



Sightseeing in St. Petersburg, Russia

Oakwood teens travel to Russia

By Chris Saunders

How do you say “hello” in Russian? “Zdravstvuyte” If you can’t get your tongue around that many syllables, four Oakwood teens learned last summer just to say “Hi,” while traveling to Russia on a youth mission trip, sponsored by MVERN (Miami Valley Episcopal Russian Network). Leo Schenk, Oksana Cerny, Jeff Mumford and Sarah Penix from Oakwood High School were part of a group of 16 curious and energetic teenagers who learned about a different culture while also discovering a great deal about themselves. Some of the teens had never before been outside the United States. The group was led by the Rev. David Halt and five other chaperones. Before leaving on this life-changing journey, the group met monthly to learn about Russian history, culture, and religion and to be prepared for the

adventure ahead of them.

After arriving in Russia, the travelers spent three days in St. Petersburg, exploring the historic and cultural sites of this beautiful city, often called the “Venice of the North.” Here they visited the Peter and Paul Fortress and St. Isaac’s Cathedral, the fourth largest domed cathedral in the world, and were overwhelmed by the treasures at the great Hermitage State Museum, one of the largest art museums in the world.

Sarah Penix, Oakwood High School, said that she enjoyed learning about Russian culture and their rich heritage. Another lasting impression was an appreciation for the sense of pride which the Russian people have for their country and its history, despite (or perhaps because of) its challenged history.

The group then traveled to the village of Sablino, 30 miles from St. Petersburg, where they spent eight

days in a sprawling youth center, developed by Fr. Nikolai Aksenov, rector of St. Nicholas Church, the Russian parish that is partnered with MVERN.

Children at the youth center’s summer camp were eager to meet their new American friends. Following a candlelit opening ceremony, the activities began. For eight days the American youth mentored younger students and built relationships while helping with music and art projects, sports and games, finding that despite their previous fears, language was not a problem. One girl remarked that “it was cool just hanging out with the kids of Sablino.”

After lunch the American group went to work on many service projects, joined by some of the Russian teens. One group sanded and painted the wooden façade of the youth center with donated paint that can

See **Teens** on page 6 ►



Chris Shea Founding Artistic Director of Free Shakespeare! works with OHS student Callia Tellez on swordfighting stage combat techniques for the upcoming OHS production of *Romeo & Juliet*.

Oakwood High School Masters Shakespeare

Oakwood High School Theater department will present the timeless Shakespearean tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* on November 8, 9 and 10 at the high school auditorium. Sword fighting, true love, revenge – this play has got it all! Over 40 students make up the cast and crew under the direction of Michael Wadham. The role of Juliet will be played by freshman Molly Boozell and the role of Romeo will be played by senior Shadow Woolf.

Students auditioned for the roles last June before the end of the school year in order to have the summer to memorize the dialogue. This fall they worked with Chris Shea of the profes-

sional Dayton theatre company Free Shakespeare! to learn the art of sword fighting. Don’t miss this outstanding production of two young lovers who must withstand the assaults of prejudice, bigotry, and revenge in search of their happily ever after.

There will be three evening performances on Thursday, Nov. 8 through Saturday, Nov. 10 begin at 7:00 pm and the afternoon matinee on Saturday, Nov. 10 begins at 3:00 pm. Tickets are \$5.00 for students and \$8.00 for adults. Tickets will be sold at the door or you can contact Sara Swift at ssswift@woh.rr.com to order your tickets early.



2nd Annual Holiday Cookie Baking Contest

Details on pages 8 and 9



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► **Teens** from page 1 best be called a “pumpkin orange.” After deciding that it was just too bright, they added lots of white to the remaining orange paint, producing a pastel peach color with which they painted the center a second time. They also moved a mound of sand and gravel in preparation for some new construction, painted a fence and cleaned a large fountain in front of the center.

Fire is a common problem in Russian villages since many of the houses are made of wood. Shortly before the Ohio group arrived, a fire had consumed the home belonging to the family of Ilya, a young man who had traveled to Dayton several years ago on an MVERN exchange. An American crew tackled the dirty job of cleaning up the rubble and preparing the site for a new house to



Repainting the youth center.

be built. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, Leo Schenk, a senior at Oakwood High School, said that the highpoint of the trip for him was

cleaning up Ilya’s house.

Shortly after they arrived in Sablino, the American group was challenged to a basketball game

against a team in a nearby town. Although the Americans had never before played as a team, they quickly learned to play together and lost the game by only one point. At the camp there also were lots of volleyball games and a ping pong tournament.

The group attended two Russian Orthodox services, one in St. Petersburg and the second at the village church of St. Nicholas in Sablino. In both cases, almost everyone in the group was struck by the Russians’ depth of the devotion and the unmistakable sense of community. After seventy years of communist suppression of religion, it was encouraging to see faith and worship making a strong comeback in Russia.

After church in Sablino the group enjoyed Sunday dinner in village homes where they enjoyed Russian hospitality, learned about Russian life-styles and enjoyed real Russian food. One traveler said: “It was fun trying new foods. I now like caviar and cabbage rolls!”

There were hugs and tears as the Americans prepared to leave and promises that they would stay in touch with their new Russian friends via Facebook. They had learned that Russian and American teenagers are much the same. Everyone said that they had been warmly welcomed and thanked their Russian hosts for their hospitality. One of the boys volunteered that he “could

feel love everywhere!” It was truly a trip of a lifetime.

Since 1998 almost 120 Episcopal and Orthodox youth from southern Ohio and Illinois have traveled to Russia with MVERN on life-changing trips - pilgrimages with a mission. Trips such as these bring youth in contact with the core values of a Christian life. Their faith is increased, their horizons are expanded, and they return home excited about being involved in the ministries of their churches. They also are reminded that they are richly blessed in our nation - and called to be good stewards of all they have been given, important messages, especially in times such as those in which we live.

Chris Saunders is co-founder and former president of the Miami Valley Episcopal Russian Network. She is a member of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Oakwood and a resident of Oakwood.

The Miami Episcopal Russian Network (MVERN) is a consortium of eleven Episcopal churches and two Orthodox Churches in the Miami Valley that have formed a partnership with St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Sablino, Russia, for the purpose of fostering a spiritual and personal relationship between the congregations of the participating churches. The next youth exchange to Russia is tentatively scheduled for June 2015.

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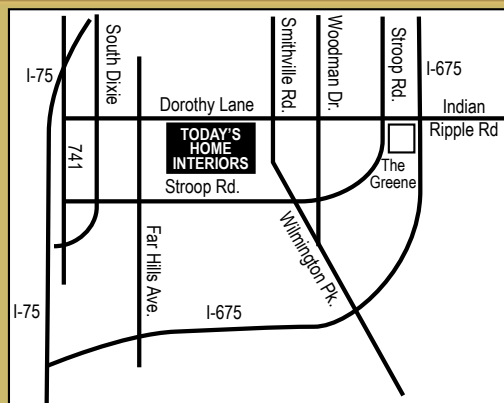
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Playing a Russian game.



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