

Socks and Pigs Sustain 'House of Mercy'

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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A girl at the Frolovs' daycare center, dressed up for an early New Year's party. **Vladimir Andreyev**

Olga Frolova and her husband were low-income residents of a small town in central Russia when they decided to move to the country in 2005 to fulfill their dream of becoming farmers.

But what they found in the village of Khitrovshchina in the Tula region — shabby houses with outdoor toilets, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism and hopelessness — prompted them to open a shelter for the down-on-their-luck.

Authorities temporarily shut down the shelter in 2009 over safety concerns, but in February 2010 the Frolovs brought in sponsors who extended their charity effort to include not just individual residents, but the whole village.

"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime," said Teresa Rothman, project manager of IT [company](#) NVision Group, which is involved in Khitrovshchina projects.

NVision ordered and bought souvenir Christmas socks from local women, to be distributed as presents for kids in orphanages that the company supports, Rothman said during a tour of the village in mid-December.

It also plans to order and buy Christmas decorations and banya caps, NVision said in e-mailed comments.

"It works very well because the women now have a reason to get up in the morning," Rothman said of workers at a sewing workshop that the company helped set up in Khitrovshchina.

The Frolovs were already raising six young children — four of them adopted — when they arrived in Khitrovshchina. But the heartbreaking conditions they found there prompted them in 2007 to open a shelter for the disadvantaged, including teenagers, young mothers and the elderly, and begin a hunt for sponsors.

"We had no [big] means and mostly provided physical labor, so we started looking for people with big hearts," Frolova, 47, told The Moscow Times at the shelter, which reopened last year.

Sitting on a sofa in the corner of a playroom, Frolova spoke eagerly in a gentle voice, pausing every once in a while to flick a worried glance at the kids in the room and make sure they were doing fine.

Sponsors found by the Frolovs included NVision and Mercedes-Benz. But in 2009, local authorities closed the shelter over fire safety, sanitary and technical violations.

At the time, NVision employees were donating from afar. None of them traveled to Khitrovshchina until February 2010, when they came to discuss plans for relaunching the shelter.

What they found was a settlement where out-of-work residents were living in dilapidated housing with no utilities.

Though typical for Russian countryside, the picture was shocking enough to see in real life. That's when NVision employees decided to help the whole village.

"These women, when we looked into their eyes, they had no hope," Rothman said. "We told them we would come back, but they didn't believe us."

The volunteers managed to reopen the shelter as a free daycare center for children, naming it the [House of Mercy](#).

Donations by individual employees allowed the House of Mercy to afford food, clothes and other goods for children and their parents, as well as to renovate and furnish the premises. Volunteers also hired three nannies, two caretakers and one cook.

The House of Mercy now provides aid to about 80 families. This includes taking care of the children during the day, feeding them, helping them with school homework, organizing recreational activities, and providing sewing lessons and psychological advice for mothers.

Still, the sponsors understood that donating money is less efficient than teaching the villagers some skills so they could fend for themselves.

The volunteers started by buying rabbits and chickens, and later also pigs and sheep, for the villagers, telling them "to generate income from these animals," Rothman said.

"Now they can feed the whole daycare center with these animals," she said.

Then NVision opened a workshop with sewing and knitting machines, and hired professional seamstresses to teach Khitrovshchina women the craft. Attending the courses at the workshop is mandatory for all women who leave their children at the daycare center.

"They just can't bring the baby and leave it there, they must learn some skills," Rothman said.

The project has worked out well, and Rothman said her company was "very proud" of both the women and of NVision employees who have been "actively donating" to support it.

The company does not promote its charity efforts, Rothman said, adding that she only agreed to an interview to "compliment" local women on their progress.

As for local men, several got jobs at the farm that the Frolovs purchased with a bank loan. They are paying it off using state support they are entitled to as a low-income family with multiple children.

Apart from helping local residents, Frolova accommodates homeless people from nearby towns and even Moscow who are brought to her by charity activists.

"When we provide aid to other people, we are helping our souls," said Frolova, who is an Orthodox Christian.

She only helps out adults on the condition of total alcohol abstinence.

"My heart fills with joy when I see that someone mends their ways," Frolova said during a tour of the village. "Some of them have married here and are raising nice kids."

In 2006, Frolova adopted Alla Shatilova, then 15 years old, after the Tula region native's alcoholic mother was stripped of parental rights.

"I came to the shelter, and Aunt Olya adopted me," Shatilova recalled in a shy voice.

Shatilova is now a married mother of two toddlers. A local church provided her family with housing, allowing them to use a small building that was not intended for human residence and had no heating, utilities, electricity or gas. It had a leaky roof, but was still better than nothing, she said.

Another of Frolova's foster children, Sergei Zinovyev, 21, had been living in the streets for six years until a volunteer found him at Moscow's Paveletsky Station in 2009 and brought him to Khitrovshchina.

"I like it here," Zinovyev, who now looks after cows and pigs, said in a small room next to the cowshed that serves as his home. "It's calm and quiet."

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