

## From Seattle to Novosibirsk: A 1st Grade Exchange

In Seattle, Washington, an interdisciplinary Soviet-American curriculum exchange—the Kids-to-Kids project—was created by three dedicated teachers who planned and implemented it, and finally visited the Siberian town of Novosibirsk.



*Photograph courtesy of Jane McLane*

*On her first visit to the U.S., Alóna Kosinova, of Novosibirsk, Siberia, gives her teacher flowers. Soviet students and parents are meeting their new American friends here for the first time.*

"I wonder what kind of rocks they have in Siberia."

"How do you say 'Good morning' in Russian?"

"Do their pop and candy taste the way they do in Seattle?"

These questions—and many others—were asked by 1st graders in Seattle as they shared a cross-cultural curriculum with 1st graders in Novosibirsk, Siberia, USSR.

The project began in the spring of 1989 at Kimball Elementary School with the 1st grade teaching team, Chris Morningstar, Sharon Enga, and me. Our idea was to invite 1st grade Soviet children to visit our school and city, since Seattle was hosting the Goodwill Games in the summer of 1990. We wanted to contact a school in the Soviet Union that had not had many experiences with Americans. We approached Olga Bazanova, a voluntary peace worker in the Families to Families Association in Novosibirsk. Olga's daughter was in the 1st grade at School #25 in Novosibirsk, a school considered progressive for children of parents who work at the nearby University of Novosibirsk. When Olga asked them, the 1st grade teachers at

School #25 were excited about the prospect of an exchange with an American school.

### Beginning the Project

Over the summer of 1989, Chris, Sharon, and I brainstormed ideas and activities in music, art, language, literature, science, and social studies that both schools could share. Our plan was to integrate the subjects through a thematic approach. Later in the summer, Sharon went to the Soviet Union and spent a week at School #25 setting up the exchange agreement.

In 1st grade the major social studies theme is the study of families. Thus, exchanging information about family life in the U.S. and the USSR was a natural starting point for this project. Through this study, the children began to see similarities and differences in the two cultures. The children at Kimball wrote books about themselves and sent drawings of their families' celebrations of winter holidays to their Soviet friends.

The study of families branched off into the study of animal families native to the two environments of Washington and Siberia. The children made clay figurines of the various animals and wrote reports about them.

The Kimball 1st graders also studied folk and fairy tales common to both Soviet and American cultures. They compared five stories from each culture which had similar themes, characters, and settings (for example, Cinderella and Vasilisa).

Art and drama were integrated into this literature unit through two projects. The first was an art activity where—engaging the help of artist-in-residence Stuart Nakamura—the children were able to express these stories visually in the making of silk-screened comparative banners. Later four of the five banners were presented as gifts to School #25, the Families to Families Association, and two other schools we visited in Novosibirsk.

The second project drew upon the talents of nearby Cleveland High School drama students. These students volunteered to develop and then to teach drama activities to the 1st graders throughout the school year. When



*Photograph courtesy of Jane McLane*

*Kimball Elementary School's 1st grade ambassadors are on their way to Moscow from Seattle for their 1st grade exchange.*

the Soviet visitors came, the Kimball 1st graders presented several short plays based on the folk and fairy tales they studied.

Enthusiasm spread from 1st grade to the rest of the school. A 5th grade class learned some Russian, and many students wrote to pen pals at School #25. During the year, I introduced Russian words and phrases to the entire school during the all-school morning announcement time. Children from different grade levels brought in Soviet-related materials to share with the first graders. And our Kids-to-Kids project became the catalyst for the entire school to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum theme centered on the Pacific Rim.

### The Spring Exchange

This yearlong project culminated in the long-awaited exchange between the schools. Eight Soviet 1st graders, each escorted by a parent, and four other adults visited us between May 28 and June 12, 1990, staying in Seattle pupils' homes, attending special activities at Kimball Elementary, and sight-seeing around Seattle.

The official welcoming event for the Soviets was an all-school assembly with the award-winning children's mu-

sical group "Tickle Tune Typhoon," whose music includes the themes we covered in our project: friendship, environmental issues, peace, and Soviet-American relationships. It was a very exciting moment for all the school's students, parents, and staff to meet our Soviet visitors. Few of our Soviet visitors spoke more than a phrase or two of English, and only a couple of Kimball staff knew more than a few words of Russian, but the cordiality and enthusiasm of our meeting was inspiring.

The other all-school event was the Kimball Mini-Goodwill Games. Every student participated in the Opening Ceremony, which included a Parade of Nations (with music and banners) to the playground where a welcoming speech was given in English and Russian—and in seven other languages that represented some of the languages spoken at our school.

Among other special activities was a field trip for Kimball 1st graders and the Soviet visitors to the Suquamish Indian Reservation. The Suquamish Indian children had been learning their language, tribal stories, music, dance, and art in preparation for our visit so they could share their rich culture with the Soviet children and with us. Our experience ended with the shar-

ing of traditional songs, games, and dances from our three cultures.

### **The Summer Exchange**

On August 25, 1990, eight Kimball 1st graders, each with a parent, traveled with us to Novosibirsk for a two-week visit. There we were greeted warmly by the Soviet friends we had met in Seattle and the new friends we were to visit.

The highlight of our visit was our participation in their first day of school on September 1. It's officially called "The Day of Knowledge," when schools celebrate the opening of the new school year. All the students were gathered outside in front of the school by class groups. The 1st graders were welcomed to the first day in their journey through "The Land of Knowledge" and were given a gift of their first books by the older students. The seniors were also acknowledged for their last year in school. At this ceremony, the Kimball 1st graders gave the Soviet 1st graders the silk-screened

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T-shirts we had made during the school year.

The excitement we had felt in greeting the Soviets in Seattle was reciprocated by the Soviet children, parents, and teachers who greeted us on the first day of school. Many students

wanted to come and stand next to us, say hello, and smile in friendship. Later that day, we teachers had the opportunity to meet and talk with the staff of School #25. The Soviet teachers were eager to meet us and discuss what we taught in school as well as how it was decided. I spoke with one teacher about the educational computer network in which our school participates and discussed the possibility of creating a computer network between our two schools.

### **More Important Than the Summit**

After we returned home, the staff of School #25 sent Kimball School a letter encouraging the continuation of the exchange of ideas and projects between our two schools. They also invited a group of teachers and students from Kimball to visit their school again in the spring of '91. The host families from both countries are keeping in touch with the students and adults they hosted, by letters, fax, and packages sent by courier. Our staff has investigated the possibility and cost of setting up a computer network between Seattle and Novosibirsk. We are waiting for a response from School #25 to find out if it is possible for them.

When we began, we envisioned the outcomes of this special yearlong curriculum exchange to be an appreciation of our similarities, a celebration of our differences, and the laying of the foundation for lifelong learning as world citizens of the 21st century. We believe we reached those outcomes.

We saw our children easily making friends with the Soviet children they met. We found the Soviet people to be very warm, gracious, and so excited to meet Americans. As Marina Kosinova, a Soviet parent, said in an interview at our school, "This exchange between Soviet and American families is more important than the summit meetings between our two nations' leaders. If our children are friends now, then later as adults they will be friends." □

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