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Russian Students Astonished by U.S. Holiday Cheer

By Jonathan Earle

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Primov learned to bake Christmas tree cookies with his U.S. host family.

Many travelers have pined for home during the holiday season. It's the lucky exception who, finding himself in company of new friends, realizes that he's found a home away from home.

Kirov native Ivan Chesnokov, 17, was celebrating Thanksgiving Day in Gladewater, Texas, chowing down on turkey and chatting up his host family's relatives, when he made this discovery.

"I began to realize that I'm far from being a guest here. I'm a full member of a real American family. And the most incredible thing of all is that they've taken me in. Me, a stranger from another continent, with a different language and culture," Chesnokov said.

Yulia Abdullina, 17, of Penza, helped with the Thanksgiving cooking in Oak Harbor, Ohio. When all six members of the family sat down to eat it, before even picking up a fork, they all

thanked each other one by one.

"It was at that moment, I suppose, I felt that I was a member of my host family. I was truly at home," she said.

The holiday season has brought many pleasant surprises for Russian students in FLEX, a U.S. government-sponsored study-abroad program that sends teenagers from across the former Soviet Union to the United States for a year of cultural immersion. The Moscow Times is following some of the 244 students who are living with American host families and attending American high schools this school year. The group is ambitious, energetic, sharp and quite possibly Russia's future leaders. The skills, perspective and confidence they bring back could change the country from the ground up.

Students expressed delight in e-mails about the Americans' love of Christmas decorations, gift-giving, charity, and holiday cheer.

"Peoples' faces are radiant with happiness," Chesnokov said. "This person's looking forward to the vacation, this one to shopping. One person believes in Santa, while another can't wait to open presents. But an enormous number of people are extremely happy because of these holidays."

While many Russians consider New Year's to be the most important holiday of the year, Valery Primov, 16, a Tolyatti native living in Wichita, Kansas, said he'd never felt such a warm seasonal spirit as in the U.S.

"It's a shame that in Russia people don't throw themselves into preparing for New Year's," he said. "Preparations begin later, and I frequently don't feel the same celebratory atmosphere."

The students described their host families' holiday zeal — decorating, baking, shopping — with a mix of delight and mild bewilderment.

"[He's] a grown man, but he looks forward to [Christmas] like a child," Chesnokov said of his host father, who bought a tree in the beginning of November and only listens to holiday music in the car.

A month before Christmas, the gifts in Chesnokov's second family are already under the tree, although nobody knows which gifts are in which boxes, he said. When the family goes shopping, one member lures another into a store, while a third buys the second a gift.

Several students were struck by the ubiquitousness of holiday charity programs for the needy.

"The city government helps people who need it, providing food for volunteers to hand out. Having personally participated in this, I saw how much happiness a little bit of help can bring," said Primov, who collected toys for a group called His Helping Hands.

"An elderly woman who received many stuffed toys for her grandchildren told me that nobody can imagine how happy Christmas will be in her family, thanks to this help," he said.

Another student was astonished with religious groups' efforts to reach out to the needy.

"Here, if you don't have any money to buy food for the holidays, you can just go to a church and get some basic food," said Darya Andreyeva, 17, of Reutov, in the Moscow region, who is living in Pocola, Oklahoma.

The holiday season has also had it's share of good-natured silliness.

Abdullina's school in Ohio held an "Ugly Christmas Sweater Day," when students were encouraged to wear the most absurd and funny sweaters. Some wore funny glasses, cap and ties. "It was a lot of fun. I'm not sure not to forget it for a long time," she said.

Chesnokov said his church youth group has already held a "birthday party for Jesus Christ" at a roller rink, where they skated, ate pizza and drank soda. By accident, Ivan collided with a small girl and made her cry. At one point, the group sat in a circle and sang happy birthday.

But while the FLEX students said they enjoyed the atmosphere of holiday cheer and generosity, Abdullina said she would miss watching "The Irony of Fate," a classic Soviet-era classic traditionally broadcast on New Year's Eve, and eating Olivier salad, which consists mainly of cucumbers, boiled potatoes, peas and eggs mixed with mayonnaise.

The Olivier that she prepared for her host family on Thanksgiving received mixed reviews. She said she'd be bring the tradition of baking Christmas cookies back to Russia.

In Texas, Chesnokov said he also felt homesick at times.

"I kind of miss my mother's cooking. I kind of miss everything all at once," he said.

Reflecting on differences between the United States and Russia during the holiday season, Andreyeva concluded that Americans are more laid back during the holidays.

"Every mom in Russia is trying to make a million things for everybody and take control of everything," she said, adding that she'd like to bring that "simplicity" back to Russia.

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