The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Good Cause: Giving Orphans a Loving Home

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June 07, 2012



George Smyth, a 21-year-old student from Bristol University, England, moved to Russia in September 2011. He has spent the last two months living in Kitezh, a therapeutic community that provides orphans with a loving home.

Q: What is Kitezh, and how does it differ from a normal Russian orphanage?

A: Kitezh is located in the Kaluga region and is a therapeutic foster community made up of lots of small buildings for orphans or children who have been taken into care. The adults who live there act as foster parents, teachers and friends to the children. Weekly meetings are held to discuss community issues in which the children take an active role and are encouraged to make suggestions. The members of Kitezh see themselves as one big family and the children receive a lot more attention than they would in a normal Russian orphanage.

Q: What are Kitezh's goals?

A: Kitezh aims to make sure their children are morally aware, able to form loving relationships and that they have received a good education so they are ready to face Russia when they leave. On a national scale, Kitezh aims to promote their educational and psychological methods to try and improve the way that state orphanages are run.

Q: What would a normal day involve for a volunteer?

A: While I was there I helped to build a barn for the goats, taught English, helped out in the kitchen and did activities with the children, like arts and crafts or sports. There is a friendly atmosphere and communication is encouraged.

Q: Why did you decide to live and work at Kitezh?

A: I had never done any volunteer work so it was a new experience for me. I had heard about the difficulties Russian orphans face and wanted to see how Kitezh's program worked. It is also a good chance to experience the real Russian countryside in a safe and structured environment. It's a welcome change to the noisy metropolis of Moscow. I also wanted to improve my Russian, which I have done.

Q: How is Kitezh funded and what can people do if they want to help?

A: Half of Kitezh's funding comes from the state and half comes from Russian companies, individual donors, Western charities and other organizations. There is a good foreign volunteer scheme and Kitezh encourages applications from open-minded people who are willing to contribute to their community.

Kitezh is located 400 kilometers southwest of Moscow in the Kaluga region. To find out more about the community, visit www.kitezh.org/en

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/06/07/a-good-cause-giving-orphans-a-loving-home-a15319