

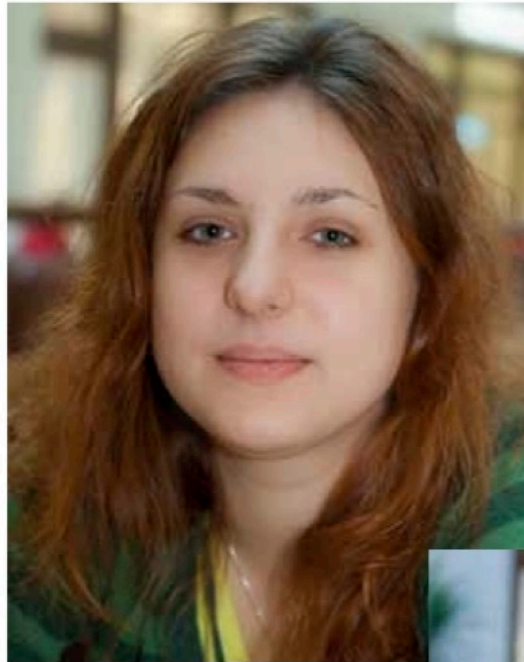
# “EVERYTHING’S GOING TO BE OK”

Two Kitezh graduates tell their stories

BY ALEXANDRA ALBA

Kitezh Children’s Community is one of the 100 charities supported by IWC. The newsletter editing team was moved by a passionate talk given by Kitezh founder, Dimitry Morozov, at an IWC Charities General Meeting and became interested in meeting the Kitezh children. After a few calls and emails, we were introduced to Valentina Kanukhina and Vasily Burdin, who have been so kind as to talk openly and honestly in our newsletter about their lives, and what they have learned.

When Valya’s older brother died, her mother started to drink. Valya remembers the moment when she realized that her mother would not recover; she was not quite seven years old. Valya, born in 1988 in Kaluga, has strong memories of her grandmother who started to take care of her. She enjoyed her school, and had friends; like many children in similar circumstances, she spent much time out of the company of adults, taking trolley buses, or walking in the nearby woods with her best friend, Sasha. She has positive memories of this period.



When Valya’s mother’s parental rights were removed, Valya was sent to Solnyshko (“sun” in Russian) orphanage, not far from her house. Although she has mixed memories of the staff and some of the children, and she missed her grandmother, who had moved further away and could not visit, she feels that the orphanage was not all bad. She was fortunate because she continued at the same school, and so did not carry the stigma of “orphan”.

Valya’s success at her studies was a great help to her. She earned the respect and affection of both her teachers and classmates, and found that they would protect her from teasing even though she was now living in an orphanage.

When Valya moved to Kitezh, she found a very different world from the one she was used to. As she points out, Kitezh is not an orphanage, but rather a large family. In an orphanage there are always people who are indifferent to your welfare, but in Kitezh, everyone is worried about all the members of the community;

## VALYA

there is always someone who is interested in you, who is worried about you, and who will help you if something goes wrong. At Kitezh, Valya gravitated to older children, who taught this sensitive and emotional girl to be more attentive to other people’s opinions, and to learn to make compromises. She learned that at Kitezh she could open up, and that no one would tease her.

For Valya, the transition to living and studying in Moscow was not so difficult. During the last two years at Kitezh, she came to Moscow often, and this allowed her to become familiar with the city. She deliberately tried not to “imagine” her life in Moscow, and so accept whatever happened. Although she was lonely at first, and had to learn how to use the transport system, and even how

to buy clothes for herself, she made new friends and developed new hobbies. During the first two years, she returned often to her friends at Kitezh, which also supported her financially, and this helped her to survive the challenges of adapting to her life in Moscow.

Valya thinks she will have a career in languages or journalism. She is only nervous about her immediate future – her exams and getting her degree, but she feels it doesn’t make any sense to worry about her life. She may move to St Petersburg, or stay in Moscow. The immediate members



of her family have all died, but she has some contact with other relatives. She knows that to be happy she cannot rely only on her career, and must have other pursuits that give her pleasure, such as her singing. She looks around her and sees much beauty in the world – in Kitezh especially, but also just walking down the street in Moscow. Valya feels that whatever happens, everything’s going to be OK.

## VASILY

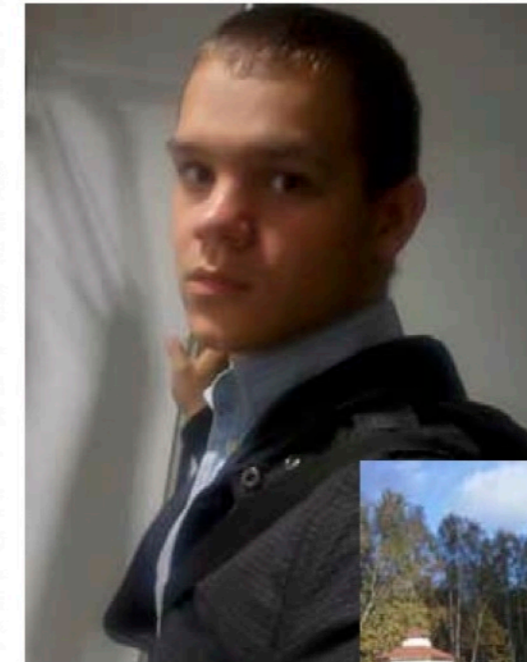
Vasily studies law in Moscow. On the 15 April of this year he will turn 21, and although he has had a long and difficult journey from his birth place in Kaluga province, and been through many difficult experiences, he is not afraid of the future, and he is grateful for what life has given him.

The one fact that Vasily knows for sure about his biological parents is that they died from alcohol poisoning. He never knew them and was basically left to bring himself up. He received meals from neighbours or bought food with the occasional money that came from his parents, and wandered alone in the city. His strongest family memory is of his grandfather who worked too hard at his job to care for him, but would ask him how he was doing, to which Vasily would answer “fine”. Despite not knowing how or where his parents were, Vasily does not have such bad memories of his early childhood – it is all he knew.

At the age of six, Vasily was placed in Solnyshko orphanage, where he attended the state school, and where his life became more difficult. He was either ignored or teased by the other orphans and, trying to be obedient, he had few friends of his age. In school, he started to steal, which he now realizes was an addiction, something he couldn’t stop himself from doing, and which led him to steal from his own friend when he was invited to his house. Although he managed to overcome this behavior, he found himself in fights almost every day. It was in the library however, that he discovered a love of reading.

At age nine, Vasily arrived at Kitezh, where life was different to anything he had known before. Suddenly, he did not have to fight to survive, but he had to learn new, unfamiliar skills. Understanding how to treat people as friends, how to help each other, how to communicate, and how to study, were very difficult for Vasily at the beginning, but as before, he adapted successfully.

Making the transition to Moscow was another challenge for Vasily after the small world of Kitezh. He had been warned repeatedly that the “big world” would be dangerous, and that he would have to watch his step. But when he graduated from Kitezh, he felt somehow that everything would be OK. At the beginning though, he did have a few problems. He began at the university determined to focus on his studies, but he started to meet



people who liked to party, to go out and drink, who didn’t care about their studies, and who had more money. He had to make a decision not to hang out with these people. He also felt isolated from other students by his experiences; it was difficult for them to understand his situation. Now, he accepts that though he knows many people, only a few can be good friends, and he once again is focused on his studies.

What gives Vasily the strength to meet the challenges of his life? He receives financial support from Kitezh, and is in contact with his godparents who live in Amsterdam. He composes



songs, which brings him mental and spiritual balance, and he knows he has a family in Kitezh, a very special place to him. He does not make long-term plans, because he knows life can be unpredictable. He will stay in Moscow and hopes to have a career there, but he is not scared of failure because Kitezh is the one place in the world where he can always return.