an elementary school, checked out the displays at a children's museum, met with TESOL specialists, observed classes, found some interesting things in a school supply store, got a bird's eye view of Chicago, and checked some things out in Kansas. They learned a great deal -- both formally and informally -- and they had a great time.



Children's Discovery Museum, Normal



Computer Lab, Sugar Creek Elementary School, Normal



Lunch with ISU English Language Institute Teachers



View from the Ferris Wheel on Navy Pier, Chicago



**When they saw this timer at the elementary school they visited,
Lena and Olya immediately concluded that the AH needed to have at least a couple of them.
There can no longer be any question as to how much time is left for an activity!**



Down on the ranch--in Kansas

(Their Kansas host, Nancy Hughes, thoroughly enjoyed the time she was able to spend with Lena and Olya--and they enjoyed the change of scenery and activities. Nancy became connected with the American Home as a "nontraditional" student in our Intensive Russian program.

(For some videotaped comments from four 2019 Intensive Russian participants, [click here.](#))

For the Facebook album on their trip, [click here.](#) For the blog entries, [click here.](#) (The blog includes some "after-the-trip" comments from Lena and Olya, as well as comments from their hosts and some of the people they met.)

This trip was clearly a very valuable experience for our two intrepid Teacher Supervisors. For example, now when their students ask about a specific feature of American society, more often than not Lena and Olya are able to respond based on their personal experience -- instead of having to ask one of the American teachers to reply to the query. This obviously gives them increased credibility with their students.

Lectures

Early on -- the exact date has been forgotten -- students asked if the teachers could give presentations on American history, culture, etc. They wanted to both learn more about America and to find out if they could understand native speakers besides their teachers. These presentations proved to be popular, and they became a formal part of our program. Applicants for our teaching positions are informed about the "lecture requirement" and are asked as a part of the interview process what they think they might want to talk about. As the teachers began to put more time and creative effort into preparing for their presentations, Alexei suggested that the lectures should be made available to an audience beyond the American Home's students. Beginning in 2013 the teachers have been repeating their lectures over two Saturdays in April. These presentations are open to the general public -- and they are well attended.

Presentations on American food...



... and babies in America





Lecture on history through the eyes of comedians



A full house...

I think the value of the lectures is indisputable. Students get to practice their listening skills while they learn about different aspects of American culture that they might not discover anywhere else.

-Nick Knaebel (2014-15)



Mardi Gras Lecture (Boxes of Cracker Jacks were tossed to the crowd from the floats until it was determined that too many people were being injured when they were struck by a corner of a box. The people on the floats now toss Moon Pies to the crowd.)

For a brief video interview with a member of the 2015 lectures audience, [click here](#). (NOTE: The young lady being interviewed, Anna Polyakova, was hired to work in our program for 7 to 11 year old kids after her graduation from Vladimir State University in 2015.

Holiday Celebrations

Beginning in 1992 the American Home has made a point of celebrating the basic American holidays. These of course include Halloween and Christmas during the English program's fall term. In the spring term they have alternated between Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day. Following are some photos. A good many more photos are available in the respective albums on our Facebook page.

Halloween

At first Russians thought dressing up in often "scary" costumes was quite strange. But the younger generation in particular seems to have become more used to this with the passage of time. (Halloween is now celebrated not only at the American Home....)



Grim Reaper -- Winner -- "best costume" 2014



Dangerous beauties...



Tin man getting an eye adjusted

Enjoying the festivities

Christmas



Santa and friends

(America's Santa Claus and Russia's Ded Moroz have a lot in common)



Making snowflakes



Pin the nose on the snow man -- some of the participants aim was obviously better than others

Mardi Gras OR Valentine's Day

Each year the teachers decide which of these two holidays they want to celebrate with the students -- and possibly invited guests.



Clearly enjoying the festivities



Party announcement



Playing the game "If you love me..."

Other Parties & Activities



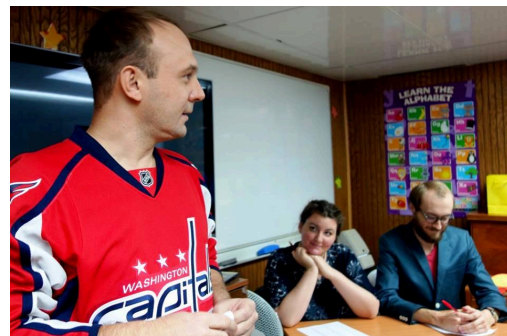
Game Day: Card Game



Sing-along



Game Day: Charades



I know this word... Maybe if I close one eye I can "see" how to spell it



This event was especially well received. It hopefully will be repeated.

Adult Parties

Beginning in 2013, we started organizing parties specifically for our adult (18+) students. These parties generally have a theme such as *Spring Fling* (the first party); *Backyard Party*; *Viva Las Vegas*; and *New Year Fairy Tale* (which included an unusual take on the Nutcracker Ballet).



2014 teachers interpretation of the Nutcracker Ballet
(The teachers usually perform a skit at the adult parties)



Exchanging inexpensive Christmas presents



A little dancing....



More dancing



Handing out a "door prize"



A demonstration of vocal talent



Playing a water balloon toss game during a "back yard" party
(Unfortunately, the new facility doesn't have a counterpart for the AH's back yard.)

All of the American teachers attend the parties. This gives the Russian attendees a pleasant opportunity to practice communicating with different native speakers.

Thanksgiving

From the beginning the teachers have wanted to celebrate Thanksgiving. The Americans prepare a traditional Thanksgiving meal which they then share with the Russian staff -- and possibly an invited guest or two. In the early years the turkeys had to be purchased in Moscow and some ingredients had to come from the States. Pretty much everything eventually became available in Vladimир. Hopefully that will continue to be the case.

The following photos speak for themselves -- for the most part.



(In the last photo the ladies are listening to an explanation of the recipe for Zack's cranberry sauce.)

Alexei has expressed a desire for the addition of Thanksgiving to the pantheon of Russian holidays. He expressly likes the sentiment the holiday embodies: Thanks for all of our many blessings.

The November 2016 Thanksgiving celebration was the first to be held in our new "home." The American teachers and the Russian staff were joined by host family members who brought some of their favorite dishes to the celebration.



Russian-American Lunches

Another AH tradition that focuses on good food and good fellowship has the Russian staff and the American teachers alternating preparing a special lunch once a month. Besides providing the opportunity to enjoy an especially good meal, the lunches contribute to the development of "team cohesion."



Galya "stirring the pot"

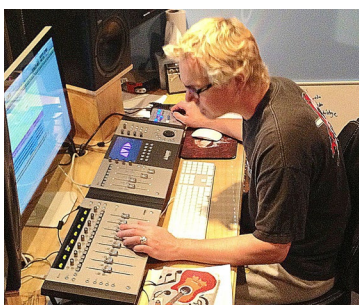


A toast



Ron brought some packaged soup mix that everyone agreed was tasty -- even though it ran counter to the Russian tradition of fixing meals from scratch....

An "Anthem" for the American Home



After the 20th anniversary celebration Alexei mentioned that it would be nice if the American Home had a special song of its own. Ron worked on some lyrics -- with input from Alison Kitzman, the AH's first Lead Teacher, and Alexei. Music was composed in 2013 by Garner Knutsen who, in the process, also contributed to the final version of the lyrics. He then recorded the song, playing all of the instrumental tracks and singing the vocals. (Garner is married to Krista Pope. Krista is Ron's brother Terry's daughter -- that is, she is Ron's niece.) Garner's recording of the song -- with accompanying photos -- is available [here](#).

Another version of this song was produced by Ludmila Maximovskaya, an early AH student now living in Chicago. Her version is available [here](#). Click [here](#) for a small Facebook album on the effort to come up with an "American Home Anthem" that even non-professional singers can perform.

Drew & Vanderbilt Programs

Drew students in the church where they did some volunteer work



In May 2013 a group of 8 students and 2 faculty from Drew University arrived in Vladimir for a month-long study program. In addition to Vladimir, they spent time in Murom and Moscow. Dr. Carol Ueland, Director of Drew's Russian Program, indicated that the students especially appreciated the opportunity to interact with their Russian peers and to do some volunteer work. She wrote that their "...visit to the church being restored [in the village of] Chernish was especially memorable." Hopefully it will be possible to mount a return trip in 2016.



Each of the American and Russian "volunteers" was blessed
(In January 2015 the students were still being remembered in prayer.)

In addition to the above, the Drew group met with Vladimir Juridical Institute cadets, planted flowers, studied Russian, and much more.

For more on the Drew trip, [click here](#).

In May 2014 the AH's David Johnson -- also a Lecturer in Russian at Vanderbilt -- organized Vanderbilt's first study tour to Vladimir. David now leads a Vanderbilt group each spring.



Vanderbilt 2014 -- doing some volunteer work



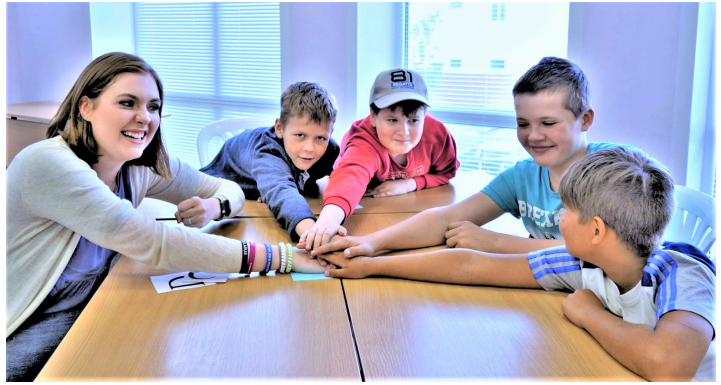
Visiting a dacha



Vanderbilt students give presentations on their families



MORE CAPTIONS WILL BE ADDED...



More "Upgrades"

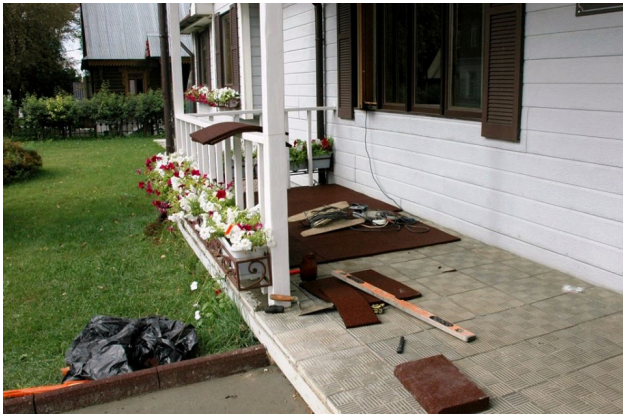
In summer 2014 paving bricks replaced the asphalt sidewalk in front of the Home -- at the "request" of the city government. w asphalt driveway, and a special experimental covering was put over the "path" to the front door and on the front porch.



Installing the new brick driveway and sidewalk



Clearing snow
(The bricks are much more attractive than the asphalt)



Installing the new covering on the front porch



Using the AH as a "backdrop"

Both Russians and visiting foreigners regularly have their picture taken in front of the American Home -- or in the backyard.

A contributor to the American Home English program website (www.ah33.ru) commented:

I want to express my gratitude to the [American Home] staff for the attractive appearance of the American Home and the surrounding territory. Always when I pass by your place, the well-kept yard with its abundance of colors is very pleasing to the eye. Your place is one of the few truly attractive houses in our city. Thanks. Keep up the good work.

It seems fair to conclude that the American Home was making a positive contribution to Vladimir's image.



Wedding party -- AH backyard



Taking a photo in front of the AH

A very nice letter of support

DATE: October 16. 2013

RE: The American Home, Vladimir, Russia

As a frequent visitor to Russia, I came across the American Home in Vladimir. I was very impressed with the people and programming and recommended to one of my students, at that time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that she consider applying to teach English there. She did and worked there for a very happy year prior to enrolling in a doctoral program in Comparative Literature at Harvard. (She used Russian literature as one of her literary traditions in that program of study.)

Two years ago one of our students at TCNJ, majoring in Criminology with 2+ years of Russian language study, on her own initiative participated in the alternative spring break service learning program run by the American Home. She had an excellent experience. And this was the student least likely to ever go to Russia (she had self-identified in first-year Russian as not interested in going there).

After receiving a US Department of Education grant, last spring I led a group of 6 students (3 in the first year class, 3 in the second year class) for a service learning program run through the American Home. Among other things, the students volunteered in a local school. It was an extraordinarily successful experience as evidenced by the participants' enhanced motivation for continued language studies. (All those students are continuing in Russian this year, which is spectacular considering we don't have a regular 3rd year class - therefore these students are doing an independent study). Our attrition in the Russian program was zero among this cohort, which is unheard of. The students' journals and PowerPoint presentations about their experience were all phenomenal.

Working with Alexei Altonen and his team was a delight. They are responsible, committed, and conscientious professionals who understand the cross-cultural challenges faced by Americans who study and visit Russia.

The programming, both cultural and language-focused, was all "right on the mark," and everyone was very gracious and flexible in making things work for our students.

I will be sending another group of students for this program this academic year, but so confident am I in the American Home that I will not be accompanying them personally. My calendar does not permit me to travel with them, but I have every confidence that they will once again have a very successful experience. I wish I could be there to observe their joy of discovery first hand.

In short, I give the American Home my strongest and most enthusiastic endorsement as an institution that provides cultural, linguistic, and logistical support for Americans visiting Russia. If you'd like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Ben Rifkin, PhD
Professor of Russian
Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences
The College of New Jersey

Transfer of the Original American Home to the Vladimir City Administration

The end of September 2014 a letter from the Vladimir City Administration was hand delivered to the American Home. The letter demanded the immediate transfer of the title to the American Home to the City Administration and the vacating of the AH by the end of October, that is, right in the middle of the English program's fall term. This thunderbolt came completely out of the blue.

Apparently, no consideration was given by the City Administration to the impact of their demand on our ability to honor the contracts we had signed with the more than 500 students enrolled that term in our English program. (We are far and away the largest English language school in Vladimir.)

The City Administration claimed that while reviewing documents concerning city property they came across a copy of the contract signed in 1992 governing the construction and use of the American Home. Clause 13 of this contract called for the transfer of the American Home to the Vladimir City Administration by no later than January 1, 2003. This date was clearly long since past. But the City Administration claimed that they had a "legal obligation" to take over ownership of the Home in the fall of 2014.

Before the scheduled transfer of ownership in 2003 Dr. Pope had approached a contact in the City Administration with a request to extend the status quo for at least an additional 10 years. Dr. Pope was informed that the Head of the City Administration at that time had no objection to this request, but that he was not willing to put anything in writing lest this stir up a political fuss. In short, we were advised to not draw attention to our situation.

In 2001 the "Branch of Serendipity" had been given official title to the American Home and given a 49-year lease on the property surrounding the Home.

As noted above, the initial agreement with the City Administration in 1992 called for the Vladimir city government to cover all the costs for the project on the Russian side. When most prices were freed by the Russian government in January 1992, the resulting inflation wiped out the City's reserve funds, and they had to withdraw from the initial contract. As mentioned previously, thanks to the generosity of his father, Dr. Pope was able to cover all of the project's cash expenses. This ended up amounting to more than \$125,000. This cash investment was essential to the success of the project. The American Home could not have been built without it.

The American Home was the first 100% foreign financed investment in the Vladimir region to be completed -- and not just discussed. The city clearly benefited from the project in a number of ways.

Working on the assumption that the City Administration was not going to invoke the transfer clause in the original contract, over the years substantial investments were made in upgrading the Home. As mentioned above, these included adding an emergency exit from the basement and a ground-level furnace room in 2010, installing a new metal fence before the 20th anniversary celebration in 2012, replacing the asphalt drive way with paving bricks, and the installing of a new deck at the back of the home just before the City Administration's letter was delivered in the fall of 2014.

An attorney who was originally from Vladimir and who still had contacts there was hired, and the pro bono services of an attorney with the Moscow branch of DLA Piper, a major multinational law firm, were obtained. The two lawyers agreed that, under existing Russian law, we ought to have a strong case for retaining ownership of the American Home.

There were two relevant legal provisions: the law on gifts and the statute of limitations. According to the Russian law on gifts, Dr. Pope had a right to withdraw his offer to give the Home to the City Administration. According to this law, the recipient of a "gift" can only make legal claim after they have possession of the item in question. Prior to the physical transfer of the property in question, the gift giver can withdraw his/her offer with no legal restrictions or consequences. Regarding the statute of limitations, under Russian law the City Administration should have had three years in which to make its claim. The maximum possible statute of limitations was ten years. By September 2014 we were more than 11 years beyond the scheduled January 1, 2003 turnover date. (Presumably, the countdown should have begun January 1, 2003.)

A meeting with the City Administration was requested. They responded by filing a lawsuit. (The 1992 contract called for binding arbitration should there be a disagreement that could not be resolved by the two parties.)

The first court hearing was scheduled for December 22, 2014. The session was delayed for about 15 minutes when the judge assigned to the case was called into the chief judge's office. In retrospect, this wasn't a good omen.

An AH student initiated an online petition in support of our efforts to retain use of the American Home. It attracted more than 1,000 signatures.

As it turned out, "insider politics" prevailed over "legality." The curtain came down on this saga when the beginning of December 2015 the Russian Supreme Arbitration Court declined to review the pro-City Administration decisions of the lower courts.

The law on gifts was circumvented by the "determination" that the City Administration was operating the Home jointly with Serendipity-Russia. No evidence was provided to support this claim -- which was in fact not accurate.

The statute of limitations was made irrelevant by the Court's decision that the clock began in November 2014 -- and not, as logic would suggest, January 1, 2003.

An appeal could have been made to the European Court for Human Rights. But Dr. Pope decided to forgo this option. If the ECHR agreed to review the case, final settlement would have been delayed three to five years.

All Is Well That Ends Well

By the end of 2014 it was clear that a new "home" had to be found for the "American Home" -- just in case. Over 70% of the English program's students were already having to take their classes in leased space in a Soviet-era "business park." The goal was to move to a new facility where everything could be under one roof.

Especially because of the well documented absence of the consistent application of the rule of law in Russia, there was no choice but to try to find an affordable alternative to the continued use of the original American Home. Pursuing the case through the court system served to provide the more than one year that it took to find and prepare a facility that could house all of our classes and other activities.

Space was arranged for in a building that was under construction. Because the interior was unfinished, it was possible to lay out a floor plan that would make the most efficient possible use of the available space.

This major move was made possible by the hard work of the Russian staff, first and foremost, Galina (Galya) Altonen. She put in long hours and made a lot of significant decisions in the process of overseeing all of the details that had to be taken care of.

On January 25, 2016 everything was moved to the new location. (Click here for a [PowerPoint Tour](https://www.dropbox.com/s/aagtuv105tmvc1v/PowerPoint%20Tour.ppsx?dl=0) of the new facility, at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/aagtuv105tmvc1v/PowerPoint%20Tour.ppsx?dl=0>)

The irony is that without the pressure generated by the City Administration's effort to gain control of the original American Home, this move almost certainly would not have been made at this time. And had the City Administration not prevailed before the courts that heard the case, it would not have been financially possible to cover the cost of the new lease and the cost of maintaining and staffing the original American Home. In other words, to a significant extent, the loss of the American Home turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

The Old vs. the New



The old lecture space



The new lecture hall



Teachers' old AH attic office



New teachers' office (This office is much larger than what is shown here)

The new lecture hall is obviously larger and brighter. It can comfortably hold at least 50 people. We hope to be able to get a much larger video screen in the not-too-distant future. Also, the new teachers' office is significantly larger -- and brighter.

The saga doesn't end here.

Take a look at the photo below. What is missing?



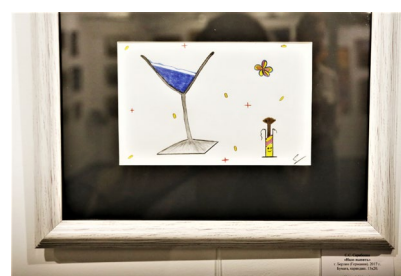
The City Administration insisted that the wording "Amerikanski Dom" had to be removed. They claimed that this wording had not been officially approved. Ultimately all of the signage on the building for our organization was taken down.



Finally, at the end of 2017 we received permission to put up our logo – with Russian text only – and the Russian for “Educational Center.”



What Has Happened to the Original American Home?



Ever Onward

In 2015 an English teacher specializing in working with the youngest school children moved from Moscow back to her home town of Vladimir. At the same time, our move to the new building provided us with room to add to our program. The result was the addition of classes for 7 to 11 year old kids the beginning of September 2015.

The Lead Teacher for this new program, Galina Vladimirovna Chibysheva, graduated from Vladimir State Pedagogical University in 2001 with a major in teaching English and History. She moved to Moscow where she did additional course work at Moscow State Pedagogical University and EF International Language Centers in London. In addition, she received a Certificate from Cambridge University when she passed the Teaching Knowledge Test. While in Moscow, Galina Vladimirovna taught at both private and state schools.



The American teachers assist with teaching the children's classes. They provide the kids with the opportunity to communicate with native speakers which gives the children an incentive to really learn English.

American teacher comments

"The kids loved having me. If I missed a class, they would ask Galina why. They would greet me on the street when I saw them in town. They loved asking me questions about my life and interests, which led them to learn about American views and lifestyle while practicing their new grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful way."
-Lorraine Roge-Jones

"The children clearly looked forward to spending time with real Americans and were eager to impress me with their progress. They were able to use their English in a real world situation which provided them with the motivation to learn more." **-Tyson Trotz**

Our Established Programs

English

Enrollment for our regular classes for the fall 2016 term was 481 – vs. approximately 550 for the previous two fall terms. This was a relatively modest drop given the ongoing economic problems Russia was enduring. And it was offset by the new children's classes which enrolled 89 students. The combined enrollment in our regular classes and in the children's program is now more than 600 students in the fall and spring terms.

Summer session enrollment for 2016 matched our previous high of 150 students – despite the depressed economic situation. In 2018 enrollment in our regular classes (12 and older) and our children's program (7 – 11 years old) exceeded 600 students. This is close to our physical capacity.

Street Ball

The August 2016 street ball tournament for boys and girls' teams was once again held at the "Druzhba" (Friendship) summer sport camp. Twenty four teams participated. The competition was intense.





Watching with interest



They played hard....

On September 24, 2016 ten older girls' teams met for their 7th annual American Home sponsored street ball tournament.



The participants in the 2016 American Home sponsored "Vladimir Street" tournament

For the first time in the tournament's history, three of the five participating Vladimir teams made it to the semifinals. The defending champion, VSU-Festival, met the always strong team from Ivanovo. The final score was 9 to 8. The championship remained undecided until the last second. Maria Ezhkova fired off an accurate long range shot that would have won the game for her team had it not been ruled that the whistle had blown before the ball left Ms. Ezhkova's hand.

(See our Facebook page for [more photos](#) and comments on this tournament.)



In 2017 we celebrated our 25th anniversary. The festivities included a June 3 Open House. The event was well received. A photo album – with a balalaika soundtrack – is available .





Summary

The “American Home” in Vladimir has become a center for learning English and learning about American culture, a meeting place for Vladimir's local Partner [Sister] Cities Association, and the communication center for, and frequently the initiator and coordinator for, a wide variety of undertakings.

Specifically, we provide the region's largest and most comprehensive English program – with customized teaching materials and teachers who are native speakers of English – an excellent Intensive Russian program, a Writing Exchange, an Alternative Spring Break program, and American university sponsored study tours. In addition, we offer lectures by the AH's English teachers throughout the academic year which are then repeated in April when they are open to the general public. From our very beginning we have provided support for the Vladimir region basketball program (including the sponsorship of Street Ball tournaments), and encouragement and support for high school exchange programs, and assistance with special projects. In the past these have included law enforcement exchanges and assistance with tourism development. In addition, we have contributed to a variety of "one-time" educational, cultural, and professional projects and exchanges – for example, the *Sound of the Sun* exhibit of work by Vladimir-area artists noted above.

Our current on-going “special projects” include providing assistance with fundraising and volunteer labor for an organization dedicated to helping homeless dogs and cats, providing assistance requested by the Vladimir Veterans Association, the Association of Families with Handicapped Children, an orphanage – and more.



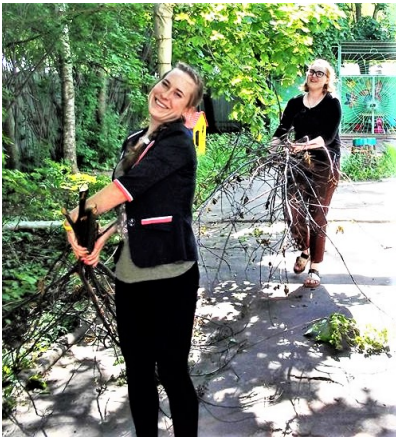
Alexei and Galya Altonen have a special affection for cats



Meeting veterans



Cleaning veterans' apartments



Clearing brush – and logs



Painting playground equipment



...and murals



A new hair dew and makeup – a little pampering will brighten anyone's outlook on life

We will continue to try to make worthwhile contributions from our new home base in the years ahead!

For more information please see our [archive of articles](#), the relevant individual sections on our [website](#), the relevant albums on our [Facebook page](#), and the [summary of current AH activities](#). For those who know Russian, additional information is available at the English program's Russian website: www.ah33.ru

And please do not hesitate to contact us with specific questions:
serendipity.american.home@gmail.com / ah.secretary@gmail.com / serendipityrussia@gmail.com



New logo for the Vladimir-based programs