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Sochi Volunteers Revving Up for Olympics

By Natalya Krainova

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A group of young Olympics volunteers talking in an assembly hall during a training session at Moscow State Automobile and Road Technical University. **Igor Tabakov**

St. Petersburg native Tatyana Taramzhenina, 72, readily admits: She's got Olympic fever.

Having relished her experience volunteering at the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, she jumped at the chance to greet participants at the 2014 Winter Olympics and Paralympics in Sochi.

"You have to feel all the grandeur of such events to understand why one wants to become a volunteer," Taramzhenina said.

"There is a unique atmosphere, boiling emotions, sporting events," she said, her voice rising with enthusiasm.

Taramzhenina is one of 25,000 volunteers who will work at the upcoming Olympics in Sochi

and was one of more than 7,000 applicants to volunteer aged 55 and older.

Volunteers were selected over a year-long period beginning last February, with more than 115,000 of the roughly 200,000 applications coming from people aged 17 to 22, according to press materials of the Sochi Organizing Committee.

The Kremlin has made preparation for the Games a top priority, pouring billions of dollars into sports facilities and infrastructure projects in and around Sochi with the hope of showing Russia's best face to the world.

Opposition activists have slammed the Games' roughly $50 billion price tag, accusing officials of siphoning off part of the funds, and nongovernmental groups have criticized the conditions for laborers working to build the facilities and the environmental impact of the construction.

But the volunteers, naturally, are gung-ho about helping put on the event. In return for fulfilling such duties as checking tickets at Olympics venues and asking athletes about their dietary preferences, the volunteers will be provided free accommodation, three free meals a day and daily transportation costs. They will not be paid and must cover their travel expenses to and from Sochi.

Despite the travel costs and the fact that volunteers may have almost no time to watch the games, it was not free tickets to Olympic events that attracted many of them.

"Communicating with the athletes completely makes up for the few opportunities to watch the games," Karina Subbotina, 21, a linguistics student, said by phone from Vladivostok.

Last month, volunteers began their training at 26 sites across Russia. The training is divided into three stages, which stretch into next year and teach the history of the Olympics and Sochi, the specific duties of volunteers depending on their spheres of work, and navigation around the Olympic facilities.

At Moscow State Automobile and Road Technical University, or MADI, which hosts one of eight training centers for volunteers in Moscow, some 300 young people gathered in late March for one of the first training sessions in a newly renovated but still Soviet-style assembly hall, with windows several meters high covered in old-fashioned curtains.

The session opened with a video shown on a large screen that showed images of Earth from space, with a voice-over saying it was the year 3015.

"It's time to divulge all the secrets of the Games in Sochi in 2014. Why did they become the most successful in all of modern history?" the voice-over said.

The optimistic short film was an introduction to the first stage of training, in which volunteers study the history of the Olympics and Sochi in the form of a trivia game, which they play in 15-person teams over three days.

On the first day of the game, identical questions were written out in individual workbooks that volunteers filled out in groups. The team that answered a question first received a bag of candy.

Apart from the questions, the workbook included instructions for volunteers on how to communicate with guests of the games in general and with disabled people and reporters specifically.

The volunteers are urged to use caution when talking with the media. One part of the instructions takes the form of a cartoon titled "An Importunate Journalist" that depicts a volunteer telling a reporter that he was very tired working at the Games, and the reporter turns the comment into a negative news story.

At the training session, this vigilance with journalists was on display. Organizing Committee spokeswoman Svetlana Volodina watched closely as a reporter interviewed two student volunteers at MADI and the head of MADI's volunteer center, and she listened in on a phone conversation between a reporter and an elderly female volunteer from Moscow, even chiming in with questions for the volunteer about the location and time of an Olympics-related event.

Artyom Voitenkov, 18, a student at MADI and a longtime fan of the Olympics, said he wanted to meet "interesting" athletes and "plunge into the atmosphere" of the Games.

His fellow student Renata Kamelyanova, also 18 and a longtime sports fan, said she picked MADI for university in part because it has a center preparing volunteers for the Sochi Olympics.

"Instead of watching the games from the sidelines, you can be directly involved in the process," Kamelyanova said before the start of the training session.

Volunteers could choose one of 18 areas to work in, including doping checks, media relations, transportation services, interpreting and translating, and catering, among others.

In addition to receiving training in their specific areas of work, volunteers will be required to improve their English and learn the Olympics vocabulary, meaning the terms used in various disciplines, such as those related to the equipment and rules of the events.

The volunteers were selected on the basis of various personal traits, such as the ability to handle stress, a sense of purpose, attentiveness and inventiveness, among others, as well as based on their knowledge of English, said Ilya Arifullin, head of the Volunteer Center at MADI.

The selection process included a psychological test, an English test passed on the Internet and an interview at the Organizing Committee, Arifullin said.

Some volunteers have their own sense of what qualities they should possess for the job.

Galina Alexeyeva, 64, a Moscow professor and a Sochi volunteer, said she believed her task was "not to turn down any work."

"And when you see that a person needs help and you can't help them, you should call other people," she said by phone. Alexeyeva said she thought optimism and support from volunteers would help the Russian athletes win a lot of medals.

Canadian volunteer Jon Mankow, 21, is one of more than 20,000 foreigners hailing from about

100 countries who filed applications to work at the Games. (Information on how many foreigners were selected was not immediately available.) He said a volunteer "should have an interest in people from different cultures, good interpersonal skills, care about the Olympic spirit and be prepared to work hard."

For Mankow, a student of Russian currently living in Moscow, volunteering in Sochi is a chance to "meet great people" and "make many friends," but also to acquire "organizational, problem-solving, time management and interpersonal skills" that he may need for his desired profession of business manager.

Taramzhenina, the 72-year-old volunteer, who is a French teacher by profession and who was a sprinter and high jumper in her youth and practiced martial arts later in life, said she was interested in sports "from the viewpoint of human capacity and self-improvement."

Just like for many younger participants, volunteering at the games is also an opportunity — and a free one, at that — for Taramzhenina to improve and practice her English, which she studies as a hobby.

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