

## Why Kitezh Works in Contrast with Russian Orphanages

As I have worked in a normal, government-administered children's home in Russia, and am now spending two months as a volunteer in Kitezh, I was asked to share my perceptions of the differences between the two experiences.

The biggest difference is in the care of the children. Kitezh is structured for and dedicated to providing a healthy and healing environment for the care and upbringing of very emotionally damaged children.

I have always known that no matter how badly damaged these children are, given enough love, opportunities, guidelines, boundaries, patience, caring proper teaching and nourishing, they can heal and go on to thrive in life.

These are also the stated intentions of normal Russian children's homes but unfortunately the political and cultural biases of the country and the profoundly deep emotional legacies of the people, carried through many generations, completely sabotage all attempts at positive change.

There are, of course, the exceptional children's homes where the directors and their staff understand and strive to meet the emotional, psychological and spiritual needs of the children, as well as the extreme demands placed upon them by the governing officials of such institutions but, by and large, these are the rare exceptions. The government's own statistics state that approximately 90% of the children matriculating from these institutions quickly succumb to drugs, alcoholism, crime, prostitution and suicide.

My interest is particularly piqued by what is behind the uniqueness of Kitezh—why does it work and work so well? My conclusion is the nature of the community itself.

From what I have heard, the community has undergone a series of severe challenges and difficulties since its inception and having survived these, I believe that there is an innate understanding among the individuals that the top priority of the community is to maintain its own health and well being if it is to carry out the greater goals to which it aspires.

In Kitezh there is a group of adults that is hard-working, smart, intelligent, dedicated, willing to sacrifice, not seeking self-glory or monetary gain and willing to change and adapt as necessary for the common good and health of the community. Though such qualities can be found in individuals everywhere, most of these qualities are not esteemed, taught and encouraged by the culture and the societal organisations of this country. This is a collection of very rare adults in any country but particularly so in Russia.

Another thing about Kitezh that is particularly unique and fascinating to me is how open and transparent the individuals, and the community as a whole, are to the scrutiny of fellow Russians and foreigners. Not only open but going out of their way to encourage and facilitate outsiders to visit and see what they do.

This is extraordinary in a country where paranoia and secrecy is almost hard-wired into the genes of every Russian and where vast resources are expended to maintain secrecy around the most mundane and commonplace of its institutions.

I am fascinated to see the differing roles that many of the key individuals choose to play for the benefit of the health of the community. There is the community leader who chooses to be humble, loving, caring, humorous and forever affirming and building people up. Whatever happens he just absorbs it all and deals with it in a loving and caring manner. Shockingly atypical of the norm for Russia.

Almost every one else in this community, extremely impressive, smart, talented and remarkable in their own ways, is totally dedicated to the care of each other and the children, and to the success of the community.

Since most learning is achieved by observation and experience, what better examples of family dynamics, coping, loving, sacrificing, discipline and teamwork could these children have? That, in and of itself, is probably the most valuable experience and learning these children will take with them as a legacy for living their lives.



**Stephen Bellamah**

Kitezh Children's Community Network in Russia is an innovative approach to the therapeutic care of orphans. Foster families in Kitezh and Orion villages take children out of orphanages and raise and educate them together in a supportive rural community environment. Ecologia Youth Trust has supported the development of Kitezh since it began in 1992, providing professional training, raising funds to build the villages and running a programme for international volunteers of all ages to teach English and take part in every day life in the communities.

# The Children of Orion are Blossoming

I have spent the last five weeks as a volunteer in Orion and as a mother of four, I can quite honestly say that it would be hard in this day and age to meet nicer, better-behaved children. On my fourth day an eight-year-old boy asked me if I would care to 'peet chai' (drink tea). He put the kettle on, got out the tea leaves, laid a plate of biscuits before me and we sat and chatted. Later I learnt from one of the foster parents that this boy had spent four years in an orphanage and that his willingness to help was most likely a coping strategy to deal with those difficult surroundings. No eight-year-old has shown me such hospitality before. Another child, a girl of thirteen tells me that she has read all the works of Dumas. She is an able student and in our English lessons, a joy to teach. Many of the children smiled shyly at me during my first days here, but two weeks later I was being hugged by a little boy on the morning of his ninth birthday, the first birthday that he had ever celebrated.

To be honest, I was expecting the children's behavior to reflect far more the difficult years in the state orphanage system or as witnesses of chronic alcoholism. That it does not prove the efficacy of the therapeutic process at work in Orion, one based upon a combination of respect, kindness and duty, and at its core, love.

Recently, Orion held an open day. The day before, after the usual morning lessons and lunch, the children and adults assembled in the dining room for a session of spring cleaning. The children are quite adept at this as they do the washing up after every meal on a rota basis. Some of the girls followed me into the kitchen where we made biscuits which were then beautifully decorated. Elsewhere costumes were being sewn, *sarafans* were being ironed and *pirozhi* were being baked. On the big day itself the smallest children danced to a traditional song, the older children put on a production of Snow White in English, the group from Kitezsh put on a comedy, guitars were played, poetry was read and two foster parents entertained us with some expert ballroom dancing.



An important aspect of this day, as of every day, was that everyone worked collectively, everyone had something to offer, and all the participants were valued and thanked. It is customary here to thank anyone who cooks, to thank teachers for lessons, in fact just to thank, generally. Another important aspect is the value of performance which is viewed as having a beneficial therapeutic effect that enables children to overcome their fears and problems and become more confident within. Indeed, all the children performed with joy and considerable flair.

For the adults—the foster parents and permanent volunteers—their work is a vocation and a way of life. Their commitment to these children is little short of astounding and incredibly admirable. Whilst the rest of the world seems focussed on individual interests, here is a group of spirited young people dedicated to bringing up other people's children alongside their own. The atmosphere that they have created here is deliberately child-centered. During meal times there are no raised voices, the children are gently requested to sit up straight at table or to eat properly. Much thought is given to meal times. In an orphanage or when living with an alcoholic parents, food is important because there is never enough. You can see the vestiges of this concern when one child asks, out of earshot of the other adults, if she can have a snack. To counter such concerns there is a glass door to the fridge and everyone can see that there will be enough for the next meal and the next day.

Above all, the children feel that they are valued for being themselves. There is much laughter, little idiosyncrasies are noted and appreciated, and at the weekly meetings in which all members of the community participate, the opinions of the children merit consideration equal to that of the adults. Orion has much to teach those rearing troubled children and also for those of us who are just rearing children.

Lucy Wright

## Orion News Bites....

### Launch of parent's training at Orion

In February, the first training programme for parents took place at Orion. The training, developed by Kitezsh teachers and psychologists and led by Maxim Anikeev, director of Kitezsh school and master of pedagogical studies, helps cultivate an attitude towards different family situations that inevitably transforms the situation and the behaviour of the people involved. Three Moscow families took part in the training. Both children and parents discovered many new things about each other that will enable the strengthening of family ties. Some of the children showed an interest in taking part in our summer role play games and team building work. Further one and two-day training courses are planned.

### Orion has doubled in size...

...thanks to the arrival of three families from Voronezh, Smolensk and Saint Petersburg, and three children who have been fostered by Yulia Khlopenova and Maria Shibaeva. The structure of the organisation has become more complex and life has become more intensive and full. The house built in memory of Teresa O'Neill is in its final stage. It is beautiful! All that is left to do is plumbing, flooring and the entrance door. We plan to finalise by June. This house can house four adults and up to eight children.



# Datuna Inspires his Scottish Friends to Sing

Datuna, a social orphan from Temi Community in Georgia, fell from a seventh-storey window when he was two and never received adequate medical attention. He has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. Now eight, he has found compassionate individuals—Madge Bray, Fiona Lindsey, and Dr. Thanos Tsirikos to name a few—who are offering him a chance to have life-saving spinal surgery in Scotland.

While visiting Scotland, he developed a relationship with Thornlie Primary School in Wishaw, a depressed neighbourhood near Glasgow. No one could have predicted the impact he would make. When asked what he means to them, one pupil answered. “Things have changed since we’ve met Datuna. We’re, well, mair happier, mair confident ... and last year we wouldna sing or nothing”.

And sing they surely do. Thornlie hallways are often bursting with *Mravajhamiers*, a Georgian toast sung for long life, and *Alilos*, a Christmas harmony song. But it’s about much

more than music for Thornlie. Their Christmas concert at St. John’s Church in Edinburgh raised £1,000 for Datuna’s upcoming surgery. David Hughes, the school’s headmaster, elaborated on the importance of the event. “Our children’s singing has never been more beautiful or meaningful as when their harmonies rang out in St John’s, framed by their statements to the audience about how their commitment to this project had increased their involvement and commitment to others, to their own community, and to each other. Certainly I’m interested in our children doing good work, but I’m more interested in what happens to the pupils in the act of doing that meaningful genuine connected work—what they learn about each other, about themselves and about possibility.”

They have learned much about possibility. On their own initiative, the children raised money to buy Datuna a wheelchair ramp at Temi, where there are none.

Their wee choir has not gone unnoticed. In October, the children have been invited to sing at the Tbilisi Music Symposium in Georgia, the first foreign children’s choir to do so. The Shavnabada Choir, one of Georgia’s foremost choirs, will make a tour stop in Edinburgh to sing with Thornlie at St. Cuthbert’s Church on November 23rd, 2010. The Thornlie children will host the event joined by storyteller, Laura Sims.

Datuna returns to Scotland this Autumn for further tests. His surgery is planned for March 2011. While many have graciously donated funds, time and energy, more is still needed to cover the steep medical costs. Donations, however large or small, are very welcome!



## A Week with Nana: A Georgian Singing Tour: 2 – 9 July

Nana Mzhavanadze invites you to another year of singing and sharing Georgian music. In May this year, Nana was in the UK giving workshops in Georgian musical harmony. In July she will host ten travellers on a musical and cultural experience in Georgia. With Nana, Georgian traditional singers and a local women’s choir will share their passion for an ancient musical legacy. The tour includes workshops with local singers, simple shared accommodation, homemade Georgian cuisine, sightseeing excursions, and the opportunity to experience Georgian music in everyday life. Places are on a first-come, first-serve basis—so reserve your space today!

Cost: £625 plus airfare

For more information about this and other events, contact: [sing.georgia@gmail.com](mailto:sing.georgia@gmail.com).



## Kitzh News Bites....

### Kitzh welcomes new small residents

New children have arrived at Kitezh live in our families. Brothers and sisters Nastia (3), Vania (4), and Nina (8) Titovy are clever, sociable and friendly kids. We are happy to have more children this year. Little Nastya is living in Tamara Pichugina’s family. Tamara is the most experienced of our mothers. Vania and Nina live in the family of Sasha and Irina Varaksin. These days it is more important than ever for Kitezh to help as many children as possible. Two more Kitezh families plan to take new children to foster care this year. New god-parents are very welcome.



Nastia



Vania



Nina

### Progress on farming for sustainability

The Kitezh farm, home to three cows is growing. Two calves were born in February. For over half a year we have been drinking our own milk. In Orion we have a small collection of goats who also produce delicious milk. Kitezh now has three large greenhouses and Orion has one smaller greenhouse and a lovingly tended vegetable garden. Our target is to independently produce our own vegetables and greens.

### Kitzh finally gets gas

After a long wait for the gas connection from Baryatino, and a summer of digging trenches for pipe lines, thanks to a generous donation from Red Mountain Energy Corporation gas boilers were installed in ten houses at Kitezh by December 4th. Shortly afterwards the temperature dropped to -27° C so the gas boilers were greatly welcomed.

## Steps Forward for Burmese Migrant Workers

It is early February 2010, 33 degrees and overwhelmingly humid. I feel hot and faint sitting under a tin roof in Kuraburi, a migrant worker settlement in a rough port area of southern Thailand at a meeting where our project staff are giving information on rights and entitlements to a group of 50 Burmese migrant workers and their families, most of whom work in insecure, difficult and dirty jobs on fishing boats and shrimp plantations. The stifling meeting room is in an overcrowded shantytown of corrugated iron huts with poor sanitation and rubbish piling up.

Mai, the community worker talks passionately about Nationality Verification in an attempt to dispel the fear around this procedure that is now mandatory for all migrant workers in Thailand.

Nationality Verification is the first step in a legal process that will allow migrant workers to live and work in Thailand. They will be permitted to change their employment, own cars, motorcycles and mobile phones (currently not allowed), travel freely in Thailand and access health care and education for their families.

Fear and misconceptions surround this process as it requires formal and substantiated proof of where a person comes from and migrants are nervous about information going back to Burma (Myanmar) for fear of repercussions. They are anxious about filling in the complex forms in two languages as a single mistake voids it. They worry that after filling in the form the Thai authorities will round them up and send them back.

This contrary understanding of Nationality Verification is partly the result of rumours spread by some greedy employers and brokers that ignite the fears of this marginalised and troubled group of people. Employers are generally not supportive and many brokers are charging huge fees to get migrant workers through the process.

Against this background of confusion, Ecologia's Thai partners, Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation (SNF) and other NGOs are delivering a series of information workshops directly to the migrants and assisting with the NV forms. It is estimated that 18,000 migrant workers in Phang Nga have already submitted an application. This would have been impossible without local, national and international networks of NGOs weaving a web of support for this specific group of people.

SNF works closely with other NGOs including International Organisation for Migration, Grassroots Human Rights Education, World Vision and the Law Society. Together



they create strategies, networks and working groups that are active at local, provincial and national levels. This joint approach carries enough weight to influence the Thai Government to apply policies that are in line with international human rights agreements.

Our project team has taken on a huge and extremely sensitive workload and has made a considerable impact not only with the migrant workers but also with the Thai people.

Ecologia's Big Lottery funded project is making a real difference to these families who left Burma for work to support their families at home. The human rights of these workers depend on them registering themselves and their families in Thailand. Our project team is committed to help them do so, to improve their appalling living and working conditions and to raise awareness in the Thai population of their rights as human beings.

As I leave the shanty town, over a bridge across the rubbish strewn mangrove inlet, I know that this is only the first stage in the process and that the migrant workers have many more obstacles to face in gaining their full registration and overcoming the prejudice that are endured by marginalised people everywhere.

Jane Rasbash

*Described here is one activity of the HR and Advocacy component of the EYT project 'Supporting migrant workers from Burma in Phang Nga and Ranong, Southern Thailand'. Other components are Peacebuilding through Youth Empowerment and training for Community Self Reliance. The project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and is in its third and final year. Ecologia is seeking further grant funding to continue the excellent work that has been started.*



Help the children of Kitezh by supporting our online shop where you will find books, seasonal handmade greetings cards, gift certificates and more.  
[www.ecologia.org.uk](http://www.ecologia.org.uk)



Read all about our work online and make a secure credit card donation today to help us help them.



Ecologia Youth Trust, The Park, Forres, Moray, IV36 3TD, Scotland. Tel / Fax: +44 (0) 1309 690995 Email: [info@ecologia.org.uk](mailto:info@ecologia.org.uk)