

## **A Never To Be Forgotten People To People Experience**

Life events often stand out in bold relief. They surprise everyone as many times they far exceed expectations. This was certainly true of the Muscogee Rotary Club's recent experience with the Productivity Enhancement Program (PEP) that brought eleven physicians from Russia for 24 days from May 22<sup>nd</sup> to June 15<sup>th</sup> to our community in Columbus, Georgia. Our medium size twelve-year old Rotary club joined an elite group of over 400 Rotary clubs throughout the United States that have been participants as part of this bold PEP initiative. There has been no other project in the relatively short history of our Rotary Club that has involved so many of our Rotarians and members of our community at large. The ground work for PEP began in 1981 as the vision of one woman, a Rotarian, Sharon Tennison in San Francisco. In that year we were right at the very height of the cold war between the United States and Russia and eighty-seven percent of the American public surveyed believed that they would die in a nuclear war. The burning question on everyone's mind, - "Was there any way to possibly prevent this nuclear tragedy?"

For two years a very small group of fifteen people made a concerted effort to alter the direction our country appeared to be going. They collectively and individually wrote, pressured and lobbied everyone of influence in our government attempting to stop a possible armed confrontation with Russia. They felt after a two year concerted effort their pleas to our government were falling on deaf ears.

Finally in desperation, as improbable as it sounds, this group of American citizen-diplomats led by Sharon decided to travel to Russia to see if they could gain some support for their ideas there. The organization that grew out of these efforts, the Center for Citizen Initiatives, just celebrated

the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their very first trip to Russia on September 16, 1983. The group had applied to the Russian government and stated that they wanted to travel to Russia and meet ordinary Russian citizens, but they did not want to do this through the traditional in-tourist system set up by the Russian government. This group of citizen-diplomats was absolutely startled when the Soviet government replied that they could indeed visit Russia. Once they had permission from the Russian government to travel there under their own terms, they thought that it would be good to advise the FBI of their plans. They were again startled when they learned that the FBI already knew all about their plans and were actively following them and monitoring their activities. They left on their journey traveling through Czechoslovakia just two weeks after the Korean Air Liner 007 was shot down over China. It was an extremely unsettling time to travel to Russia on a mission of peace.

The intentions of this small group that went to Russia, Georgia and the Ukraine was to make only one three week trip there. However, the response of the Russian citizens to this trip was so great that they all agreed when they returned to the United States that it was imperative that they educate the American public about how ordinary Russian citizens were feeling about the prospects of a nuclear conflict. To facilitate dialog, each American carried a number of cards printed in Russian that said simply, "I am an American and I would like to talk with you." What this group wanted to do was to get inside Russian homes and talk to ordinary Russian citizens frankly about what they were feeling to see what they could do together to pressure their respective governments to change their direction. The group was overwhelmed by the friendliness, and warm hospitality of the Russians they met. They quickly discovered that the Russians were feeling the same acute anxiety they were about the prospect of armed conflict. In this initial group were four men and eleven women.

One of the men, David Ellzey, is a very gifted mime who is a master of communicating the human dilemma despite the language barrier. At their very recent 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary party marking the occasion of their first trip to Russia David was present along with thirteen of the other original members of this first citizen-diplomat team. As they recounted some of their adventures they told the story of their happening on a Russian man in Moscow struggling to start his car. David jumped in and as a mime did several highly practical forms of assistance trying to get the stalled car functioning again. He even tried cranking the car. A fairly good size crowd collected as he heroically pantomimed every conceivable intervention one would think of to start the stalled car. Finally, he gave the beleaguered driver the universal “thumbs up” signal to start the car and miraculously the car started to a resounding chorus of cheers.

Talk about the power of the press! There was an article published about their trip on their return to Northern California and Sharon received a call from Studs Terkel in Chicago who was quite surprised that Sharon did not know who he was. On the basis of their phone conversation, Terkel invited Sharon to come to Chicago for an interview. When Studs wrote his article about what had actually happened to Sharon and her friends, he ended the article with her address and phone number. Her phone immediately started ringing off the hook and the Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI) took off. Over the next seven years CCI estimated that they facilitated over 100,000 people to people contacts between ordinary Russian and American citizens.

Don Chapman was a reserve navy captain in San Diego when he met Sharon in 1987 for the very 1<sup>st</sup> time. Her name had mysteriously appeared on his monthly training roster. He asked the junior officer in his command that had scheduled Sharon who she was. The officer responded that Don would be pleasantly surprised. Don said that he better be as he was more than a little bit incredulous that a civilian would be qualified to talk to a group of naval officers about Russia.

At the very end of her talk Sharon challenged the group to not just believe what she had said about the Russian people, but she suggested that they travel themselves to Russia and make their own appraisal.

Don and his wife Julie had been planning a trip to China and he accepted Sharon's challenge and travelled to Russia instead for two weeks. They took two of their children with them, and Don says that trip changed his life. Don and Julie made a second three week trip to Russia in 1989 and by that time he was really hooked. Since his first trip, Don has been one of 13 citizen – diplomats that serve on the Board of Directors for the Center for Citizen Initiatives. As a retired Delta pilot Don is able to fly all over the United States telling various service clubs about all the growth that he has personally seen in the past 16 years as a result of CCI's numerous programs directed at Russia. There is still a long way to go, but it is simply amazing the positive changes that have already taken place in Russia as a result of PEP. Over the past 20 years Sharon has raised over \$60,000,000 to fund the programs that CCI has started. Ten years after Sharon started CCI she received a white house appointment as one of 13 directors to oversee a \$250 million dollar fund to promote the development of small business across Russia.

CCI has also initiated several other programs designed to directly aid Russia, an agriculture initiative, an environmental initiative and a highly innovative program called Soviets Meet Middle America. This program began in 1987 and over two years brought over 400 English speaking Russian citizens from ten Soviet Republics to visit 265 American cities. These visitors stayed in over 1200 American homes and this resulted in hundreds of TV and radio programs and over 1,000 newspaper articles.

When the Soviet Union finally imploded in the early 1990's then CCI started the centerpiece of their current programs, the Productivity Enhancement Program known as PEP. This program was designed to broaden their base of people to people contacts and substantively help the Russian people to move from 80 years of communist rule to a market based economy. There was also a critical need to extend their people to people contact to non-English speaking Russians. The design of this program replicates the earlier highly successful Marshall Plan that was in place following World War II. Under this technical phase of the Marshall Plan, 24,000 non-English speaking foreign nationals from all over Europe came to the United States for training. This phase of the Marshall program only represented a very small percentage of the overall cost of this highly successful program. However, it proved to be a major factor in the rapid economic recovery of Europe in the aftermath of World War II.

Starting in 1996, CCI began bringing small groups of non-English speaking Russian entrepreneurs to the United States for a concentrated 24-day industry specific intensive training in management principles and production concepts. Each delegation has, in addition, a Russian facilitator and an interpreter because there is a wide range of language ability among the visiting Russian entrepreneurs.

To date over 4,000 Russians have come to the United States. They have visited 45 of our 50 states. Eighty percent of the Russian entrepreneurs who have traveled to the United States under this highly effective PEP program have come through sponsoring Rotary Clubs. These Russian visitors in turn have returned to Russia after their PEP programs and started 25 brand new Rotary Clubs in Russia as a direct result of their PEP experience.

This is an absolutely wonderful way for small Rotary clubs to undertake themselves an international project or they can collaborate with other Rotary clubs in their district to sponsor an industry specific delegation.. The PEP project will also qualify as a vocational project and in many Rotary districts as a new project as well. Each individual Russian entrepreneur pays \$1,500 (15%) to participate in the PEP program. A major grant for defraying 50% of the remaining cost is picked up by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of our own United States Department of State. The final 35% of the remaining cost for hosting a PEP delegation comes from in kind contributions from business hosts, home hosts and the sponsoring Rotary clubs.

The State Department has been so positive about this program that they recently approached CCI which is based in San Francisco and have asked them to triple the number of delegations that come to the United States over the next year. CCI is now providing industry specific training for eighty different industry groups. CCI has seen their staff grow to 30 staff members in the United States and 45 people working on the program in Russia. They have seven offices in Russia. Their main office, where the staff are all employees of CCI, is located in St. Petersburg. In the six other offices CCI maintains across the remaining time zones they have contracted with individual Russian entrepreneurs to recruit and screen applicants from Russia for this very exciting program on a fee basis. All applicants go through an extensive screening process where only the very top candidates are selected. Before they come to the United States they have a great deal of training. Once they have come here they must agree to network with other PEP interns when they return to Russia, and train other Russian entrepreneurs about what they have learned here in the United States as well. There are also 60 CCI satellite coordinators who are directly involved in marketing the program across Russia. Our State Department states that the PEP program is the most cost effective program they have in strengthening democracy in Russia. It is amazing how much this small growing cadre of PEP interns is positively changing the

business and economic climate of Russia. We will as citizens of this country all directly benefit from these positive changes in the Russian business landscape.

The Muscogee Rotary Club found out about the PEP program when one of their charter members and past president, Allen Kerr, first heard about the program when he was making up for a missed meeting at the Minnetonka Rotary Club in Minnetonka, Minnesota. When Allen returned to Columbus from Minnesota, he told his Rotary board about the PEP program and received their blessing to explore this opportunity further. On surveying the Muscogee Rotary Club it turned out that 27.5% of their membership of 59 members was employed in the health care field or related fields. When the board heard in much greater detail about the PEP program they gave their enthusiastic support to sponsor a PEP delegation. They also accepted the suggestion that they ask to host a Private Medical Clinic Delegation. Part of Allen's enthusiasm for the PEP program stemmed from his own recent experience of being a part of a People to People Ambassador Delegation of psychologists to Cuba. This gave Allen first hand knowledge of the catalytic effect that occurs in people to people interchanges. Home host and business hosts involved in the Muscogee Rotary PEP program repeatedly said that what occurred far exceeded their expectations. Once the Russian physicians actually arrived in Columbus on May 22<sup>nd</sup> the fun really began. Supplemental plans for additional interactions immediately started surfacing spontaneously. There were a total of 34 home hosts, 38 business hosts and 109 different presenters during 14 days of intensive training. There were also four planned social events. The Russian delegation all received from United States Congressman Sanford Bishop official recognition from the United States Congress. Some of the other occurrences that made this visit so special were a video tape of all our preparations, and a condensed short video tape with background music of the training and other highlights of the Russian visit. As a part of

their farewell gift, each Russian physician received a CD of all the photographs that were taken daily. They were also introduced to some brand new concepts. They participated in a Habitat for Humanity building blitz for 10 houses that were being constructed for a youth program in LaGrange, Georgia. Their first day of training was on Servant Leadership, a style of management quite different from the traditional top down style of management. Our community has a Russian speaking mayor, Bob Poydasheff, who expeditiously found their luggage which had been delayed in Atlanta. The Russian physicians radiated personal warmth as they responded to our community's hospitality. Not to be outdone, the Russians threw their own farewell party upon completing the PEP program.

For Rotary clubs that would like detailed information about this extraordinary opportunity they can check out all the details of the PEP program on CCI's web site – [www.ccisf.org](http://www.ccisf.org) Specific details about the private medical clinic delegation that visited Columbus, Georgia can be found on the Muscogee Rotary's web site – [muscogeerotary.org](http://muscogeerotary.org) This web site has a direct link with CCI's web site. The program presented Columbus, Georgia at its very best and the entire experience built lasting friendships between a small contingent of Russian physicians and a large segment of our community and our Rotary club.

Allen S. Kerr  
887 Oakwood Drive  
Columbus, Georgia 31904  
706 660-1623  
E-mail: [askchar@earthlink.net](mailto:askchar@earthlink.net)  
Free Lance Writer

