

A Sister City Story from Tom Row

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | February 28, 2007



On a visit to Obninsk, Russia, Tom Row, at left, marvels at progress that has been made there

In a recent *Historically Speaking* column about the world-wide impact of successful efforts in Oak Ridge and the numerous potential opportunities facing us, I briefly mentioned Oak Ridge's participation in Sister Cities International. Obninsk, Russia, and Naka Machi, Japan, are Oak Ridge's two sister cities. This story, provided by Oak Ridger Tom Row, discusses the relationship Oak Ridge has developed with Obninsk over the years. Like other things Oak Ridge has done, this is being done well and is a model of success.

I asked Tom if he would please give me input on his impressions of the Sister Cities program, as he had been a participant on some of the trips and hosted the visitors to Oak Ridge. He readily agreed and provided a written account of his memories about the city of special people he met and some especially important efforts being undertaken there that are near to his heart. He also mentions one program that is just now being developed — so his involvement continues.

“As a result of a grant application that Ken Luckmann wrote in 1999, the Sister City organization in Oak Ridge and the United Way received funding for a USAID exchange program with the city of Obninsk, Russia. The grant was based on an exchange of ideas and experience in United Way agencies programs for children and seniors.

“I had helped some in the ideas for the grant, and when the award came, I had just retired. The United Way executive director who was supposed to lead the work in the grant had just left to take another United Way post in another state and the lot of being the "leader" fell in my lap.

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"What a surprise for one who had just begun to savor retirement. After that surprise, Annie Cacheiro, the new United Way executive director, and I went to Moscow for training on the grant, and visited Obninsk to set up conversation with those with whom we would work. Because of her new duties Annie was only able to help on part of the grant and the visits and the other contact activities were mine.

"First, a group from Obninsk visited Oak Ridge to see first-hand how we do agency work and how important the unique individuals called "volunteers" are in the success of these programs. Following this visit we planned and completed two additional visits to Obninsk — one involved leaders in our youth programs and the second our senior programs.

"All three visits were approximately two weeks long and involved an intense schedule of discussions and visits to agencies and those who worked there. We had a weekend on each trip that the team members used to visit Moscow to see the sights there.

"During our two weeks we visited an orphanage that served children "orphaned" in most cases by alcoholic parents. The orphanage worked very hard to help the children but was quite limited by funds and lack of resources.

"Another facility was one developed and operated by a woman who was intensely devoted to helping children who had learning and physical challenges to reach their full potential. Again, funds were short and First Methodist Church had for some time been assisting them with funds which they used to enhance their programs.

"A third agency was the Veterans Club, which provided learning and recreational opportunities for seniors. Veterans, in the Russian translation, are those who have spent their life in one endeavor or another, not just armed service veterans but veterans of business, etc.

"Seniors generally have a difficult time with health issues, nutrition, as well as the conventional challenges of growing old. The club was doing a good job, but again was limited by their funding.

"Another start-up activity was a firm that was being started to help those with physical therapy needs of many different kinds.

"On one of our trips, Bob Benning, director of Ridgeview, worked very closely with several Navy officers to develop a program to help combat the serious drug and alcohol problem that plagued many of the young and older people in the city.

"As an aside, I visited a Russian Orthodox church, Belkino, located in the old city area. The wife of my counterpart in Obninsk was very active in the church and I was curious to see what part religion might play in helping to solve many of these problems.

"I had several great meetings with the young people of the church and we talked about projects they might undertake to serve the seniors in the community. It was great fun being the center of curiosity from those youngsters and answering the hundreds of questions they had about our country and things we do and why — the best part of the trip.

"As we worked with these groups, we shared our thoughts and ideas and encouraged them to try new ideas, to challenge the city government to provide more funds to assist them in their work, and to enlarge their services to accommodate more people.

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“Then in the spring of 2006 I was presented with a wonderful opportunity. I saw Ken Luckmann and he mentioned that a small group from the city was to visit Obninsk to help them celebrate their 50th anniversary of the founding of their city. I took only a moment to decide that I would like to return to see the friends I had made during my visits there and what might have happened to the time and ideas we invested in Obninsk.

“I was thrilled with the results! The orphanage which was a stand-alone operation before was now a well-funded part of a five-program activity that provided not only excellent care for the children but counseling for families, children with drug problems, children with the problems of their separation from their family, and pre marital counseling for young couples.

“Many times the number of people being served, compared to the number I found during my earlier visit, as well as the funding from the city had increased significantly. The facility for the mentally and physically challenged children had continued to improve and enlarge their client base.

“While we were there we attended a special 50th celebration where the director of that facility received an award from the Bishop of Church of the Kaluga Region (equivalent to our state) for her outstanding work in that field.

“The new business to provide physical therapy needs had grown exponentially to the point that their success brought the director an opportunity to move to a city ten times the size of Obninsk to manage a similar, but much larger, facility there.

“The Veterans Club gave me the greatest satisfaction of all. I had worked very hard with the leaders of that group to help them understand that their activity was key to growing the services needed by seniors, and that with compassionate pressure on the city fathers they could in fact grow their work to a major force for that group of seniors in the Obninsk population.

“Wow — when we revisited the club and saw the number of activities now in place and the success they had in getting those seniors in competitions to show their talents regionally, it was a great reward for the effort we had made.

“During one of the major 50th anniversary celebrations, similar to the Secret City Festival, the members of their club occupied space equivalent to the Oak Ridge City Center with their crafts and other beautiful objects they offered for sale. Ken and I bought beautiful embroidered panels to bring home.

“Last but not least, I revisited the church at Belkino and once again got to talk to the young people. They have, over this five-year span since I last saw them, continued to develop their programs serving seniors with special meals, shopping assistance, day trips and personal visits. I am sure the seniors of Obninsk are very appreciative of the attention they receive from them.

“Summing up, it was a wonderful experience to return to Obninsk, to see old friends, and enjoy that special brand of hospitality they offer. It was grand to see all of the progress made by the different agencies, to hear about their new and larger programs, and certainly to see that the city is now funding these operations to a level that sustains their work. I hope to again visit them and see further progress.

“We came back with a new challenge. Why can they not have the equivalent of a Second Harvest Food Bank in Obninsk? We are working the idea and it seems that our timing is good, as international organizations seem to have the same idea. So, we hope for success in making this happen.

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"The volunteer spirit that allows Oak Ridge to provide so very many extraordinary opportunities for our citizens was shared with our Sister City Obninsk with great success. The citizens of Obninsk enjoy a much richer experience because of those ideas and encouragement we were able to bring to them."

This Sister Cities effort being made by Oak Ridgers is hugely successful. Existing programs have been strengthened and new programs have and are being begun. Personal involvement on the part of Oak Ridge's talented volunteers not only produces tangible results, it sets the example for others to learn how to improve their own volunteer efforts by emulating successful Oak Ridge program activities.

We can all be proud of the "Tom Rows" we have in Oak Ridge. Reading his story causes pride in all of us and thanksgiving that we are so richly blessed. More importantly it makes us proud that we are fortunate enough to be able to share those blessings with others. Oak Ridge is richly blessed with enormously talented individuals and groups. We continue to have world-wide positive impact!

In addition to Tom Row, director and board vice president of United Way of Anderson County, the following people were involved in the Sister Cities effort with Obninsk, Russia through 2006: Annie Cacheiro, executive director, United Way of Anderson County; Robert John Benning, chief executive officer, Ridgeview Psychiatric Hospital & Center Inc.; Cynthia Smith Bailes, executive director, CASA of Anderson County; Dr. Rush Berryhill Winchester, executive director, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tennessee Valley Inc.; Anita Cardwell Rule, president UWAC, director of Clinton Operations, HomeCrest Cabinetry Corp.; Frances Lucille Griffo, executive director/chief executive officer, Girl Scouts of Tanasi Council Inc.; Dianne Lynett Wilgen, executive director, CONTACT; Forest Lee Turner, Web site manager; Lynn Dorice Burbank, director, non-resident students, St. Catherine's College; Diane Mastromatteo Wright, past director of Keystone Elder Day Care Facility; Pamela Sue Obenshain, executive director, Clinch River Home Health; Janice Challan Thomas, recreation supervisor, City of Oak Ridge Senior Center; Peggy Kitchen Meier, past Office of Aging director, Regional Committee on Home & Community Based Services Funding; Dr. Ken Luckmann, president of the Oak Ridge Sister City Organization; and Jerry Luckmann, Oak Ridge Sister City Organization, Girl Scout leader.