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First-Ever Charity Pigeon Shoot a Smashing Success

By Sonia Elks

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About 50 expats and Russians took part in the first charity clay pigeon shooting competition outside Moscow. **Dina Magnat**

"Hold the gun to your cheek, look down the barrel, follow the target and fire!" the guide orders as another would be shooter tries in vain to turn a brightly-colored clay target into a puff of pink smoke with one well-aimed shot.

Not everyone is a natural sharp-shooter, but regardless of whether or not they could hit the target, participants at Moscow's first-ever charity clay pigeon tournament were helping a charity that takes aim at the complex issues facing hundreds of orphans and special needs children.

Dozens of executives from top companies turned out for the contest on Friday, run by Moscow-based charity Step Up, which provides education and support for young people leaving institutions to live independently for the first time. Organizers hope that the unusual

choice of event will help turn it into one of the fixtures of the Moscow social calender and help them expand their work into the regions.

The concept was taken up with enthusiasm by around 50 Russian and expats taking part in the tournament at the Fox Lodge shooting club outside Moscow. Among the crack of gunshots, little cheers could be heard drifting up from teams dotted over the huge course as shooters found their mark, while others jokingly suggested that getting faces printed onto the targets might help improve their aim.

In the event, the commiseration prize for the worst team was accepted by a team made up of journalists, while the "Angry Birds" were crowned the best team. They claimed that hours of virtual target practice on the hugely popular game had given them the competitive advantage.

"We played to win," joked Lincoln International CEO Andre Joosten. "Practicing Angry Birds has definitely been our preparation for this game."

After finishing the shooting, competitors warmed up over a drink, before bidding on artwork and tours, and a glass of single malt whiskey auctioned off for $500, which brought the total raised over the day to around $40,000 dollars.

Event organizer and Step Up board member Vitaly Farafonov said the money will be used to set up a fund that will help secure the charity's future, allowing them to focus more time on their work with young people.

"Eighteen months ago Step Up was in a very bad place and financially we were realizing that we could not pay people," he said. "What we want to do is to build up a pot of money that will give us six months' security."

"The next step will be regional expansion, to copy and paste our model in the regions."

Farafonov hopes that the event will help the charity stand out from the crowd, as well as help them develop relationships with potential corporate sponsors.

"Moscow is so saturated," he said. "If you organize another ball, people are going to be bored. This is different, this is unique."

Many of those taking part agreed they had been attracted by the chance to get out of the city and try something a bit different in aid of a good cause.

Jonathan Muir, chief financial officer at TNK-BP, which sponsored the day and sent around ten people in two teams, said he had enjoyed a change from the usual charity golf tournaments and parties.

"This is different. It's out there, it's unusual, and that's nice," he said. "I hope it is successful, I hope it comes back next year and if I am still here I will definitely be participating."

Similarly, PriceWaterhouseCoopers partner Michael Harle said: "It made sense to come along and it's good to spend an afternoon letting some frustration out. It also takes you out of your comfort zone a bit and it's a beautiful location."

"I think I can leave with my head held high because first I didn't hit any of my team mates."

Step Up charity director and co-founder Olga Tikhomirova said in a speech to guests that she was happy that the day turned out well.

"We were very worried about how it would turn out, and so we're very happy that it all worked out," she said. "We hope to learn from this year and make it even better next year."

For more details about Step Up, check out www.vverh.su.

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