



The American Home English Program

Participant Comments & Observations

The following essays have been taken from the American Home’s newsletter, which we “published” twice a year from March 2002 through December 2008, and from our [blog](#)—which replaced the newsletter beginning in 2010. (All of the newsletters are available on the [website](#).) The comments and observations by those who have taught in the program should help prospective teachers—and others—better understand what the American Home English program has to offer—and what is expected of the teachers in return.

Ron Pope, President
Serendipity-Russia

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EXPECTATIONS

Our Ideal Teacher

NOTE: The comments below, written in March 2002, still reflect our policy.

After more than nine years of administering our English Program in Vladimir we have identified some key characteristics that maximize our teachers' success as well as the success of the program.

American Home teachers who have excelled have been creative and hardworking, have worked closely and cooperatively with our Russian staff, and have been more than willing to go out of their way to do things that benefitted the program--even when that might have interfered with their personal agenda. It is also interesting that these teachers have all reaped considerable personal benefit from their experience in Vladimir and have subsequently parlayed that experience into substantial success in the "real world."

Frequently, what helps the program benefits the individual more than might first be apparent. For example, community outreach activities, such as visiting local schools, give the teachers a perspective on Russian life that they don't get from the confines of the American Home, and that even their Russian friends can't provide. In this regard, one former teacher who spent two years in Vladimir noted that the "outside activities" both encouraged and helped her to improve her Russian. Additionally, when it comes time for us to write reference letters, we can obviously say some very positive things about those teachers who have been especially cooperative and worked especially hard for the benefit of the program. We know for a fact that our strongest references have played a significant role in helping our former teachers land very good positions. On the other hand, teachers who have complained the most and have been the least willing to do more than merely focus on their classes and learning Russian, seem to have gotten considerably less out of their time in Vladimir. This is not to say that their experience has been negative overall. In fact, we are not aware of a single former teacher who is dissatisfied with the opportunity they had to teach at the American Home and spend a year or more in Vladimir. However, there does seem to be a clear correlation between how much each individual gets out of the experience and how much they put into it for the good of the cause.

Some Comments from Former Teachers

My year in Vladimir affected my life in profound and unforeseen ways. Hoping to gain fluent Russian and a new perspective, I hopped on a plane to Russia fresh out of college. One year later, I emerged with an invaluable cultural experience, dozens of amazing new friends, and a Russian husband! Despite these many rewards, life in Vladimir is not a walk in the park—the winters are long, the work is demanding, and McDonalds is a three-hour bus ride away. My first two months there were particularly harrowing, in part because I had no prior teaching experience. Fortunately, the sense of fulfillment I derived from eventually connecting with my students more than compensated for any fatigue I may have felt. Equally satisfying were the many "extracurricular" activities I was able to participate in. Late in the fall, a few of

the other teachers and I visited the local pedagogical institute to speak to students about higher education in America. We enjoyed a fruitful exchange with this very inquisitive bunch and, in the process, learned a lot about the Russian university system. On another occasion, I visited a local youth club and told them about my home town in the States. It was clear that many of these kids had never been outside of Vladimir, so they were eager to get the "inside story" on life in America. Once again it was a mutually educational experience. Life in Vladimir can be very demanding, and sometimes it was tempting to forego such opportunities for a nice, long nap. Looking back, however, I have no regrets. Spending extra time with students gave me a much broader understanding of life in Vladimir, a town that in many ways more closely resembles Soviet Russia than Westernized Moscow or St. Petersburg. Back in America, I've found that my experience in Russia invariably piques the interest of prospective employers. There's nothing more impressive in an interview than mentioning the fact that you spent a year working in a small Russian town. And there's nothing more exciting than maintaining the incredible friendships I made while I was there. Visiting Vladimir just last summer (and this coming summer, I hope) reminded me just how dear my time in Russia was to me.

Charity (Trelease) Ryabinkin --currently studying at the Georgetown Law Center. Charity published an article on her AH experience in ***Transitions Abroad***. [See the "articles" section of the website.]

Since this was written, Charity graduated from law school and moved to London where she is an investment banker with special responsibilities for Russian projects.

After I read the intro paragraph to Dr. Pope's statement concerning the ideal qualities for teachers at the American Home in Vladimir, I stopped to consider what I would want to add for the benefit of people applying to work there. Interestingly, I decided that a vital trait is a willingness to volunteer. Volunteer to teach extra classes for children, visit schools or institutes and really give yourselves to the Vladimir community. Working in the American Home is not a nine-to-five type of job. It requires dedication and flexibility. Teachers need to be reminded that working for the American Home is a serious affair. You are a representative of American culture and the American Home at all times--whether you like it or not. Citizens of Vladimir are continually watching the teachers, and their behavior reflects on the School and our country. I know the above paragraph may sound a bit "too serious," but becoming an ambassador for a culture and a language is a serious matter. At the same time, it is also exceptionally rewarding.

Holly Daugherty --completed her MA in Social Work at Case Western Reserve University

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THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

A Great Place to Start Teaching

Youngmee Hahn, 2005-06

“So, what are you thinking about doing next year?”

The question itself is a harmless one, but it became an extremely sensitive subject for us first year teachers at the American Home. Many of us came here open to the possibility of staying for a second year. But when it came time to make the final decision most of us struggled quite a bit. For me, it was especially difficult because my experience here has been almost *too good!* I felt the need to leave Vladimir not because I was dissatisfied with my experience at the American Home, but because working here has been such a wonderful introduction to the world of teaching that I now have the urge to return to my university, finish the Pennsylvania State teacher certification program, and commit to a career as a language teacher. Now that I’ve made my decision, it’s a relief to know for sure what I’ll be doing next year. But at the same time, I can already feel how much I’m going to miss the American Home.

I believe that it’s not much of an exaggeration to say that working at the American Home is a first-time teacher’s dream job. For one thing, the general atmosphere is unusually warm and welcoming. Anyone who spends even just a day here will notice that the American Home staff members genuinely care about each other and about their work. And if there happens to be a Russian or American lunch on the day that you choose to visit, you’ll understand why I have a hard time using the word “coworkers” to refer to my fellow teachers and the Russian staff—how can I use such a dry, impersonal word to talk about people who feed me such wonderful food in such a festive atmosphere, and for whom I’ve had the pleasure of cooking equally big and festive meals

Besides the wonderful atmosphere at the American Home, I know I’m also going to miss the working conditions here. Having studied education in college, I had a theoretical background in pedagogy when I arrived here but no actual teaching experience. To be honest, I was terrified before my very first class in September. But the American Home provided me with everything I needed to be the best teacher I could in spite of my lack of experience—grammar reference books, supplementary materials, pictures, and perhaps most important, Lena, our wonderful teachers’ consultant, who has been a godsend to me many times when I have been at a loss for good ideas. At the same time, the American Home has also allowed me a lot of freedom—the only thing that is decided for me is which grammar topics I’m going to teach and the order I’m going to teach them in. Other than that, how I present the grammar and how the students practice it is completely up to me. In short, the American Home has provided me with the support I have needed to get started as a teacher; and at the same time it has given me the freedom to find my own teaching style and to grow into being the kind of teacher that I’m most suited to be.

More than any other part of teaching, I’ve enjoyed interacting with the students in class, and I’m certainly going to miss that too. There’s something special about the student-teacher dynamic at the American Home: students don’t just learn English grammar and vocabulary here, they learn to communicate and make personal connections in English, both with each other and with their teachers.

For the most part, American Home students are engaged, highly motivated, and inquisitive, and it's been a pleasure to work with people who are so interested in learning. I've had a great time working here, and I've learned many invaluable lessons about being a teacher. The American Home has been an excellent place to start out. I'm sure that I'll keep calling on my experiences here as I continue to develop as a teacher in the years to come.

On Becoming a Teacher

Sara Beach, 2006-Fall 2008

In high school history we learned the battle cry of 19th century labor: *"Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will!"*

In college we allotted *4 hours for class, 4 hours for the library, 10 hours for procrastination, and 6 hours for sleep* – unless of course it was the night before your term paper was due. In this case you shifted to *16 hours for procrastination, 6 hours for work* (beginning around 11 pm) *and 2 hours for sleep*. (Your friends find you drooling in your library carrel at 7 am.)

Friends in America tell me that they've joined the rat race; they work 9 to 5, try to kick back in the evenings, and, reluctantly, get a full night's sleep in order to do it all again the next day. But here at the AH, no such 8-8-8 rule exists.

And it's not for lack of labor reform. My day here starts just barely before noon. That is humane, if not downright indulgent. If I happen to come in a little earlier, there's no need to get down to work right away. Actually, there's an inescapable pull toward the kitchen table, tea, and snacks. And it's not a break I have to hide from my boss. It's my boss (Galya) who invites me to join them. Relations between labor and management are quite good. In fact, I think management would even like us to take a few more tea breaks. (Among other things, these contribute to the best possible relations between the Russian and American staff.)

Between noon and four I go back and forth between lesson planning, grading, and reading the *New York Times* most-emailed list. And then, with a cup of coffee in hand, I do the real work from four to nine in the evening. This is the part of the day when I really feel alive, when I have to be ON for ninety minutes in a row, answering unanticipated questions about modals with grace under fire; acting out the difference between past simple and past continuous; doing a little interpretative dance to demonstrate tag questions – and then – in the fifteen minute break – try to rewind the movie, clean up all the scraps of paper, schedule extra office hours for Masha, find vocab list #7 for Pasha, discuss the quiz with Sasha, look at photos from Natasha's trip, and make a date for coffee with Dasha.

These supposed *8 hours for what we will* should begin around 9:15, once we've cleaned up after the last class. But even when I make it to Joanna's (see her essay in this issue) by 10 pm and collapse on her couch with a cup of tea, I seem to keep working. For one thing, Joanna and I are A2 (fourth-level) colleagues. We're allies in the valiant struggle for more conversation-based grammar, and we're

comrades-in-arms in the march towards the proper – though restrained – use of the passive voice. We are united in the fact that, having seen it 13 times, we know every single word of *Father of the Bride*.

We've spent more evenings than I can count lamenting dry grammar and thinking of ways to make it relevant. Our students' mistakes come up in conversation not because they're funny ("My mom needs to be done") – well, OK, they sometimes are pretty funny – but because we spend a lot of time thinking about how to do our job better. Most students confuse past modals for real and unreal situations – so what can we do about this? Are there any new speaking activities that will get them talking? What bombed last semester, and what can we do to achieve success this term? Joanna usually reminds me a few days early – sometimes when we're out on a Saturday night – that we've got to remember to write that quiz for Monday, and do I happen to have any good ideas for it?

Like gas in a container, the AH expands to fill the available time, and often it takes as much as being in a different country to prevent me from coming in to work every single day of the week. That's OK. If I didn't have my students, I probably wouldn't have any Russian friends here. And if I didn't like my students, respect them, and know them as good friends, I wouldn't have quite as much motivation to help them learn English.

Here is how my days break down. If you subtract tea breaks from my *8 hours for work*, then I suppose I clock in at slightly over 6 hours at the AH. I closely guard my *8 hours for sleep*. And those for *what I will*? As much as I thought it was essential for good mental health to keep this part of my life separate from work (and here's a shout-out to A2 Unit 2A - Gerund Phrases as Subjects and Objects), *working as a teacher* is slowly but surely turning into *being a teacher*.

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR TIME IN VLADIMIR

Breaking the Ice

Nicole Brun-Mercer, 1996-98

NOTE: At the time she wrote this, Nicole lived in France, where she had a small language school and translation business. She wrote this essay in January 2009. More recently, Nicole and her husband have lived in the Middle East and Africa. (See our Facebook page / blog.)

As we approach the end of winter, I am reminded not only of this seasonal idiom, but also of its relevance in my life eleven years ago. I was half-way into my first year as a teacher at the American Home and only just beginning to pick up the courage to speak in Russian. It took me, in fact, nearly six months to apply the lessons I was trying to teach my students: the more you speak, the faster you learn.

The American Home is a special experience because it allows the American contingent to be teachers and students at the same time. We can thus apply our difficulties in learning Russian to how we teach

English and vice versa.

One of the first things I learned during our teacher-training week was from a second-year teacher, Kira Lee. She always began her classes with a question of the day. She would review vocabulary, for example clothes with, "What are you wearing today?" or review grammar, like the present perfect in, "What have you done since you got up this morning?" Each student would answer the question, then ask a classmate until the whole class had spoken. One of the primary objectives of this exercise is for every student to "break the ice" at the beginning of the lesson. It is generally difficult, and for some students embarrassing, to speak in front of a class. However, once they have spoken in the controlled environment of a familiar question which everyone answers, they have more confidence and will more readily volunteer information during the rest of the class.

I quickly adopted her technique. (One of the beautiful things about friendly teaching environments is that we never talk about "stealing ideas".) It is amazingly flexible in that it can be used starting the second day of a beginning English lesson: "What's your name?" but also at the most advanced level: "What do you wish you had had the chance to do as a child and why?"

Unfortunately, I was not so quick to adopt it with my own language learning. I had come to Russia with a very rudimentary level and was too embarrassed to speak, particularly in front of the other American teachers, who all spoke better than I did. Finally, I asked myself why I was wasting such a fabulous opportunity. I opened my mouth.

I was surprised that not only did no one laugh at me, but suddenly American Home staff who had seemed cold and distant were quite friendly and encouraging. I began to make friends and, of course, my Russian improved dramatically.

Winter is often the hardest season. The days are short and cold. Many teachers have returned home for Christmas and their second departure, back to Russia, is generally more painful. The excitement has worn off. And yet it can also be a wonderful period: a time to start forming real, lifelong friendships and finally see some progress in one's Russian and English-teaching. It is a season when the ice forms, creating a hard barrier that often seems impenetrable. But it is also a time when the ice can begin to break.

For those new teachers out there, I encourage you not to wait until the snow thaws. Break the ice now. Start speaking. Invite Russians you have met to Suzdal, to the theatre or even just for a walk in the park. The first step is always the hardest, but like a question of the day, it will only get easier from there.

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TEACHING TIPS

Move It or Lose It

Nicole Brun-Mercer

Note: This essay was written in February 2009.

I had the perfect level D class: a dozen enthusiastic young adults who loved to talk... and a Volodya.

Volodya thrived on yes-no answers, laughed at other students' mistakes and categorically refused to do his homework. I changed my topics, I changed my tactics (see-sawing between good cop and bad cop) and was finally about to give up when I discovered that Volodya was a kinesthetic learner. I should have known. Volodya was very athletic, loved being outdoors, was one of the rare men I knew who liked dancing, used expressive gestures when he spoke and was always fidgeting in his chair. These are all indications that a student could be a kinesthetic learner.

In a class of twelve, a teacher probably only has one or two kinesthetic learners. Most people are either visual or aural learners, which is why most teaching is geared to them. Teachers write, students copy, teachers speak and students repeat. Unfortunately, this leaves out kinesthetic learners who, regardless of their age, are engaged by doing.

What are the differences in learning styles? Let's consider the alphabet. A visual learner will memorize it by looking at it and copying it down. An aural learner will listen to the song and sing along. A kinesthetic learner can write the letters in the sand, which is more tactile than pencil and paper, or better yet, make the shapes of the letters with his body, Y-M-C-A style.

There are a number of activities that can be used with kinesthetic students. When studying directions, the Follow Me Obstacle Course is fun. The class is made into an obstacle course, with chairs, tables and bags strewn about. One student is blindfolded and has to be led through the course to a chair where he is to sit. Without touching him, his partner must tell him where to go by saying "to the left", "keep going", "watch out!" and so on.

Also for lower levels is the Ball Game. An imaginary ball is introduced by the teacher, who holds it up and announces, for example, "blue". The ball is then thrown by the teacher to a student. When the ball is in your hands, you must repeat the word "blue – blue – blue...") until you throw it on to the next person, who catches it, repeats the word and so on. For additional difficulty, while one "ball" is going around the classroom, the teacher can introduce a second one ("green"). The two balls circulate simultaneously. The teacher can add as many balls as he wants. This exercise lends itself naturally to learning colors, but can be used for words in other categories as well (animals, food. . .) and is especially good for pronunciation work.

Regardless of the level of the Volodya in your class, there is sure to be a solution to bring him out of his

shell. Moreover, the new activities will stimulate all your students, as none of us are 100% visual or aural. We can all be better engaged when different areas of our brains are being activated. Patience? Don't lose it. Just get your Volodya to move it.

The Rewards of Working with a Blank Slate

Sara Beach, 2006-Fall 2008

I've loved Z1 since the first class I taught in September 2006. I love watching my students' astounding progress over the course of three months. And I love that I get to work with blank slates. I have no lingering bad habits to correct: no one says "I can't play tennis" and cases of "I am work" are precious few indeed.

And I've been told that I've been able to keep attrition fairly low, which is great. Logically, Z1 is the level that should lose the most students. It's easy for the students to think they can drop by in the evenings twice a week and pick up a foreign language. But of course learning English turns out to require a lot of hard work and patience. I've never thought much about the number of students who stick with it, but I can tell you what I do to make learning as painless, productive, and fun as possible.

The ambitious students always ask me impatiently, "Sara, when will we be able to have a normal conversation?" I say, "You know, you can already talk about your family, your hobbies, your job, your home, your health, your weekend plans, the things you can do well and can't do at all. You can ask about the time, the weather, and how to get around a city." And I try to prove this to them by reversing the roles of teacher and student. I can easily play the role of an innocent abroad, and I make it a point to sit down and ask them for advice. "Is there a good restaurant around here? Where is it? How do I get there?" "I have a sore throat today. What do I need?" "How do you make salad Olivier?" "Americans think that all Russians drink vodka. Do you agree?"

Like all classes at the American Home, my Z1 classes are personalized. Our examples come from our lives. It becomes much easier to remember new vocabulary if it's associated with your friends and classmates, and so the whole class knows that Yana is a singer, that Masha goes swimming at 6:00 am, and Artem drives his car to the American Home. And even though sometimes it can bring my fast-paced class to a screeching halt, I always think it's worth the time to provide my students with the most accurate words to describe their lives. Case in point: last year my Z1 class met on Thanksgiving Day, and I asked them all what they were thankful for. Everyone used our nice, basic English vocabulary: "My family," "My health," "My teacher" (aw!)—until we got to Natasha. Natasha didn't want to use just any noun. She wanted to say, "I am thankful for obstacles that make me stronger." I wrote it on the board for her to copy down. A year went by. Last Saturday night I got together with students from that Z1 class who are now in A1 and A2. We even managed to speak some English. And you know what they—all of them—wanted to drink a toast to? "To the obstacles that make us stronger!"

Some Observations—from someone who has been there and done that

Ted B. Walls, 2002-05

EDITOR'S NOTE: When Ted started at the AH, he had no teaching experience and had to learn how by actually doing it. Since leaving the AH—after 3 years of increasingly effective teaching—Ted has taught in Poland and now teaches business English in Moscow. His approach to his craft has clearly evolved over the years. This essay was written in December 2008.

It is true that the very best teachers are born with a special talent that can't be taught. There is an essential quality of creativity and affection for the students which simply cannot be learned. But *effective* teachers can develop with experience in the classroom, hard work, and the help of others.

Learning to teach effectively is in many ways like learning a language. Current ESL theory holds that learners of a second language find their own path to internalizing it. Every student is different, with a unique learning style and way of seeing the world. Some researchers (such as Noam Chomsky) go to an extreme, and say that formal language instruction has no direct correlation with language acquisition.

These things are hotly debated in academia—and nothing is written in stone. But we can say for sure that, the skeptics' views notwithstanding, formal language instruction greatly enhances the natural language acquisition process. Our goal in teaching, and in becoming effective teachers, is the same—to encourage the natural process.

Teacher development works the same way. Just like our students, we will approach teaching in ways which suit us, and this is quite appropriate—as long as our students are able to learn what they need to know. And, like our students, formal instruction can make a major contribution to our learning our trade.

Teaching is a very rewarding profession. Especially when teaching a language, we can see our students make real progress. At the same time, teaching lets us be creative, and express our inherent talents. In fact, truly effective teaching requires creativity—and hard work. We can never lose sight of this if we want to successfully promote our professional development.

So how do we develop into effective teachers, all the while keeping that spark of magic? By doing three things: piggy-backing, reflecting, and acquiring needed tools.

Piggy-backing simply means learning tips and tricks which have worked for others. Teachers are always attending seminars, sharing ideas with colleagues, reading books, constantly on the look out for something they can use directly or adapt. Some of them get quite giddy when encountering a new technique or exercise, and can't wait to try it out.

To be an effective teacher also means developing the life-long habit of reflection and self-evaluation. Especially if you are a new teacher, you can help this natural process develop much faster by being *methodically* reflective about everything you do. You learn to set parameters by which to judge your performance, and to make your pedagogical assumptions explicit, so that you can see if they are clear

and logical.

In other words, we must take the time to think, read, and bounce our ideas off of others—if we want to be effective teachers. Then we must apply what we’ve learned in the classroom, see what happens—and then ask a new set of questions.

This is when knowing how to develop a good lesson plan helps. Making a lesson plan is really a matter of asking and answering a set of questions: What do I want to accomplish? How will I go about accomplishing it? What problems might I face? What are the limitations of the materials and the learners? Most importantly we ask, “How will I know if I have met my goals?”

Finally, we must acquire the necessary tools—things such as language awareness, classroom management skills, and graded speech.

We must start by developing a good command of what we are trying to teach. You can’t try to learn the difference between a subject compliment and a prepositional phrase the same afternoon you’re going to present this to students. A responsible teacher will go through the grammar schedule for the entire semester, and get a handle on what concepts are going to be covered. Most curriculums build on previous knowledge and unfold the grammar in a logical way, so knowing the material for the level(s) you are teaching as a whole will help you give students a better understanding of each part.

In the classroom, will you put students in to pairs? Give them a pyramid exercise? What is considered to be unacceptable behavior? What is your policy on turn taking? Where will you stand when you speak to the students? How will you monitor the students unobtrusively? Poor classroom management will undermine the most carefully prepared lesson. Learn about these things from your mentors.

Remember that there is nothing more rewarding than seeing your students improve their command of the international language of English—and knowing that that knowledge might very well change their lives for the better in the years to come.

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THE “EXTRACURRICULAR” ACTIVITIES

AH Ambassadors—A Very Rewarding Experience

Meg White, 2007-08

When I took the job at the American Home last year, I was thrilled by the fact that I would not only be teaching English, but that I would be involved in the community of Vladimir. When the year began, I may have had doubts about my ability to act as an informal “cultural ambassador” for the US, but after one TV interview on the origins of Thanksgiving, two very different radio interviews (one on the role of

Andrew Carnegie and the other on Christmas trees) and numerous visits to local schools, I really have come to enjoy the role of an accessible, friendly AH teacher—more or less “knowledgeable on things American.” Because underneath the interviews and school visits, what the people here really want to know about is your own individual experiences—and that is something that is easily shared.

But when we were reminded that we would be hosting a seminar for English teachers in the Vladimir region, I was a little worried. Truth be told, I was scared. Present a workshop for people who have been teaching ten or more years? What could we, as new English teachers, possibly teach them?

Those doubts were soon assuaged after the first day of the “seminar”—as the Russians call them. These teachers were eager to speak with native English teachers, eager to debate with us, demonstrate their sense of humor and reveal their personalities. And they wanted to learn about the games we had adapted and developed in order to teach specific aspects of our grammar. They, in turn, demonstrated their most effective “tricks” for teaching Russians difficult English grammar points.

The Russian teachers were also curious to hear about our individual experiences and interested in getting to know us as people.

We played games with them, we sang songs and taught them country-western line dances—which, to our surprise, they very much enjoyed. In short, we had fun and we learned a lot about teachers here in Vladimir.

It was extremely helpful to participate in the exchange of teaching techniques and a pleasure to get to know some of our Russian colleagues. The teachers we worked with are clearly dedicated and talented people. Spending time with them was an especially rewarding experience.

Holidays at the AH

Halloween at the American Home, 1998

Note from the Lead Teacher, Charity Trelease

I can say that, without a doubt, the Halloween party was a success on all fronts. Approximately 25 children showed up for the first party and took part in several games: bobbing for apples, trying to lower a pen, which was attached to a string tied to their backs, into a bottle (a lot more challenging--and entertaining!--than one would think), a follow-the-leader type of dancing game, and beating a pinata that was filled with candy. This last event was probably the highlight of the party--a collective cry of joy was heard in front of the American Home when the first pinata finally exploded.

In addition, students voted on their peers' costumes and Halloween drawings, all of which were on display in the meeting room. Brenda and Sara, with the help of a couple of students and Alexei, led students through the Haunted House. As I said before, all enjoyed a good time.

Brenda and Sara decorated one of the classrooms with cobwebs, candles, and sheets. Small groups of

students were led into the room, at which time one of the students working the HH told them a scary story about how a student had died at the hands (or fangs) of Brenda, the resident vampire. Just as the story was finishing, the "dead" student would rise up from a hidden casket, scaring the unsuspecting students. This tended to elicit some screams. More scary, however, was the sudden appearance of Alexei, who had an unidentifiable red gook smeared all over his face and chest. He usually jumped out at students from the closet and appeared to be holding a bowl of human organs. This invariably elicited some screams. At this point, students were led into the "Presidential Suite" [presumably the master bedroom --R.P.] where they were blindfolded and told to put their hands in various bowls on the table. Each bowl contained a body part (they used olives for eyes, a water balloon coated in oil for a stomach, big seeds for teeth, spaghetti for brains, and dried apricots for ears. This effectively "grossed out" the students. Just to underscore the eerie atmosphere, we had a Sounds of Terror CD playing in the back ground. It worked quite well.

A New Tradition? – Mardi Gras in Vladimir, 2002!

This year we decided to replace the traditional Valentine's Day party with a Mardi Gras celebration. No Russians we spoke with were familiar with this holiday. We did some research ourselves to find out what traditions are associated with Mardi Gras other than drinking, eating, trading beads, and contemplating what you will give up for Lent. In fact, we found a number of traditions that made for this crew's best party yet.

We began a week earlier making masks with the English Club--using feathers, sequins, glitter, and glue generously sent over by the parents of a current teacher. We also made nametags for each guest, creating such entities as the Baron of Baltika and the Princess of Present Perfect Progressive. At the party two students were elected King and Queen, and beads were given and taken away on the basis of the English spoken by each guest. Music combined the jazz theme of Mardi Gras with American disco favorites, current Russian hits and Europop. This was all collected on two discs prior to the party using our brand-new CD burner – eliminating the need for a DJ. Instead of King Cakes, we ordered 200 *ponchiki*, which students decorated with homemade icing in the traditional Mardi Gras colors of yellow, green and purple. We also sponsored a baking contest, with prizes for the Best, Most Creative, Most Attractive, and Worst entries. (The Worst entry was won by the *ponchiki*.) In addition to eating, dancing, and drinking, students put on several skits and the King commissioned a contest to see who could best make use of the centrally-located basement pole as a dance partner. At the end, we all promenaded to the Golden Gates where we gave a final salute to the King and Queen and shouted "HAPPY MARDI GRAS!", drawing a potentially dangerous amount of attention from drivers whizzing by in Ladas and Volgas. It remains to be seen whether Mardi Gras celebrations will become a fixture on the Russian holiday calendar, but there are at least 60 American Home students who know that it can be a fun time.

Julie Spears, Co-Lead Teacher, 2001-02

NOTE: Each year the teachers are free to choose between Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day. (See the New Teacher PowerPoint presentation.)

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THINGS TO DO—BESIDES TEACH

Being in Vladimir

Ted Walls (2002-05)

If I had to provide any words of wisdom (of which I have full many) for the new teachers, I would tell them to make the most of your time in Vladimir. Some of the local inhabitants decry it as hopelessly provincial and boring, but I have found that there are an almost limitless number of pastimes to be found here.

It really depends on what kind of person you are. If you look for activity, you will find it in abundance. I am used to big city action (Detroit), and without exaggerating I can say I've led a rich life here in "little" Vladimir, full of meaningful relationships, personal firsts and achievements. I will miss this place greatly.

Coming from a university environment as most of us do, it is good to keep in touch with the process of learning. I haven't gone through a period of intellectual mourning as most people do upon graduation, because I have been constantly challenged and stimulated here, not only by my Russian teacher, but by the very process of adapting to a new lifestyle and culture—of building a new life from scratch.

I have done and learned a lot of things. I went rock climbing for the first time in my life, something I had been dreaming of since childhood. On this trip I made friends with a whole new circle of people who are hardcore wilderness enthusiasts, and I have since had many adventures with them. Last summer we took a three-day canoe trip through one of the cleanest and most remote parts of Vladimir region.

I've learned to play the guitar, another long-standing ambition, and picked up Russian songs from my friends, as well as composing many of my own. As you will pleasantly discover, guitars and music are an integral part of any Russian party.

I have learned a lot about gardening, having gone through more than two seasons of helping out at the dacha. Gardening can be hard work, but it is relaxing and rewarding. Russians say that people who garden never go crazy or suffer from dementia! Nothing is better than opening a new jar of pickles or jam in the middle of the winter, and letting the smell take you back to the day spent outdoors when you picked the fresh cucumbers and berries.

Church is also something not to be missed. I am not Russian Orthodox, but I have so enjoyed being immersed in the Orthodox culture. The sound of the bells (quite unique), the singing, the incense, the beautiful iconography, the ancient ritual—it is all very intoxicating and uplifting. The people are very devout, some even prostrating themselves on the ground when they pray. The fact that there are so many churches, so accessible on foot, and the fact that they are so old and beautiful, can really create the impression of being in a holy landscape, if you take the opportunity to expose yourself to this aspect of Vladimir. When weather permits us to open the windows of the American Home, we can hear quite clearly the bells of Spasskaya Church, which is very close. If you position yourself in the right part of the neighborhood, you can hear the bells of four or five different churches ringing at the same time. It's easy

to stop by on your way to work, light a candle, enjoy the silent solemnity, look at the icons or frescoes, and say a quick prayer that your students will understand today's grammar.

I've read a lot since I've been here. At college you are forever reading what you must, but in Vladimir you can finally relax and get around to that novel you've wanted to finish for so long. I read *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*—both of them twice. I finished *The Brothers Karamazov*, *We*, and *The Master and Margarita*. I'm on to *The Idiot* and *Dog's Heart* next. I also re-read my anthropological theory texts and had the chance to read a lot of the source material that was presented in part by my professors.

There's something wonderful about reading Russian literature while in Russia. Much of what Tolstoy praises and complains about is still true of the Russian character. The majestic descriptions of nature and the changing seasons described in *Anna Karenina* unfolded before my eyes as I was reading about them.

On a more day-to-day level, there is a wonderful babushka who we have for a neighbor, and my wife [Ted is married to an AH student] and I visit her often for fresh hot blini and a rousing game of Uno. She also makes some pretty tasty cabbage soup. I know it doesn't sound too exciting, but we have a blast. About every other weekend there is some kind of party to go to, or friends visiting from Moscow or somewhere else invade the apartment with champagne and chocolates, and don't leave until 3 a.m. When I first got here I went to cafes and nightclubs, but all that seems too boring now that I have deeper connections. Make these connections as soon as you can!

With the arrival of the warm weather, it's time again to go traveling. My in-laws will need help at the dacha, and friends will want to go camping and make shashlik, but still we will find time to finish seeing more of the Golden Ring. Traveling like a native (bus and hostels) is in itself an adventure. We saw Pereslavl-Zalessky last fall, and we want to do Rostov and Yaroslavl this spring.

Being in Vladimir is good. All the teachers could describe in kind their own pastimes and discoveries, how life has opened itself to them here. You will see for yourself.

Studying the Flute—Russian-Style

Sarah Rorimer (2003-05), Lead Teacher 2004-05

During my last semester at Bates College, I put most of my time and energy into organizing a Senior Flute Recital that combined my two major interests: Russian studies and music. I performed solo and chamber works by twentieth century composers, including Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Shostakovich. For me, this concert was the culmination of my four years of study, and I prepared by seeking advice from my professors, my flute teacher, and by listening to all of the relevant recordings in the music library. Looking back, I can see that my recital was missing a critical element which not even my most knowledgeable mentors were able to teach me: how to play Russian music the Russian way.

I wanted to study the flute in Russia, but after my first lesson, I was a little skeptical. It was held in a dingy music school where all of the other pupils were under the age of twelve and running through the

halls singing songs at the top of their lungs. In addition, my flute teacher, Galya, was just a year older than me. "I'm a college graduate. What can I possibly learn here?" I thought. As it turns out, there was a lot to learn! Galya asked me to play some long tones, and right away she said that I was doing it all wrong. "You ought to breathe from your diaphragm, not your chest," she said. "You've been playing the flute for how long?"

For the first few months, we worked solely on the quality of my tone and breathing. I would spend each lesson playing long notes one at a time—rich, loud, low notes and soft, delicate, high notes. Galya made me repeat the note until I got it just right—equal in volume, vibrato and timbre. "Think of your breathing like your monthly wages. If you spend all of your money right away, you won't have anything left at the end of the month. How will you buy your groceries? You need to economize so that your money lasts until the very last day." (Given the size of my "Russian salary," I could certainly relate to this metaphor.) Galya even gave me exercises to do at home which required me to lie on the floor with a book under my stomach! I had no idea that learning to breathe "properly" would take so much work...and that was only the beginning!

All of Galya's music is dog-eared and well-loved, covered carefully with cellophane to protect the outer pages. Because it is really difficult to find flute music in Russia, I shared what I had with Galya and introduced her to a number of new pieces.

As for my progress, the duets that I had played in the past took on entirely new identities with her coaching. Instead of a measured playing style, I have learned how to "lift the notes off the pages," ripping off fast passages at lightning speed and milking the slow, somber sections for all they are worth. Galya is constantly pushing me to play more expressively and with more forward movement. She often stands next to me and sings the melody in my ear, encouraging me to "Play louder!" "Give it more!" or when I hit a wrong note she reprimands, "Don't compose new music!"

Now after nearly two years of study and two recitals, I have become a completely different musician. Although I will probably never be able to fully master the Russian style, I have a much better understanding of what it means to play "from the soul" with emotion and expressiveness. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to continue my musical studies and learn some of the secrets of playing Russian music from someone who really knows.

A Cross Country Adventure

Moultrie Townsend (2002-05)

I came to Russia for an adventure. However, the word adventure took on new meaning one cold Sunday morning in February when Sarah [Rorimer] and I met up with a local cross-country ski club at Friendship Park. We set out at 10 a.m. through the park and turned off onto a path heading away from Vladimir to the south. We had done this part of the route before, so I felt comfortable enough.

After we crossed an open field, our group of about twelve skiers stopped at a picnic area and had tea

and a small lunch. At this point, a few people headed back to Vladimir while the rest of us brave souls carried on to the Klyazma River. In the fall and summer I can't say that I'm impressed by the Klyazma, but it's truly beautiful in the dead of winter. We stopped in the middle of the frozen river to take some group pictures.

We continued on. After some time, we reached a small lake near a village where four fishermen were out trying their luck at ice fishing. As we waited for another member of the group to join us there, we had the opportunity to ski over to the fishermen and inquire about their success. They said the fish were not biting that day, but catching fish doesn't really seem to be the point of ice fishing anyway.

This place wound up being about the halfway point of our journey. From there we skied along a road until we found a "trail" taking us roughly parallel to Vladimir. During this part of the trip, the views were spectacular, even if the skiing was rather difficult at times.

After another two hours or so, the group was road to a ski base and rest center, "Ulibishevo." There they had cabins for rent and a small café. The management let us use their picnic tables for tea and snacks.

After a twenty-minute rest, we skied on towards "Mostostroi" and another crossing of the Klyazma River. Mostostroi ("bridge building" in Russian) is the place where the train crosses the Klyazma not far from Vladimir. When we got there we took another group picture and then skied along the train tracks, finally heading back to Vladimir.

Sarah was initially a little worried about skiing down the middle of the train tracks, but the experts in our group assured her that only two trains a day came by on this route. As it turns out, we had to ski into the snow banks twice to clear the way for trains. I guess it was all part of the adventure.

As the sun was slowly setting, we approached Vladimir. We could see some landmarks in the distance, and I for one was glad that our journey was reaching its end. We took off our skis at a warehouse area and walked uphill another ten minutes to the bus stop, Ruslan and Ludmila. By then it was almost six in the evening, and we had skied about twenty-two kilometers that day. It was quite a trip, and in spite of being tired and sore afterwards, it was one of the all-time highlights of my three years in Vladimir.

Teaching English at an Orphanage

Meghan Gilrein (2003-05)

Visiting a local orphanage and volunteering my time to teach some of the kids English has proven to be a rewarding experience. The children are eager to participate and always glad to see me. In fact, they tend to run up to welcome me, and often all try to help me take off my coat and scarf at the same time. This can sometimes be uncomfortable, but it is always flattering. I'm not used to being greeted by "students" in such a manner!

There are about ten “students,” age six, in the group I work with. The number of kids changes regularly as they are adopted. I do not know for sure, but I believe that several are headed for the United States. I am glad that I can teach them some survival English. They pick up the language surprisingly quickly and their accents are wonderful. Some of the kids have perfect pronunciation.

The children are always ready to speak English and love the attention they get when they stand up to recite some new words. They always have smiles on their faces and inevitably make my day brighter.

NOTE: Meghan helped out at the Karl Libknekht Orphanage. She was preceded there by another AH teacher, Nina Zaragoza. The children at this orphanage are between 2 and 7 years old. The orphanage staff does their best to nurture the children. This includes making every effort to get as many of them adopted as possible. Unfortunately, recent moves by the Russian government to limit foreign adoptions will make that task more difficult. Russian families don’t normally adopt. For more information on the AH’s connection with this orphanage, see “Other Projects” on the web site.

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THE VALUE OF THE AH EXPERIENCE

The Unexpected Value of Learning to Teach English Grammar

Nicole Green, 2006-07

When I mentioned leaving the United States and moving to Russia for a year, my friends thought I had lost my mind. When I put everything in storage and my condo up for sale, they were certain of it. Everyone worried about what this would mean for my future. “You’ve always been so focused...aren’t you a little old to be running around like this?” “I’m sure it’ll be fun, but what are you going to do next? You have such a great resume and then...teaching English for a year? What is that?”

I packed my bags and off I went, not sure what to expect. For the first month, I felt excited and terrified. Excited to be living in another country. Terrified because I didn’t speak Russian, I’d never heard of a lot of the grammar terminology, and I had no idea how to teach. The fear soon dissipated somewhere in the midst of week-long birthday parties, trips to the banya and invitations to make blini, to go to musical concerts, to walk in the park, to eat ice cream, to celebrate the New Year.

After returning to the States, I went to a job fair in Washington D.C. A recruiter from a financial planning company walked up to me. “We saw your resume and we know you can teach...we’d like to talk to you about working for us.” Confused, I noted my less than stellar math ability and lack of financial background or MBA. “That doesn’t matter; you know how to explain ideas. That’s all you need to succeed.” This pitch was followed by similar ones from companies selling products ranging from computers to medical equipment.

The proven ability to engage and communicate was a key factor for companies that thought my resume was of interest.

What did I end up doing? My current job involves working for a small business as a corporate trainer, teaching a “Critical Thinking” class around the country. I was surprised and pleased to find that what I thought might have been a professional gamble for the sake of pursuing a personal interest turned into an experience that gave me extra marketability.

I miss walking around in my tapochki, drinking tea and gossiping about the day’s events. My inner idealist still thinks about working for an NGO. But for now, I can say that I’m happy where I am. My time at the American Home was directly responsible for a series of unique job opportunities I would never have considered.

Note: Nicole earned her bachelors degree from the US Air Force Academy—and she has an MA in diplomacy from Norwich University. She spent four years on active duty in the Air Force before teaching at the AH.

A Year that Really Made a Difference

Erika Boeckeler, 1997-98

Russians in the seventeenth century used a different word for the first person pronoun ‘I’ than contemporary Russians use today. Az (Аз), like the contemporary Russian Ya (Я), was also a letter, but it came at the beginning of the alphabet, instead of at the end. My year as an American Home teacher in Vladimir was like that shift from A to Z, from Az to Ya, from one kind of self to another kind of self—a self that is forever changed because of that experience.

I am now working as an assistant professor at Kenyon College, having recently received my PhD in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. My daily life often reminds me of how that year shaped my present life. I learned how to make friends and acquaintances in unexpected places, like the woman who invited me in for tea as I gazed at a church across the street from her home during my first week there. The generosity and kindness of strangers in Russia never ceased to amaze me, and I strive towards those qualities in my life. I developed friendships in Vladimir which carry into today—one of my Russian friends has asked me recently to be the godmother of her newborn daughter.

Academically, learning Cyrillic spurred the passion which has become my professional livelihood. My dissertation-turned-book-manuscript discusses the impact of the alphabet upon intellectual development in the early modern period, which saw the invention of movable type and the printing press. I devote one long chapter to 17th century Cyrillic in which I discuss alphabetic phenomena during this odd time when the Cyrillic alphabet was still in flux. Some quirky alphabet trivia with which you may wish to impress your friends at cocktail parties include: a) alphabet books do not agree on the number or order of letters in the Cyrillic alphabet; b) Peter the Great personally cut out three letters,

writing the order for this while he was leading the Russian army in a war against Sweden! c) the first extant poem written in a Slavic language is an alphabet acrostic; d) the most pedagogically advanced alphabet primer of its time appeared in Moscow, and you can see this quirky printed book on display in Suzdal.

Although I am a member of the English Department, Kenyon College prizes interdisciplinary dialogue, and I am able to integrate Russian literature into my teaching. Who knew that my first real experiences of teaching at the American Home ten years ago would lead me in this direction? Whatever the future holds, I (or Az', or Ya) have been forever "cyrillicized" by my year at the American Home.

A Note from London

Charity Trelease (1998-99)

Privet, dorigie druz'ya! [Greetings dear friends!]

Last May marked the beginning of my "release" from law school. After three grueling years at Georgetown, I got my big-important piece of paper and enjoyed a few weeks off.

Alas, it was not to last. I spent the rest of the summer studying for the DC bar exam, an activity that ranks right up there with repeatedly squishing a slug. For ten weeks. With bare feet.

Thanks to some higher power, I managed to pass the bar and have since taken a job in London with Baker & McKenzie. I'll spend the next two years training to qualify as a solicitor, which is what they call lawyers over here. (Barristers, in contrast, are the ones who appear in court and - most crucially - wear powdered wigs.)

I am happy to report that the AH's prominent billing on my resume has opened countless doors for me, both in being admitted to law school, and in getting jobs with international organizations and firms. My thanks to you all for creating and growing this remarkable institution.

Why I'm Staying for Another Year

Joanna Greenlee, 2005-07

When I started thinking about whether I was going to return to teach at the American Home for a second year, the question for me was not so much, "Why should I stay?" but "Why should I leave?" There isn't one overarching reason why I decided to stay; rather, my decision was based on many small, everyday experiences that make up my life here in Vladimir. Here are a few examples.

One beautiful Saturday, Youngmee and I went skiing in Park *Druzshba* (Friendship). After we finished skiing, I was waiting for Youngmee to return her rental skis when I saw one of my former students out

walking with her little son. We talked for a while, and then she asked me to wait while she got something for us. She came back with a thermos full of steaming hot blini, dripping with butter, which she poured out into our hands. It doesn't get much better than eating blini out of a thermos after a morning of skiing in the park.

My birthday was in February, and I realized how great it is to be a teacher on your birthday. My students did not let it pass by unnoticed. I accumulated more and more gifts with every class. One class brought champagne and chocolate, and gave me *Anna Karenina* in Russian (I'm currently about 3 pages into it). Many of my students remembered my love for the banya when they gave me gifts, and I now have a large collection of scrubbing implements and other useful banya accessories. The American Home staff gave me what is probably Russia's largest *venik* (a bundle of branches with leaves on them) for use at the banya. Even some of my former students remembered my birthday. About half of a former teenaged class I had affectionately named the *zoopark* (zoo) stopped by the American Home to give me a rose and other presents for my birthday. And of course, I received many congratulations and wishes that my life would be full of happiness, success, health, and love.

Every night when I come home from work I'm greeted enthusiastically by my 15-year-old host brother, Pasha. After dinner we drink tea, and Pasha usually launches into one of his favorite conversation topics and doesn't stop for quite some time. I say "conversation," but usually this time consists of Pasha talking and me giving an understanding "Uh-uh" or "Da" once in awhile. I've heard discourses (both in Russian and English) on war, friendship, honor, the possibility of life on other planets, fate, love, and his favorite band, System of a Down. Pasha is a student at the American Home, and he often tells me about the grammar he learned in class that day. My favorite example of this happened after he learned double comparatives. He was walking around the apartment singing, as he often does, and he came into my room. "Joanna, I want to tell you something," he said. "The more I see you, the more I want to sing."

Living in Vladimir and teaching at the American Home has provided a rich assortment of unique experiences that I know I wouldn't have encountered elsewhere. Thus, I am returning to Vladimir to add even more memorable experiences to the ones I already cherish.

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COMPARING THE AH PROGRAM

An A+ for the American Home!

Youngmee Hahn (2005-06)

When I decided to come and teach at the American Home, I was expecting my year in Vladimir to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I ended up being right about that, but what I wasn't expecting was to come out of that experience with a clear idea of exactly what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. To my surprise, teaching at the American Home didn't just give me an unforgettable experience in Russia; it also showed me that teaching is where I belong. Based on my experience at the American Home, I

decided to return to the US, get the necessary certification, and embark on a career as a teacher.

I am now in the final weeks of student teaching for my certification program, and it has not been an easy ride! As I had expected, teaching high school is very different from teaching at the American Home—the students are less motivated, the curriculum is much more rigid, and there seem to be a million things to keep track of, from homeroom attendance to hall passes for kids who want to go to the bathroom! It has been a challenging time, but once in a while I catch a glimpse of the kind of learning that I saw in my students at the American Home, and it's that kind of connection that keeps me going these days.

One thing that has been fascinating for me this semester is discovering just how well-run the American Home is. In addition to student teaching, I attend a weekly seminar where we discuss curriculum issues and general teaching methods, and I've been amazed over and over as I read various articles about excellent teaching practices and theory. "That sounds exactly like the American Home!" From the American Home practice (strictly and excellently enforced by Lena) of creating tests well in advance and making sure that they actually measure proficiency, not just the ability to fill in blanks, to the very collaborative work environment where teachers can and are in fact encouraged to ask each other for advice or bounce ideas off each other, practices that are so everyday as to be taken for granted at the American Home are being presented in education journals as solutions to the many problems in the American public school system.

American Home teachers may often come in green and inexperienced, but the support and training they get are excellent. And now that I've had a chance to study teaching methods in a more formal setting, I can confidently say that the quality of instruction at the American Home is really very good. The American Home isn't just for Russophiles or adventurous souls with an urge for something different—it's also for people with a serious interest in developing their teaching skills in an uncommonly supportive and well-run program.

What a Difference...!

Jane Keeler, 2005-06

When I told my friends, family and coworkers that I was leaving my cushy government job for the purpose of moving to Russia to teach English on a remarkably small salary, I didn't exactly get the most positive reaction. I'd been saying that I was going to do this for some time, although it seems that no one really believed me. Of course, when I quit my job, sold all of my furniture, drove what was left of my possessions a couple thousand miles to my Mom's house for storage, and bought a plane ticket to Moscow, people began to realize that I was serious.

"You're doing *what?*"

"Surely you're not doing *that* again?"

"Didn't you learn your lesson the *last time?*"

The *last time* was in 2001, when my best friend and I moved to South Korea for what was to be a short lived and horrific experience teaching English as a Second Language, or ESL. In short, the school in Korea was a scam where the owners blatantly ripped off both teachers and students in order to maximize their profit. However, while in Korea I realized that while I was stuck in the most miserable of jobs, many native English speakers were able to travel around the globe having wonderful experiences teaching ESL. I knew that at some point I would return to the field of ESL; I just didn't realize it would take four years....

After extensive research into the American Home, in hope of avoiding an experience such as the one I had in Korea, I applied for a teaching position. I was hired, and moved to the town of Vladimir, Russia in August. I have been here for almost two months as I write this, and so far the experience has been wonderful. For nearly my first full month in Russia, we attended seminars at the American Home (led by Lead Teachers Kelli and Britt, and our Teachers' Assistant, Lena), wherein we learned a lot about how to teach ESL at the American Home. We planned lessons and "taught" them to our coworkers, who in turn critiqued us. The weeks of practice and preparation were wonderful and helped to ease us into the reality of teaching. But we did not spend all of our first month working; we toured the historic district of Vladimir and visited the ancient and beautiful nearby town of Suzdal. We took a day trip to Moscow and spent a lazy Saturday at a dacha in the country. The first few weeks of our stay in Vladimir did not merely prepare us to teach in the American Home; they also enabled us to have a smooth transition into life in Russia.

Classes began nearly four weeks ago. Despite the wonderful treatment by the American Home staff following my arrival, I must admit that I approached the first day of classes with trepidation. I remembered the horrors of my last time in an ESL classroom.... But I needn't have worried. My students have been wonderful, and the continuing support I have received from the staff and my American coworkers has been fantastic. I am looking forward to the remainder of the year going as smoothly as the past seven weeks.

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THE HOST FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Russian Hospitality 101

Molly Murchison, 2006-07

The other day, Galya, the director of the American Home, ventured up to the teachers' office. As usual, all eight of us were roosting in the warm attic room e-mailing, lesson-planning, and brushing up on our English grammar. Galya stopped in front of my desk and said, "Molly, I have to talk to you. There is a problem with your host family." Galya had the tone of gearing up for a lecture, and needless to say I was a little concerned. "Boris called this morning. He said that you don't eat, and never have breakfast."

This is a peculiar thing for my host to say, since I actually do eat breakfast, but it's usually after he's left for work. I concluded that he must think I don't eat breakfast because I do my dishes after I finish, meaning that there isn't any evidence that I really ate. (It is apparently unheard of for a guest in Russia to do their own dishes.) In addition to the lack of "evidence," we have a history with the issue of how much I eat...

The first day I arrived in Vladimir, Boris greeted me at the door while my host brother and his friend carried my suitcases up the stairs, despite my insistence that I could do it myself. Boris immediately led me to the kitchen, sat me down at the table, and began bringing out the food. An unusually large bowl of soup, a plate piled high with bread, an oversized tomato and cucumber salad, two sausages, a bowl of tea cookies ("sushki"), and a glass of tea, into which he carefully measured several teaspoons of sugar.

I wasn't really hungry, but since I found myself sitting there in front of all that food, I made an effort to eat anyway. Boris sat across from me and watched my progress. If I slowed down for a moment, he would loudly say, "Eat, eat!" So I tried my best to eat as much as possible, but could not convince Boris that I was eating as much as I should. I tried to explain that the food was great, but I really just wasn't that hungry. He looked at me skeptically. "Go on, just go ahead and eat!"

A few minutes later, with a grave expression, he picked up the phone, and called the American Home. "Oxana, it's Boris. I have the American here, and I'm giving her food, but she won't eat! I don't know what to do!" I panicked in response to the fact that he was going to such measures. I grabbed some bread with one hand, and a fork with the other, and made as much of a show of eating as possible.

I courageously sat there until all the food was gone, and I felt sick to my stomach.

Though Boris has only resorted to calling the American Home once, similar kitchen table stand-offs have happened almost every day. I hope to one day be able to convey in good Russian firmly and unequivocally that I am not hungry and won't eat anymore. In the meantime, I will leave all used dishes in the sink, and try to follow my fellow teacher, Joanna's wise advice: "Don't let the food win!"

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EXPERIENCING RUSSIA

The Sweet Taste of Triumph: A Produkti Story

Brooke Ricker, 2005-06

I arrived in Russia with almost no Russian language skills. I could say "please" and "thank you," and introduce myself by name, but that was about it. With daily practice and the very able assistance of the AH's Russian tutors, Tanya and Nelli, I've now gotten the hang of conjugating verbs and asking simple questions, but I'm still not very comfortable with speaking, especially speaking to strangers. The other

day I took a leap forward in self-confidence. Here's how it happened.

My host family's apartment is a nice twenty-minute walk from the American Home along one of Vladimir's main streets, so I frequently walk to and from work. On my way I pass several "produkti," small stores that sell candy, cookies, bread, meat, cheese, yogurt, and the like. They are inexpensive, convenient, and really frightening. Why? In most produkti everything is kept in glass-covered cases or on shelves behind the counter, so you have to ask for what you want by name. Most things are sold in bulk as well, so you have to ask for the specific amount that you want, then when the saleslady weighs it you have to understand the price and produce the correct amount of rubles. Add to this the fact that produkti workers tend to be pretty short on patience, and you get one very intimidating shopping experience. Thus I've been doing most of my shopping at the pricey Grossmart, a Western-style grocery store near the American Home. There you can take what you want from the shelves and put it in your basket; the packaging makes it obvious what's inside. When you check out, the amount you owe shows up on the little screen at the cash register. You don't have to be able to speak—or understand—a word of Russian.

But on this particular day I really wanted to buy some cookies for the teachers' meeting. Specifically, I wanted the best cookies ever created, vaffli, a delicious kind of wafer with chocolate filling. So I stood outside the nicest-looking produkti and had a little debate with myself.

Head: "What if I don't understand the saleslady? What if she yells at me? What if I get all embarrassed and can't say anything and everyone laughs?"

Stomach: "Mmmm....chocolate..."

Head: "Good point."

I went inside, marched up to the candy counter and requested my 200 grams of vaffli with all the confidence I could muster. And the clerk understood! I didn't understand the price the first two or three times she said it; numbers are still very difficult for me, especially distinguishing between twenty and twelve, or fifty and fifteen, which are as similar in Russian as in English. But the woman was actually very nice about it; she slowed down and used her hands to get the numbers across, which many clerks won't do.

I emerged from the produkti clutching my plastic bag of vaffli with a big grin slowly spreading across my face, a grin that lasted all the way to the American Home and all the way through the teachers' meeting, where the other teachers agreed that these vaffli were specially flavored with the taste of triumph.

I came to Russia for exactly these sorts of challenges; I wanted not only to meet new people, explore a new culture, and learn a new language, but, most important, I wanted to step outside my comfort zone. Some days I don't have the energy or ambition to be brave, and my Russian is still progressing slowly. But motivated by my insatiable sweet tooth, I conquered a fear, and it feels wonderful.

From Russia, In Love...

Britt Newman, 2004-06

Just over a year ago, I came to Russia hoping to meet Russians and experience their culture. Boy, have I accomplished those goals! In particular, I met Alyona Lazareva, who on September 23rd became Alyona Newman, my wife.

Alyona and I met at the American Home in the fall of 2004. I was teaching a salsa dance class as my New Teacher Lecture, and she was one of the students who came to learn the dance. We're living proof that it's worth the effort to prepare a good lecture.

On our wedding day we completed all of the Russian wedding traditions, one of which is to visit your place of work after the wedding ceremony and briefly celebrate with your coworkers. Here I must say that before coming to Russia, I had never heard the term "work collective." Granted, that's mainly because it's a translation from Russian and a term that we don't use much in English. Nonetheless, my time in Vladimir hasn't just introduced me to a new phraseologism. At the American Home I really have become a part of an extraordinary group of colleagues, an exemplary work collective. Never have they been in better form than on my wedding day.

The wedding party arrived at the American Home to see *Britt* and *Alyona* spelled out in autumn leaves on the garage door. The teachers and staff stood in two lines, forming a corridor that ushered us through the house and out to the back deck, where a wonderful spread of fruit and champagne awaited. Although the champagne tasted fine to me, everyone else found it to be very "gorka" – bitter – which required the newly-weds to sweeten it up with a kiss. We had little time to enjoy the refreshments before the real entertainment began.

Two "telegrams" had arrived that morning and were read aloud to us. One was a tongue-in-cheek comment from Ron Pope, praising the day's gains in Russian-American relations. One was a long and passionate farewell – earning me many a sharp glance from my better half – signed "Your bachelor life." Other colleagues then offered their multi-lingual congratulations.

The celebration moved on to a hilarious song about my wife and me composed by Alexei. The full American Home company performed this masterpiece, complete with sound effects – popping balloons – worthy of Tchaikovsky, and with a shower of autumn leaves.

After the song, we continued with another contest. Lena, our Teachers' Assistant, brought out an apple stuck with numerous toothpicks. Taking turns, Alyona and I drew out toothpicks – giving for each one a loving word about each other. This game was especially important, because by drawing the final toothpick, I supposedly won the final word in all situations in our married life. Alexei and Galya, if this turns out not to be the case, I'm going to be filing a complaint!

The champagne and food continued until finally we had to move on to the next stop in our wedding-day festivities. As we drove off from the American Home, Alyona told me that her work collective surely

wouldn't prepare anything as elaborate as mine had. A loud rattling behind the car interrupted us. Cutting away the trail of tin cans and old shoes that had been surreptitiously tied to the back of the car – a very American addition to our Russian wedding – I had to agree with her.

Working Vs. Visiting

Chris Stroop, 2003-04

Having visited Russia and even Vladimir several times before I came to work at the American Home, my first impressions as a new teacher were not strictly my first impressions of Vladimir. Nevertheless, the experience of coming here for the long-term was new, as was the degree to which I was going to be on my own in various situations, relying on my Russian skills and cultural knowledge. Sometimes my skills and knowledge have failed me in minor ways, although I'm getting to know Russia better and better as I learn from my mistakes. I've learned to barter in the open-air markets, which is now actually fun. I've also learned to deal with the fact that some stores sell things in one section and make you pay in another—so that you have to ask the price, remember it exactly, go pay, get your receipt, and then go back and claim what you've bought. A terrible nuisance at first, this process is now only mildly annoying, at least most of the time. However, on my less culturally sensitive days, when, for example, a lady at the post office is extremely rude to me, all such things become just as annoying as they ever were, and I feel like singing "God Bless America" in the middle of the street, or at least "God Bless the Down-Home American Concepts of Good Business and Service with a Smile." In general, however, Russia is becoming less foreign to me, although this is an on-going process.

During my first few months here, I've had some particular adventures with public transportation. For example, I was bewildered three times when trolley-busses I was riding just stopped in the middle of their route, seemingly at random. After the third time, I remembered to ask a Russian about the matter, and I finally figured out what had happened. The unclear Russian the conductor or driver was yelling every time people got on was not an announcement of the next stop, but rather an announcement that the bus would be finishing for the day at a particular stop. I've also learned the minute details of "Marshrutka Etiquette"—all the proper phrases for asking fellow passengers to pass your money to the driver, how to pool a bunch of money when several passengers get on at once, and how to ask the driver to stop—and even why the stress in the word "ostanovitye" (stop) is sometimes on the fourth syllable, and sometimes on the third. (The first is a command: "Stop at the next bus-stop!" The second is a question: "Will you stop at the next bus-stop?" In Russian, the command is actually not rude, although I am still having difficulty adjusting to the way Russians command each other so often. My cultural background gives me a tendency to perceive these commands as impolite, especially when they lack the word "pozhaluista" (please), as they so often do.)

As far as public transportation is concerned, I've also learned to recognize the stops I need, even when the windows of a bus or marshrutka are extremely dirty, fogged up, or iced over. Before, how anyone managed to do this was a complete mystery to me—I lamented the fact that the bus-stops were not announced on the vast majority of busses, thinking that Russians must have a sixth sense, just like they must have specially adapted eyes to see in the dark. (I still think the latter is the case. At night, which

these days starts about 5:00 o'clock, they don't seem to step in nearly as many puddles as I do. I've gotten to the point where I'm *waiting* for the puddles to freeze over.) Meanwhile, I became extremely frustrated as every Russian I pressed on the subject of announcing bus-stops told me that Vladimir was a small city, so there was no need to do this. I remembered my days of study in Germany—efficient, order loving Germany—where each and every bus-stop was announced by a pleasant, electronically recorded voice, even in my (by Russian standards) tiny city of some 70,000 inhabitants. While I still prefer the German system, I have adapted to the Russian, and I suppose I can grudgingly admit that it's part of the charm of living here. I now have no difficulty in getting off at the right stop along routes I normally take.

So, Russia is causing me to grow, teaching me new things, and, I suppose, building character and all of that. I enjoy the challenge of the language—I only wish I had more time for it, but as a first semester English teacher, I'm very busy. I also enjoy much of the intercultural interaction, the history that is all around me, and a lot of Russian food and traditions. And then there's the Russian rock music. Only legal since the mid-1980s, some Russian rock is wonderful stuff—a mixture of Western and traditional "folk" influences. Not only do I love listening to groups like DDT and Lyube, but they also help me improve my language skills. Before I leave this place, I will certainly be learning a recipe for borsht—and buying a few more CDs. Meanwhile, I'm working on the challenge of getting people with only three verb tenses in their native language to understand the future perfect, applying to grad schools, and hoping that maybe, just maybe, I will develop eyes specially adapted to see puddles in the dark.

Fleeced: My Run-in with the Russian Police

By Alex Dvorkin, 2008-10 (Lead Teacher, 1009-10)

When I got on the bus from Kislovodsk to Moscow, I was relieved to learn that this time I would not be sitting next to someone who'd been drinking. On my ride from Moscow to Elista some ten days earlier, I'd had the misfortune of sitting next to a Kalmyk who—only one hour into the twenty hour drive—asked me if he could relieve himself in my almost empty bottle of water. On my return trip, the beautiful Karachay girl who was sitting next to me as our bus pulled out of Kislovodsk didn't look like someone who was going to present similar problems. The ride would be long, boring, and not very comfortable, but I didn't have anything to worry about.

I was wrong.

When we pulled into the Caucasian Mineral Waters bus station, a police officer boarded our bus and began to inspect everyone's documents. The suicide bombers responsible for the March attacks on the Moscow Metro had come to Moscow from the Caucasus by bus, so the checking of documents didn't come as too big a surprise. I had my passport, visa, and registration: all the documents I needed. I was not expecting there to be any problems.

Unfortunately, problems don't care about whether or not you are expecting them.

It all happened so quickly. The police officer finally reached me. He asked for my documents. I promptly produced them. He asked me what I'd been doing in his neck of the woods. I told him I'd been traveling on vacation. He asked me what I was doing in Russia. I said I taught English. He asked me where I taught. I answered honestly. Next, he asked if I was receiving a salary there. I respectfully answered that I was. Where, he then followed up, was my work authorization card? When I told him I didn't have one, he asked me to get up and follow him.

At this point I started to get a little nervous.

The plastic card he was telling me I needed sounded legitimate to me. During my first year at the American Home, I was given just such a card. Why, I started to wonder, wasn't I given one this year? Perhaps the American Home had forgotten. Perhaps they'd decided to try and put one past the bureaucrats.*

I'd heard all sorts of horror stories from my students about corrupt police officers in Russia, so I was a little skeptical of this officer's claim that I didn't have all of the necessary documents. On the other hand, I distinctly remembered being issued a card the previous year just like the one this guy was describing to me. It sounded plausible and legitimate.

So, what was I to do? My first thought was to call someone from the American Home, but this wasn't an option because the money on my cell phone had run out due to the exorbitant roaming charges I'd incurred during my travels. I thought about suggesting to the officer that he might be mistaken about my needing a work authorization card, but that seemed to come dangerously close to charging him with dishonesty or corruption. Such a charge might offend or provoke him. I definitely didn't want to do that.

As I was mulling over all of this, the police officer suggested we move our conversation to his car, which we turned out to be standing next to.

Inside the car I explained to the police officer that I'd been given a work authorization card the previous year, but unfortunately not this year. His response to this was that I seemed like a nice guy, but that this didn't change the fact of my being in violation of Russia's immigration laws. According to the officer, I would have to pay a five thousand ruble fine in Moscow within the next twenty four hours. If I didn't pay it, I faced the possibility of having my visa 'liquidated' and being forced to leave the country.

I looked out the window at the Moscow-bound bus where I hoped my backpack was sitting undisturbed. I remember wishing that there was some way to just make this whole mess go away. Maybe I was dreaming. I'd count to ten and suddenly find myself magically transported to an empty train on the Moscow Metro humming towards Kursky station. Yes, I'd just count to ten and this whole hassle would simply be gone. One, tw...

"So," the young police officer interjected, "what are we going to do?"

"Well," I said, "I guess I'll pay the fine if that is what is required of me."

This answer didn't seem to please the police officer. He repeated the same question, this time asking it in a way that suggested there might be an easier way out.

When I didn't answer, he became more direct and asked me if I had "any propositions."

At this point it became pretty clear what he was getting at. He wanted a bribe. I didn't want to give him one, of course. But I also didn't want to deal with any bureaucrats back in Moscow. What I wanted more than anything else was to get out of this police officer's car and back on my bus. So, I pulled out my wallet and peeked inside. Three crisp thousand ruble notes. More bad luck. I'd have to start by offering him one thousand, the equivalent of about thirty dollars—a pretty significant sum.

I took one of the bills out of my wallet and showed it to my 'captor.'

The police officer shook his head. I had clearly disappointed him.

In a kind, almost mentorly tone, he explained that since the fine imposed on people without work documents was much more than a thousand rubles, he couldn't accept such a small sum. The way he said it, you might have thought that he was turning it down on principle. It seemed as if he was telling me, "I'd love to let you off for just a thousand, but I just can't. There are rules, you know."

After having my offer shot down, the first thought that popped into my head was whether or not he'd consider changing a thousand. Maybe fifteen hundred rubles would work. In my mind's eye, I saw him press the button that usually turns on the radio. Only this didn't turn on the radio. The steering wheel suddenly opened and a cash register on springs shot out. The police officer pushed a button. *Kaching*. Before I could even bat an eye, the officer had snatched both thousand ruble bills from my hand, deposited them in the register, counted out five crisp hundred ruble bills, and placed them back in my outstretched hand.

"Would you care for a receipt, sir?"

It must have been the sheer outlandishness of those words coming out of a Russian police officer's mouth that brought me back.

The police officer looked at me with a puzzled look on his face, "I'm sorry, but one thousand rubles is not enough."

I opened my wallet and took out another thousand. This elicited an approving nod of the head. I took the two bills and held them out to the officer. Shocked by my lack of discretion, he politely asked me to place the money on the dashboard. Clearly, he was worried about someone seeing us. I guess this way he could say, however implausibly, that I had put the money there while going through my wallet in search of my work permit. I later learned that this is standard bribe taking procedure for Russian cops.

I got out of the car with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I felt relieved that I wasn't going to miss my bus and be late for the start of the summer semester at the American Home. On the other hand, I felt angry

and frustrated at my own powerlessness because I suspected that I may very well have just been cheated. At the same time, considering the circumstances, it wasn't clear what other alternatives I had.

When I returned to Vladimir and told my story to the Russian staff at the American Home, they confirmed my suspicions. Teachers don't need work permits in Russia. I'd been had.

During my two years at the American Home, I covered a lot of ground: Alexandrov, Yekaterinburg, Elista, Gus-Khrustalny, Istra, Kazan, Kiev, Kislovodsk, Kostroma, Murom, Nalchik, Nizhniy Novgorod, Omsk, Orel, Pereslavl-Zalesskiy, Plyos, Pskov, Pyatigorsk, Rostov Velikiy, Ryazan, Sergiev Posad, Smolensk, Tomsk, Tula, Velikiy Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Yurev Polskiy, Zheleznovodsk. After the end of my last semester, I went on an unforgettable hiking adventure in the Altai Mountains.

I hope my story doesn't dissuade you from traveling in Russia, for many of my fondest memories are of my time on the road. In addition to all of the amazing things I saw during my travels, I also had the pleasure of meeting a number of fascinating people. There was the Kyrgyz man I shared a room with in Tomsk. There was the Buddhist monk from Ulan-Ude I met on an eastbound train. And how could I forget the gregarious and inquisitive young Kalmyk man who sat down between me and that drunkard en route to Elista?

So, travel, but be safe. Know what documents you need and always make sure you have money on your phone in case you find yourself in an unexpected situation. If you travel as much as I did, you might find yourself in a difficult situation from time to time, but the good will in all likelihood outweigh the bad. It certainly did for me.

Have a good trip! Schastlivogo puti!

*Alex's blog post about the castle in the photo:

<http://notesfromvladimir.blogspot.com/2010/06/spring-break-travels-part-6-around.html>

NOTE: According to Oxana, the AH's Assistant Director and "expert" on "required documents," when the Federal Migration Service decides that we qualify to hire "teachers," under Russian law they do not have to obtain "work permits." In 2008-09, apparently to be on the safe side, bureaucrats who were new to the job decided that we were not allowed to hire "teachers." The next year they decided that we were an "educational institution" which was allowed to hire "teachers" and, therefore, work permits were not required. This year, because of a delay in renewing our "educational" license thanks, in part, to a changed interpretation of the "rules," we had to go back to getting work permits. We don't yet know what we will be allowed to do for the coming year.

Clearly, each group needs to be sure they know what documents they need to have with them, especially when they are traveling. They also need to be prepared to contact the American Home if they encounter difficulties.

Alex might have been able to avoid having to pay a bribe if Oxana had been given the opportunity to explain to him-and the officer—that he did not need to have a "work permit." Mobile (cell) phones with

enough money on account to call the American Home are essential, especially when traveling. (We loan phones to all of the teachers.)

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FINDING A JOB

Serendipity Led Me Back to Teaching

Sarah Rorimer, 2003-05

When embarking on a job hunt at the beginning of 2007, my primary concern was not to find a job, but to be found by a job. AH teachers and students alike will immediately recognize the linguistic difference between these two phrases: the former is active and the latter is passive. I wanted to find a niche that needed me – a calling. I had generated a list of qualities that characterized my ideal job, but I just could not seem to define it in terms of a profession or title. For example, I knew that I wanted a civic-minded position with an international connection that would allow me to express creativity, enthusiasm and caring—while positively influencing the lives of others. I had also found through a series of administrative internships that I did not want to spend my days sitting in front of a computer screen.

One snowy February evening, after a lecture at the Metropolitan Opera on Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin,” I ran into a fellow opera enthusiast and high school principal whom I had met through one of my internships. In a brief exchange, he informed me of an unexpected opening in his ESL department and encouraged me to apply. At the time, I was about to accept a job fundraising for a musical organization, but following the advice of my aunt, I decided not to leave any stone unturned. When I visited the school, I surprised myself by accepting the job on the spot. The opportunity was too good to refuse! That very day, the New York Times ran an article about the great need for ESL teachers in New York City. Within a week, I was certified as a substitute teacher (a process which normally takes 2-4 months) and began working at my new post. Every day, I walk to school and find myself working in an international community that includes recent immigrants from Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nepal and Pakistan. In June, I will begin the New York City Teaching Fellows program, which will allow me to earn a subsidized Masters degree in education while teaching full-time.

I am so grateful for this fortuitous development—even though there is much work to be done! Teaching ESL in the nation’s largest public school system offers a major set of challenges (e.g., classroom management, motivating teenagers and teaching students with completely different first languages). I am realizing more and more what a privilege it was to teach at the American Home, where students were eager and dedicated—and where we could focus on understanding just one culture.

I can say without a doubt that I would not be where I am today if it were not for Serendipity!

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AN ADDITIONAL COMMENT

What It's Like Being a "Professional American" in Vladimir

Eric Leiken, 2006-07

The past month I have judged a regional talent show, been a guest of honor at an educational conference in Murom, spoke at an International Judicial Conference in Vladimir, had my profile in multiple newspapers and been photographed more times than I can remember. I can honestly say that I am somewhat of a local celebrity. I can also honestly say that I am not particularly personable, good looking, funny, talented or cool. Why, then, am I so popular? It's because of what I do for a living. My name is Eric – and I am a Professional American. (True, I also work part time as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, but even for that position, my major qualification is being an American, and the hours are only from 11-9 five days a week.) In contrast, the services of a Professional American are in constant demand, so my seven colleagues and I are always being invited here and there and fed and feted. Of course, it is nice that people pay attention to you, and think you are interesting, but it is also disconcerting to know that the basis of your appeal has little to do with who you are and everything to do with where your from.

I came to Russia with the goal of getting to know Russians and trying to understand this country whose history, politics, culture and language have always fascinated me. And while I am not leaving as a bitter, jaded ex-pat (I don't think), I am leaving as someone that will not miss answering the questions "So, why did you come to Russia?" "What do you think are the differences between Russia and America?" and "Honestly, what you think about Murom?" I will, however, miss many things. Having truly intellectual and interesting conversations with my D classes, seeing the genuine amusement of my grownup Z1 students after being able to say, "A cold beer, please" on day 3 of the semester, hanging out and playing cards at Joanna's, eating shashlik in the woods, running from a steaming hot banya and jumping into a freezing cold lake at a friend's dacha, and talking about Russian politics in Russian with Russians in Russia. As I am writing this, the Green Day song, "Time of Your Life," is playing (I swear to God). But it is not only that making me nostalgic right now. It is also the fact that despite the weather and the service at the post office, I have really enjoyed my time working at the American Home and have come to love both this place and all the people that have made it feel like home for me.

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