



EARLY EDUCATION STORIES

ISU Internatonal Studies

JoAnn McCarthy

Vladimir students

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SEEDS OF ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

JoAnn McCarthy

Executive Director (1983-1991), Office of International Studies and Programs, Illinois State University

To paraphrase Dickens, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” My first trip to the Soviet Union in 1990 coincided with the emergence of two new catchwords that defined the decade—*perestroika* and *glasnost*. The experience was a study in contrasts as the Soviet Union emerged from isolation and began to experiment with political and economic reforms. And for the first time, Russian universities were reaching out to the West to establish academic partnerships.

As Executive Director of the Office of International Studies and Programs at Illinois State University, I had been approached by academic counterparts from Vladimir Polytechnic University to establish an exchange of faculty and students. After hosting a delegation from Vladimir Polytechnic, we arranged a reciprocal visit to the USSR several months later.

Provost David Strand and Professor Mark Kaiser (head of ISU’s Russian Studies Program,) and I scheduled our trip for early March of 1990. In hindsight, it might have been wiser to visit during the summer months. However, I have always treasured the indelible images and memories of that quintessential Russian winter. In spite of layers of wool, long underwear, wool socks over tights, knee-high boots, hats and gloves, I was still ill-prepared for the temperatures of early March. My first purchase was a fur hat, and it was the key to my survival over the next week. It has since proven too warm to wear here in the US, although I did bring it out of hibernation for the Obama inauguration!

Some images that flash across my mind include a snow-covered birch forest; driving across a frozen lake to visit one of the oldest of the Russian Orthodox churches; dinner in the home of a university administrator involving a lot of sign language and laughter with his elderly mother who spoke no English; a serious lack of fresh fruit and vegetables; bare shelves in a pharmacy; a convivial evening of dinner and dancing at a local hotel; and a lovely watercolor purchased from a local artist in Suzdal that still hangs in my bedroom.

However, one memory stands out among all the others—our visit to a local high school English class. Provost Strand and I moved to different corners of the room and students gathered around to ask us questions. To me, they asked “Are you married? Do you have children? Who is taking care of them? How much do you make? What kind of car do you drive? Tell us about your house.” Eager faces crowded around, curious about this (then) young woman from so far away. Later, Provost Strand reported having a long conversation with his group about how a highly educated man could possibly believe in God.

Change was afoot and we all knew it. It was an exciting time to be developing the infrastructure that would ensure that these students (and their American counterparts) could have the opportunity to see for themselves what life in America and Russia is really like. Over the years, I know that hundreds of Russian and American citizens have made the journey to their Sister City and, in the process, learned more than they ever dreamed they would.



WHERE IS HOME NOW?

Anton (Tony) Shamenkov

*Exchange student at age 16 with the Marilee Alvey family in Bloomington, 1996; auto designer now living in Paris, France. **This page was written in 2009.***

When someone asks me if I've ever had a life changing experience, the answer is an easy one for me. I've been fortunate enough to participate in 1996 in celebrations of partnership relations between Russian city of Vladimir and Bloomington-Normal in Illinois. Part an interpreter, part a prospective exchange student, part a lucky curious explorer, I ended up in Bloomington/Normal at the age of 16. Prior to that I lived with my aunt, Larisa Gritskevich, in an apartment across the hall from Irina Lapshina. I was 12 years old when I met Joe Grabill there. At that time I earned some of my first money when he bought art pieces I had made out of bark.

The trip to the USA in 1996 truly opened my horizon much wider than ever before. During the mid-90s Russia was already getting quite a lot of information about the West, yet relatively few people had experienced it firsthand. Of course, this contributed to a certain mystery and legend of the curious far-away land. For example, it was unfathomable for us that someone would haul an old, yet still working, TV to a curb. In Russia every material blessing was attained with great difficulty and used up till its last breath.

Well, there I was in the heart of America seeing it with my own eyes, meeting the locals, asking them questions and answering theirs. The mystery was beginning to disappear, being replaced by new knowledge, experiences, stories and friends, some of whom later became just like family. Some things seemed quite different, yet at the core the people were the same with their joys and sorrows, achievements and disappointments, sense of humor and genuine kindness.

Also, I got to feel and see the spirit of the American Dream, the idea that one can accomplish very much if he truly desires it. For me an unlikely dream of becoming a car designer became true.

Thanks to MY wonderful American families, the Alveys in Bloomington and the Jacobsens in California, as well as many kind helpful friends I met on the way, I was able to graduate from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA. This helped to land a job with Porsche in Los Angeles and later Chrysler in Detroit. Finally, another dream realized when I became designer for the exterior of Jeep (one of Chrysler's brands) concept car, presented at Detroit Motor Show 2008.



The exciting news continued when I received a very interesting offer from the French manufacturer Renault to join their Paris design studio. It was bitter-sweet leaving America as my place of residence with all the friends, extended families, and places I love. Guess what I had to do while I was emptying my house, getting ready to move? Sure enough. I hauled my old TV to the curb -- mission accomplished.

A much harder question for me to answer, than the one in the beginning, is whether I will ever come back home to live. Well, first I have to figure out where that home is now. Is it in Russia, is it in the US, will I find it in France? However, I'm glad that it's difficult. It means that my family is that much larger, and that I

This page was written by Anton in 2014.

The photo of me on the right was taken in Paris. My American host mother, Marilee Alvey, has just visited me here in September 2014.

I still have a few friends in Russia that I keep in contact with. Also, I'm very close with my grandmothers in Vladimir. I try to go to Russia at least a couple of times a year.

I still keep a strong relation with the Alvey family. I keep in touch with Marilee over the phone. She had come to visit me in Paris a couple of years ago, and is back again this September, as I mentioned. Every Christmas I come to Illinois and get to spend some time



with the whole family. See me left with Marilee in Bloomington in 2011. We have a lot of fun with grandkids, nieces and nephews.

My brother Kostya at the age of 14 had the host family of John and Julie Maloy in Bloomington. Kostya married a Ukrainian wife, Anastasiya, 5 years ago in Savannah, Georgia. They have two children. He lives in the Bronx in New York City and is a designer of shoes for Kenneth Cole.

I've been working at Renault in Paris for over 6 years now. It's been a very interesting experience. I design the exterior look of the cars. So far the success has been the 2014 Renault "Kwid" concept for the



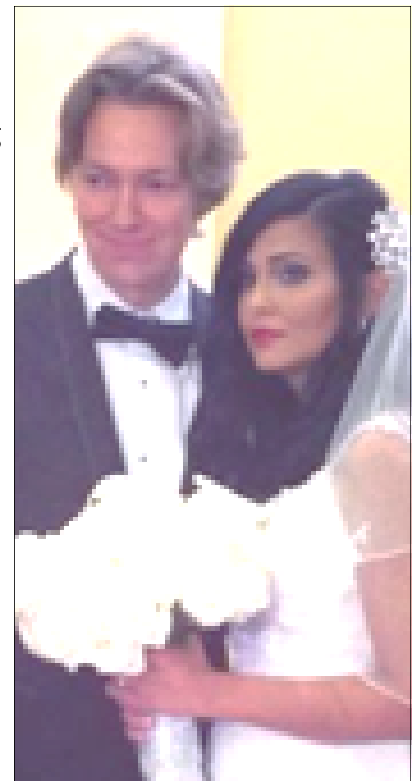
Delhi Auto Show. At the moment I'm doing a couple of cars that will be coming out in following years.

My goal is to continue working on automotive projects, hopefully developing a sports car that will be on the road in the near future. Also, I'd like to develop some other products and projects on the side like watches, footwear, and yachts.

On the personal level I married Leena in Detroit, Michigan on August 2, 2014. We have dated for years. Her family members are from Iran and I met them recently.

A happy, healthy family is all I wish for. I'd like to keep strong ties with family and friends.

I try to use every chance to help people, the way I was helped during my studies and career.



A CHANCE ON A BORING DAY

Lyena Frolova Solomon

*Student from Vladimir; owner of her own website company in California
Written in 2009.*

On a hot summer morning we were sitting in a classroom trying to stay awake. The school was out and the hallways of Vladimir Pedagogical University were empty and quiet. We History Majors and English Minors in the graduating class were receiving our last instruction before the government finals in Pedagogy and were ready to be teachers. The Pedagogy exam was a formality with no surprises. Boring. We all wished we were somewhere else.



A tourist bus pulled up to the curb right outside the classroom. Those who were sitting by the window were no longer paying attention to the professor. We were watching people clearly not Russian get off the bus and go inside the University building. Ten minutes later our session was interrupted by the Dean of History department. She informed us that a group of Americans had arrived. We were to assemble in an auditorium, listen to the guests and ask questions. A group from Bloomington-Normal was on their first official trip to Vladimir. Later my friends and I spotted some of the members of the delegation in front of their bus and we went over to chat and say good bye. That is where I met Wanda Hoover, who was happy to talk informally to us.

It was the summer of 1989 right after Chernobyl and the times of Perestroika. Paul McCartney released his record "Back in the USSR" and made it available only in Russia. It was very rare when Russians had anything that was available only in Russia. A couple of us decided to get Paul McCartney's record for our newly found friends. Despite the KGB, we found a way to deliver those records and exchange mailing addresses. That began my long correspondence with Wanda Hoover. After graduating, I got a job as a teacher of History and English. Long hours never stopped me from writing letters to Wanda, who became my "Dear Harriet."

In 1991 Wanda invited me to participate in a bike ride around McLean County called PACRACC. I was not a bike enthusiast and my new American friends were worried that 3 days and 220 miles of biking might do me in. They insisted I should take it easy and laughed when I told them that Russians never quit. Under the watchful eye of Orlyn Edge, I finished the whole ride feeling like an exhausted million bucks.

Several dozen letters later Wanda Hoover suggested I come to study at ISU. It was an extraordinary opportunity for me! I had been a teacher for 4 years and welcomed this change. ISU History Professor Joe Grabill took care of the paperwork and helped me adjust to the unfamiliar system. He was my thesis adviser and taught me how to write papers "the American way." Working as Joe's teaching assistant allowed me to gain a completely different perspective on teaching practices in the US. Joe bridged cultural gaps when his students complained about my teaching style. He explained that Russians spoke more directly and critically than Americans.

Joe allowed me to use his office for 2 years of my studies at ISU and I lived in Wanda's house. I eventually graduated from ISU with a Masters Degree in History.

I am now married and live in California. I embraced the Internet 15 years ago and currently have a consulting company doing website development and online advertising for small businesses. I am an American citizen and love this country.

The life-long friendships I now have with several members of the Sister City organization are priceless. I am eternally grateful to all the opportunities I was given. I owe it to a chance on a boring summer day and a 5 minute chat by a bus. I owe it to American citizens from Bloomington-Normal who came to offer their friendship to a tiny part of a struggling nation 20 years ago.

BLESSINGS IN ALLERGY CONTROL

Dmitry “Dima” Volkov

Student from Vladimir.

Photo in 2008 with wife Tanya and children.



Mine isn't a "coming of age" story. As of my first trip to the US (part of a month-long university exchange trip to ISU), in the fall of 1990, even though I was not quite 22, I have already been through two years of mandatory army service, was half-way through my Master's degree, and 3 months into my marriage. It isn't a "rags-to-riches" story either – I neither started in rags (though beginnings were definitely humble), nor made it into the 1%. Nothing fell into my lap, and hard work and perseverance are required of

anyone (short of those born into money) trying to make a living - whether it's in one's homeland or abroad. I also don't view my journey as an "escape to freedom" or an "American Dream come true" story. I wasn't running away from anything, just looking for a better life for my family and going after opportunities as I discovered them – some hard-earned, some through pure chance, and many others through the kindness of friends I made along the way. Yet my path led me here, and I am offering this as a "make what you want of it" account of my (still very much in-progress) journey to "making it" in America. My story would be incomplete without a tip of the hat to Lady Luck for some serendipitous (and occasionally rather painful) events that had long reaching – and often delayed - effects.

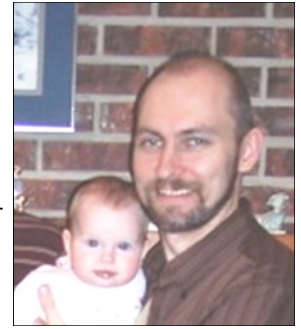
"Mom, they don't have naptime in first grade, right? Great!" That was the only confirmation the 6-year-old version of yours truly needed in order to choose in favor of first grade over another year of pre-school. Assuming that I really had a choice at that point, it's safe to say that the decision I made affected the rest of my life. As the younger – by four years - of two brothers I was already forced into the "brains" (vs. "brawn") corner for dispute resolution; starting school a year sooner only perpetuated the same on a larger scale. Learning to share was a necessity early on – our family of 4 shared a room with an unrelated old lady behind a curtain partition, while the other smaller room was occupied by a single mother with a son about my age. Still, basic needs were covered, tight-knit neighborhoods provided an additional supportive network, and I grew up as a curious and somewhat mischievous kid – fixing and improving broken toys, occasionally filling the apartment with smoke (from an electrical short circuit, or a jet propulsion experiment) and riding my bicycle with friends.

In high school, I broke my ankle running down the stairs, then – while still in the cast – broke my knee (learning that climbing a stack of rickety stools is a dangerous idea at any age – regardless of the number of prior successful reps). My brother's birthday had to proceed without the cookie surprise (I was after the recipe on the top shelf), but I think the overall surprise goal was achieved – although not per plan. The silver lining in the two years of very limited mobility was an opportunity to learn to play the guitar, with plenty of time for studies, books and woodworking (carving and pyrography). The guitar helped me meet new friends and break the ice on many social occasions; the woodworking helped me meet my future wife; the temporary handicap routed me to a lighter-duty branch in the military service, and as a patient I picked up a lot of medical terminology that I used years later as a medical interpreter.

I graduated from high school in 1985 – during the exciting time of international détente, perestroika and glasnost. At age 16, I was the youngest of my year in college (not a young prodigy, just the delayed effects of my nap-avoidance in preschool), choosing the Vladimir State Pedagogical / Foreign Language program over the Polytechnic Institute's radio-electronics engineering – thinking that languages would be easier to maintain than engineering formulas during a 2-year "sabbatical" for mandatory active military service I faced as all fit men ages 18 through 27. Gorbachev's reforms made the choice easier, with teachers getting a salary bump that put them roughly on par with doctors and engineers (still the three of lowest-paid degreed professions); coming from a family of teachers tipped the scales, too.

The two years in an Army Construction Corps battalion near Moscow turned out to be a rather useful crash course in organizational behavior, social hierarchy, diversity (thanks to the multinational backgrounds of recruits), and an "advanced degree" in slang and sarcasm (more on that soon).

It was during my first summer back after the army that my guitar-playing (thanks, broken leg!) helped me make an impression on Tanya, my future wife – when both of us worked at a pioneer (scout) camp – Tanya as a university practicum student, and I as shop/crafts instructor (here’s to running on stairs!). A year later, as one of the top performers in the English program, I was screened into the group of eight university students to participate in the first-ever exchange with ISU. My parents broke into their savings to pay my half of the airfare (the university covered the rest). Among the travel-related paperwork, the host family placement form asked about medical allergies. Not realizing the effect this would have on the rest of my life, I wrote: “Hypocrites and Fools” (thanks, the army “school of sarcasm”!). Those words, as I learned later, gave the placement coordinator – Norma Ashbrook – quite an anxiety attack, but also resulted in the perfect host family placement that turned into a life-long friendship with Jana and Orlyn Edge.



1990 was an eventful year – Tanya and I got married in June, and it was hard to say good-bye in September for a month-long trip to the US. The very first evening in Normal brought a surprise: calling a local number to arrange pickup of a letter I brought, I got recognized by voice before I could introduce myself! Dr. Ron Pope remembered me from a student concert in Vladimir earlier that year which I MC-ed and sang at (thanks again, broken leg!). The four weeks in Illinois flew by, I made new friends, practiced and improved my English, and returned to Vladimir with hopes, but no expectation, of ever making the trip again. Over the next five years, as I finished my degree and started working for a local trading venture, I kept in touch with the Sister City friends, interpreted for numerous medical, educational and humanitarian delegations, accompanied Dr. Joe Grabill on his visit to Russia and Ukraine, and interpreted business courses at the American Home for ISU law professors (Iris and Carson Varner).

It was Carson who introduced me to the idea of a graduate business degree that could be earned and paid for by working as a Graduate Assistant. In 1994, when another B-N medical delegation to Vladimir needed my help, yet my employer didn’t allow a leave of absence, I – rather than fail long-time friends who counted on me – called in sick to do what I had to. I struggled with telling a lie even for a good cause, but felt a stronger personal connection and commitment to Sister Cities than to my job. I did not regret that decision – not even when I got fired over it days later, caught on camera alongside the delegation by the local papers, and soon found a job as a translator for a USAID-funded Real Estate Info System project. By then, I have passed the TOEFL and GMAT test in preparation for ISU’s MBA admission, and was awaiting approval for the graduate assistantship. I wanted to pursue that opportunity, as the dangers of the “wild west” form of Russian capitalism of the 1990’s were incompatible with family responsibilities. So I thought an American education could give me time, and I would return to Russia - inspired by the example of the manager of the Vladimir Tractor Plant, who turned the plant around by establishing new international markets.

I started my MBA in 1995, and owe Jana & Orlyn a debt of gratitude for their support and friendship – in the early years and ever since. The friendships formed through the Sister Cities were instrumental in getting the most out my studies through a marketing internship at BroMenn Healthcare. Dale Strassheim and Julie Payne – thank you for letting me learn (while earning a few much-needed dollars to supplement the GradAss stipend).

One night in 1996, I was very surprised to hear Russian spoken behind me in a supermarket check-out line. The Russian-speaking lady turned out to be the Russian translator at a global company based in Peoria. We exchanged contact information, but the significance of this encounter did not become clear until the summer of 1997, when she called with news of her position becoming available, as she was relocating. I landed the job, and cut short my marketing internship at a Decatur power utility to get my foot in the door at the Fortune 100 company in Peoria, where I’ve worked ever since. I have held various positions over the years – translated all manner of content, traveled with delegations, managed the business side of the global translations operations, worked in accounting in logistics, ran commodity-based cost reductions, bought manufacturing materials on a global scale, led 6 Sigma improvements and factory transformation projects. I am now happy to return to my career roots as the marketing translations manager for the company’s online content.

So, 24 years after my first visit, and 19 since I arrived with a couple of suitcases to start business school, here I am: a Russian American, happily married father of three, bringing value to a Fortune 100 corporation, and active in my community as president of my home owners’ association. My wife Tanya earned a Master’s and Doctorate in Math Education from ISU, and is a tenured Associate Professor at a private university in Davenport, Iowa. All three of our children – including our 2 US-born daughters – are bilingual. Our son Anton (22) holds a BS in Electrical Engineering from Bradley U, works in hospital software development in Madison, Wis., and is getting married soon. Daughters Alina (15) and Lilia (6) have ways to go yet, but show great promise.

I am proud of my Russian heritage, and as the years fly by, find myself praying a bit more often (in Russian, of course), and holding on to hope that reason and mutual respect will prevail over one-sided geo-political agendas in US-Russia relations. Like most Russians my age (the Glasnost generation), I grew up taking official Soviet news with a grain of salt (OK, more like a bucket), and to this day remain an “equal opportunity skeptic” when it comes to mainstream media coverage (regardless of which government foots the media bill). Being able to triangulate news in several languages may not always pinpoint the truth, but often reveals the range of extreme possibilities, patterns of selective amnesia and convenient sub-setting of facts a side chooses to build their story on – all of which helps me form my own opinion.

When I hear of sister city exchange participants settling in America, I firmly believe that it’s something to be celebrated as a continuation of what made this “nation of immigrants” great. As long as America holds enough appeal to attract motivated people with diverse talents, there’s hope for its continued global leadership on the basis of innovation, democratic values, and mutually beneficial cooperation – rather than through domination by military might. Yes, there’s likely more sister city connected settlers from Russia than from, say, Japan – and different standards of living undoubtedly play a role. But whatever each individual’s path to calling this country home, each new arrival – whether temporary or permanent – contributes diversity of thought to the local communities and businesses, while adding very strong and personal “citizen diplomacy” connections between the two countries through extended family in both. Such personal connections can make this world a safer place.

As for my “allergies” – I still have them, but I’ve learned to control the symptoms through avoiding exposure to known allergy triggers (a fairly common practice among sufferers), and picking my battles when exposure is unavoidable.

There’s a Russian saying: “Как аукнется, так и откликнется” (“As the call, so the echo” – essentially, “you reap what you sow”). I have tried to treat others well, most have echoed back in kind. I feel grateful for all the people who have helped me on my journey.



Dmitry,
Alina (15),
Anton (22) at his graduation
from Bradley in
May 2014,
Lilia (6) with graduation
cap, and wife Tanya