

HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN HOME

Dr. Ronald Pope, the initiator of the American Home Project, is founder and president of Serendipity: Russian Consulting & Development, Ltd. (now known as Serendipity-Russia). He is also an Associate Professor of Russian Politics at Illinois State University. He has studied and directly observed the Soviet Union since 1962. Prior to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, he had traveled to the Soviet Union eight times.

In April 1989 he acted as an interpreter for a visiting delegation from Vladimir that had come to Bloomington-Normal, Illinois to sign a Sister City agreement. From this contact, Dr. Pope received an invitation to observe Vladimir's first competitive local elections in March 1990. During a return trip that May to observe the newly elected "city council" in action, he decided to become actively involved in the crucial changes taking place in Russia.

As a first step toward cooperation between Americans and Russians, 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. During a reciprocal visit to Illinois by two Vladimir area agricultural specialists in February 1991, Dr. Whitacre suggested building a model American-style home as a demonstration project. (The quality of Soviet-era construction left a lot to be desired.) Dr. Pope immediately recognized that this was exactly the type of project he was looking for, and he and Dr. Whitacre approached ISU Professor of Industrial Technology, Dr. Ed Francis.

Dr. Francis 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 ISU IT students and members of the Bloomington-Normal Home Builders Association, led by Randy Raper, to participate, along with Rick Whitacre..

A number of obstacles were encountered along the way, one of the largest of which was the eventual inability, due to rapid inflation, of the Vladimir City Administration to cover its agreed upon share of the costs on the Russian side. Instead of canceling the project, Dr. Pope went in search of a sponsor. Ultimately, his father, Russell Pope, offered to provide the financing.

Serendipity ended up investing more than \$125,000 to complete the American Home—it cost the people of Vladimir nothing. In-kind contributions were received from more than 50 North American firms, the volunteer builders, and Dr. Francis. (See the list of contributors and volunteers.) In addition, assistance was provided by a number of Russians. This included the support of Vladimir Mayor Igor Shamov and the full cooperation of the city's deputy mayor for construction, Valeri Siderov.

After a follow-on trip in January 1992 during which the lot the City decided it wanted the house built on was approved by Dr. Francis and other matters were agreed on, work was scheduled to start on the project in May 1992. When Dr. Francis, the initial group of builders, and Dr. Pope left for Vladimir in May, Susan Pope took on the major responsibility of managing stateside communications and the final shipments of building materials, furniture, and supplies to Russia. Dr. Pope provided the overall coordination for the project

The ground-breaking ceremony was held May 18, 1992, and the American Home was officially dedicated July 4th of that year. The rapid completion of the home surprised many Russians. They were used to construction projects taking many 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 holiday, he wanted to know: "July 4 of what year?"

The July 4 dedication was a gala affair with first rate Russian performing groups, plenty of local dignitaries, and very high hopes for the future.

In September 1992, Serendipity began offering English classes taught by three young Americans. This program quickly grew from 80 to more than 350 students (close to its physical capacity at the time). It currently employs eight full-time teachers and, thanks to the addition of a fifth classroom in the attic, enrolls more than 400 students each term. Its main attractions include energetic native-speaking teachers using a variety of materials and innovative EFL [English as a Foreign Language] -based teaching techniques. More than 10,000 Vladimiriters have participated in these classes to date, including business professionals, educators, medical personnel, law enforcement officers, and others who report the lessons are essential to their ability to communicate with their English-speaking colleagues. In 1996 the Program added conversation classes and a special class to help students prepare for the TOEFL exam [Test of English as a Foreign Language] required for admission by most American colleges and universities.

The American teachers working in this program are recruited nationwide, and there are now regularly more serious applicants than openings. (In 1997 the first Canadian teacher was hired.) Since its inception, the English Program has been very ably directed by Galya Altonen. In 2004, a former secretary, Lena Belova, returned from maternity leave to work as a resource person for the teachers. This new position has proved to be invaluable. (See the relevant articles in the newsletters.)

The English Program covers most of the cost of operating the American Home. Prior to the August 1998 economic crisis, additional funds were contributed by Serendipity's remodeling business. This was 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 who helped build the American Home and who made several trips to the U.S. In 1994, for example, he worked for three months with Bloomington-Normal builder Doug Parker who also had participated in the building project in Vladimir.

In late 1995 it was discovered that Ms. Veksler had embezzled a large sum of money from the remodeling business. She was immediately let go—but Dr. Pope was advised by a number of Russians not to pursue the matter further on the assumption that the director's "connections" would enable her to avoid prosecution. However, as a matter of principle, the theft was reported to the authorities and, after considerable time and effort, a conviction was ultimately handed down—much to the surprise of many knowledgeable Russians and Americans who had not expected the Russian legal system to function properly. (See *An Illinois Yankee in Tsar Yeltsin's Court: Justice in Russia* under Articles.)

Galya Altonen, who, as noted above, had managed the English program from the beginning, took on the additional responsibility of managing the Home. Her husband, Alexei, took on responsibility for “special projects.” (See Projects.) This dynamic team continues to do an excellent job—while Dr. Pope and his wife, Susan, manage things from the American side. Susan takes care of the website and provides substantial additional “advice and assistance.” Dr. Pope hires the new teachers for the English program each year, recruits students for the Intensive Russian program, organizes tours, and plays a major role in the “special projects.” He has ultimate responsibility for operations on both sides of the ocean.

Having survived the embezzlement trauma, on July 4, 1997 the American Home celebrated its 5th Anniversary with the help of a 19-member 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.

When so-called Russian "patriots" painted graffiti on the Home early in the morning of December 18, 1998—while the U.S. and Britain were bombing Russia's long time ally Iraq—the act was widely condemned by the local media and political leaders, as well as by the man in the street. The community gave the same response when windows were broken shortly after the NATO attack on Yugoslavia began in March 1999. Opposition to American government policy had not affected the excellent relations between the American Home and the people of Vladimir.

The end of June 1999, Russell Pope, 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.” Ron 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 that year, visited a variety of places including the orphanage the American Home has assisted since 1993, the Children’s Hospital where they delivered some donated medical equipment, and a local TV station. Russell Pope is a retired radio and television engineer. The next year Russell returned with three more of the grandchildren and Ron and Susan. 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.

Since March 2002 a twice-yearly e-mail newsletter has been prepared especially for former teachers—there have been close to 100 to date—and others with a special interest in the American Home. Beginning in 2005 a revised version of this newsletter has been sent to current and former AH students and area English teachers.

To access back issues go to www.serendipity-russia.com/alumninews.htm

On July 4, 2002 the American Home marked its 10th anniversary with a gala celebration. The decision was made at this time to end the tradition of hosting a major event honoring America’s Independence Day every year and to celebrate the Home’s anniversary only every fifth year. The yearly celebrations were getting to be too expensive.

In summer 2004 Dr. Pope and the American Home staff led by Alexei Altonen 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-Hayes grant. (See Educational Exchanges under Projects.)

Also in 2004 a major effort to assist both the City and the Oblast with tourism development was begun. (See Economic Development under Projects.)

In 2004-05 major renovations were done in the attic and the garage—and a new roof was put on the house. For some reason the old roof had started to leak in several places. The waiting area in the garage was greatly expanded. In the attic a fifth classroom, storage, and a spacious office for the teachers were added. And the library was moved from Galya Altonen’s overcrowded office to the teachers’ old office in the basement. Students—and others—now have much more convenient access to the American Home’s growing collection of books and magazines.

Teachers’ Office





Attic Classroom



Living Room



Kitchen

The American Home in Vladimir has become a center for learning about American culture, a meeting place for Vladimir's local Partner [Sister] Cities Association, and the communications center for, and frequently the initiator and coordinator of, a wide variety of cooperative undertakings. (See "Projects.")

Specifically, in addition to our English and Intensive Russian programs, and the major tourism development project mentioned above, we have contributed to a variety of educational, law enforcement, and art exchanges; the regional basketball program (we host a Street Ball tournament every summer); and humanitarian aid projects.

The American Home has earned a very positive reputation among the people of Vladimir—as testified to in part by the very negative public reaction to the attempts to make the Home a target for opposition to US government policies and by the waiting list for the English program. It also has a solid reputation among those Americans who have worked at or visited the Home. As one knowledgeable visitor noted, the American home has survived much longer than most similar projects in Russia and it has accomplished more than projects with much larger budgets.

Our goal is to continue to make improvements in our core activities while we continue to take on specific projects where we feel we can make a positive contribution.