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Disadvantaged Youth Wish Upon a Moscow Star

By Matthew Luxmoore

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Muscovite Rustam Kamaletdinov, 25, standing with the group during the farewell boat trip on the Moscow River. **Rustam Kamaletdinov**

As an action-packed weekend drew to a close on a recent Sunday evening, a dozen kids on a boat trip down the Moscow River were noticeably exhausted but content.

The previous three days had taken them from their rural home in southwestern Nizhny Novgorod to the big city, with outings to a planetarium, theater, circus and 3D movie.

Eight-year-old Zulya, who had spent the entire three-hour river excursion running around on deck taking photos, finally sat down to contemplate the experience as the boat drew into the harbor.

When night falls, she and her peers will board a bus back to Salgany, to the children's shelter they call home.

Two hundred kilometers from Moscow, the Salgany children's shelter provides a temporary home for youngsters fleeing abuse or whose primary caregivers have recently died.

A stay at the shelter can last for up to six months while the ward's domestic situation is resolved or until he or she is placed in permanent foster care.

The trip to Moscow, sponsored by the Land & People charitable foundation, was an opportunity for the kids to see big-city life and have a good time despite whatever they may be facing at home.

Members of the foundation, established in 2010 to help less-privileged children, the disabled and senior citizens, covered travel costs, chaperoned the group and put them up at their homes for the weekend.

Natasha Makarova, a counselor at the shelter who accompanied the kids, explained that alcoholism is the most common cause for parents' inability to continue caring for their child.

"Some return home after a few weeks, but they don't usually stay for long," she said.

A teacher by profession, Makarova joined the shelter after the closure of several schools in the local area left her jobless. Unable to travel increasing distances to find work, she applied to a vacancy at the shelter and has worked there for the past six years.

"Villages in the area are dying, young people are leaving for the cities," she said. "As a result, fewer children are born and local schools become expendable."

Like much of rural Russia, the shelter's Krasnooktyabrsky district has seen a big drop in birth rates. Its population has fallen by a third since 1992 to a mere 11,000.

Over the past year in the area, five schools have closed.

Funding for the shelter comes predominantly from the regional government, but it also receives donations from private organizations, including Land & People.

Rustam Kamaletdinov, a 25-year-old chaperone whom the kids refused to leave alone throughout the cruise, said Land & People was established by Moscow's Tatar community to help those in need, regardless of background.

Kamaletdinov, an ethnic Tatar, said he visits the shelter at every opportunity and his door is always open if a child wants to visit Moscow.

Although the fund subsidizes the work of the shelter, support takes the form of providing required materials and refurbishments in addition to monetary donations.

"We prefer to send things such as stationary and sports equipment rather than money, which could fall into the wrong hands," Kamaletdinov said.

On the trips to Moscow, his organization works to instill in the boys and girls a stable set of values, he said, something the lack of adult role models makes difficult.

"Yesterday evening we sat down with the children, advising them on what paths to pursue

in order to integrate into society upon reaching adulthood," he said. "They were very responsive."

The only question that Rustam felt hard-pressed to answer was whether giving the children a fleeting glimpse into a more-privileged lifestyle would raise their awareness of how little they have in comparison.

Yet the maturity with which the older kids were able to reflect upon their circumstances suggests that if this is indeed an unintended consequence, it is fortunately only a temporary phase on their road to self-realization.

Aboard the cruise, Regina, a local from the region who regularly helps out at the shelter on a voluntary basis, explained that each of the children responds to the new surroundings in a different way.

Some retreat into their own thoughts and reveal little of their emotions, she said, while others are overcome with excitement.

Alyosha, 14, was too distracted by the thought of diving into the water to explain his impression of the trip. In the shallows near the shore, Muscovites were swimming and basking in the sun.

Only 14-year-old Ravilia passed the day in a mood of sober reflection, more inclined to gaze overboard at the passing architecture than intercept every photo session taking place.

Preceding her revelation with a request not to be laughed at, she confessed an ambition to someday move to the capital in search of stardom as a backup dancer for a world-famous pop act.

Donations to the Salgany shelter can be made via Land & People's website: www.bf-zil.ru

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