



Bringing the World to You

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Final Report
Community Connections Program
Community-Based Assistance for Vulnerable Children Project for Russia
July 26-August 16, 2007

Introduction

It was a pleasure for Colleagues International to host the 10 participants of the Community Connections program for three weeks in July/August 2007. The activities arranged by our organization included both professional meetings and cultural events. Each visitor had individual interests within the program topic that we were able to meet while still focusing on the theme of the Community Connections Program. The end result was a wonderful collaboration that satisfied the needs of all parties.

This group was very cohesive and did not exhibit any signs of hierarchy or domination by any delegate. They may have started the program as strangers, but by their own acknowledgement, they have formed their own support network.

During the wrap-up session, delegates were asked to assist in identifying successes/challenges/recommendations. The comments detailed under these categories are based on their responses.

Professional Program

The professional program was fast-paced, but allowed adequate time at each site for the group to observe, learn and absorb the intended information about each site visited. We were fortunate to be able to begin the program with a firm foundation of social services in Kalamazoo County by meeting with Kalamazoo County Human Services Department (the state agency that oversees welfare services) and Family & Children's Services (our community's largest direct provider of social services). The meeting with Western Michigan University School of Social Work Professor Don Cooney provided the group with a picture of child welfare in the United States. Cooney is also a Kalamazoo City Commission and long-time activist of children's rights. The delegates appreciated that Professor Cooney emphasized the problems. Before the program, delegates had the assumption that there might not be so many problems in the United States. Cooney summarized the problems and what was being done about them.

During the program, Archbishop Desmond Tutu visited Kalamazoo. The delegates were among the 3,400 who attended "A Conversation with the Nobel Peace Laureate." The event was sponsored by the Fetzer Institute who graciously gave Colleagues International enough tickets



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for each delegate and two interpreters.

The three action planning sessions with Dr. Terry O'Connor were rated highly by the participants as a valuable part of their program. The group scheduled time on their own to complete their homework assignments between action planning sessions. In addition to completing their action plan, these sessions prepared them for a public presentation about their region in Russia, their agencies and their visit to West Michigan.

During the last full week of programming, the group traveled to Lansing, Michigan's state capital. The meeting with the Human Services Department gave the delegates the opportunity to meet with the administrative office while their HSD visit in Kalamazoo County provided a look at how services are provided at the local level. Some saw these visits as duplicative while other members of the group appreciated the opportunity to see two sides of the same agency.

A highlight of the program was a visit from World Learning Program Officer Troy Miller. He was able to attend our day at Court and enjoy lunch at a Chinese Buffet. Troy also had home hospitality with one of our host families and their guests. Everyone agreed that his visit was too short.

Cultural Activities

Cultural activities were mainly handled by home hosts based on the visitors' wishes. Some of the activities included trips to resort towns along Lake Michigan, shopping and visiting museums, Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids and the Indiana Amish community of Shipshewana. This was a group that took shopping seriously and created their own economic development program on several occasions. Three flat-screen television sets were among the goods purchased during the program. Home hosts were very understanding and accommodating of our delegates' need to shop... a lot.

Having an all-women delegation led to an opportunity for a private self-defense class. Scott Willoughby, the husband of interpreter Yulia Willoughby, teaches self defense for women and organized a special workshop for the group. Host families joined the group later for pizza at the Willoughby's home.

The Appreciation Dinner held for our delegates at the Park Club was a robust finish to a very-intensive training program. Host families, Colleagues International staff, board members and volunteers provided for a well-rounded turnout. Each delegate had a turn to say a few words



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about themselves and how they felt about the experience that they were having during their presentation prior to the dinner. Following the meal, the delegates were presented certificates by Colleagues International signifying that they had completed the program

The final weekend was spent in Chicago. This really felt like a reward for several weeks of hard work. Activities included a five-hour private tour of Chicago presented in Russian, the Sched Aquarium and the beach on the shores of Lake Michigan. The hotel, the Congress Plaza Hotel, was located right on Michigan Avenue with a view of the Field Museum, Grant Park and Lake Michigan.

The host family matches were very successful. The delegates had a very tough time when it came time to say goodbye to their American family. They expressed the following sentiment:

“It is a very sad feeling that we may never see them again. We want to come back and bring a lot of presents for our family. We feel our family here is as large as our family in Russia. We all are mothers. We want our children to see all these things and how the world is open.”

Successes

- The schedule was structured very well. It was very logical. Starting with the School of Social Work was extremely helpful in getting an overview of the system. This really helped fit the pieces together.
- The Blue Binder (program packet given to each delegate) with information in Russian about what to expect in the meetings and a description of each organization visited was very helpful.
- Host families were very well informed about what we were doing and where we were. The organization was perfect.
- It was very, very good to have the meeting with Don Cooney at the beginning. He emphasized the problems. Before coming to America, the assumption was that their might not be so many problems. He summarized the problems and what was being done about them.
- The schedule was made very nicely. The start time and end time was very comfortable. The day was shorter than a regular 8-hour day, but because of jet lag we probably couldn't take in more information.
- Our schedule was very well balanced, training, sightseeing relaxing, experiencing the culture.
- At the Ark Program, it was very good that they invited the real clients. It was wonderful that we could talk to those receiving the services. It was very special.
- The whole idea of living in a host family, probably the greatest experience. We were scared in the very beginning. We are representing a huge variety of interests. All of our interests were



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taken into account with the schedule. All expectations were met.

- The benefits of spending a day in family court were very unexpected. It was very helpful.
- There was an openness and willingness to share in every agency we were in.
- We were impressed by the number of volunteers and how much they are doing and how big their impact is.
- Three weeks is a good duration for the program. It is just enough that we can learn a lot and relax and not be overwhelmed or bored.
- We very much appreciate how CI addressed our individual interests like adding a meeting with Dr. Art James and Borgess Medical Center.
- Terry O'Connor is the greatest person and he is a very professional. We do not have words to describe how good he is. We think that our success in presenting ourselves is his success as a trainer.
- We got a lot of new ideas. We are very excited about sitting on the roof idea from CAN Council. (Each year a local radio station broadcasts from a rooftop for several days to raise money for the CAN Council. It is called Roof Sit and they don't come down until the event is over)
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters seems like a simple concept, but we understand it is tremendous work to match volunteers with kids. We will use it in our work. The process was well explained.
- The trip to Chicago was wonderful. This is our impression of America: sky scrapers. But now we know America of the small cities and America of the large cities. Chicago was probably what we were expecting when we were going to America.
- All the organizations that provided information deserve the highest regard. We were impressed by how much information they gave and the openness.
- We were presented with a variety of handouts. We were given options of what we could take.
- All the places that we visited while we were here were just great. Lake Michigan, Shippshewana, Meijer Gardens. It was very interesting to see the local sites. Some people were able to see an Amish Village. This is a very different part of American life.
- The opportunities for shopping were very good.
- Very impressed by the work of interpreters. It was a lot of information and very intensive meetings. They did a great job. They not only provide interpretation and translations, they also provide Russian hospitality
- The women's self-defense class was very helpful. We felt much better in Chicago.
- Very special to be part of the meeting with Desmond Tutu.
- Please can you invite us next year. We will be sharing what we've done in Russia and all our skills and knowledge.



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- Very small things that are taken for granted by Americans were very influential for us. We see how people treat each other and how they respect each other. It is the influence of the culture to our personal culture.
- Talking about the Culture, Desmond Tutu presentation, the tickets without assigned seats was very orderly. People just filed in an orderly and calm fashion.
- Part of life in United States is that everything is adjusted for the people with special needs: ramps, bathrooms. It's very, very impressive. Disabled people are not treated like aliens. They can move freely and be like everybody else.
- Now we are a team of professionals that have shared vision and shared goals and now Jennifer has a group of friends in Russia.
- A different chapter of successes is the visit by Troy Miller. We were impressed to be the group that he was visiting. He is a very, very charming person. He is very open. We know he is a very busy person and serious person. He was a very nice person to talk to and we were very impressed by his Russian.
- The group received great support from program organizers. Diane Downing was very, very helpful. Jennifer Lang did very well on her punctuality. We can tell that she has great potential.

Challenges

- Too far from Niagara Falls. Too far from Mackinaw Bridge. There are so many things to see that we didn't get to.
- Additional organized tours of the area might be helpful.
- Because we did not speak the language (English), the first week in the host family was hard.
- Would be helpful about helpful to have information about host families as soon as possible.
- We were very lucky to have Troy in our host family. We had a lot of questions and our host family had a lot of questions and Troy was busy interpreting everything. Our dynamics staying in the family took us to a different level after Troy helped us communicate.
- It would be nice to have one party or outing when all the hosts and guests are together. Something very informal.
- It would be nice in the schedule that if we visit an agency in the morning and see the application in the afternoon.
- In the beginning we had problems with food. We were ordering things that were too spicy. The Chinese Buffet was a very good solution for us. We can see and choose what we want.
- The meeting with KRESA was probably the least successful. We wanted more information about the program and kids with disabilities.



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- The meeting in Lansing was a duplication of our meeting in Kalamazoo: DHS. But on the other hand, it was beneficial because Lansing was the administrative part: Administrative vs. Delivery. It helped us learn about how the system works. It may have been better to visit the Lansing office first and then the local office.
- Because the question of public transportation was listed in the host family information, we were scared that we would have to take public transportation. When talking about public transportation, we were told that most people who take transportation in the United States are homeless or poor.

Recommendations

- The group's main recommendation to have another visit to Kalamazoo.
- It would be helpful to invite an interpreter or volunteer who speaks Russian to make a home visit for an hour or so at the start of the program.
- It would be helpful to have more of the agency handouts translated and/or available electronically.

Additional comments from the Director, Jennifer Lang

What a gift this group was to my small boys, ages 3 ½ and 15 months. While driving the group to Grand Rapids the night before their departure, my baby began crying. In a moment, the entire van was full of Russian singing. When one song ended, another was begun. This lasted for about 20 minutes until we reached the hotel. This response by the 10 Russian mommas was automatic and did not need translation, interpretation or orientation. It was just human nature and a love for all children regardless of nationality.