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Two Sister Cities, One World:

An International Visitor to Corvallis and OLA

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I came to Corvallis, Oregon in April, 2009 to visit the United States on behalf of the Corvallis-Uzhhorod Sister Cities Association. Mutual understanding between our countries—the United States of America and Ukraine—begins with mutual understanding of the citizens of cities like Corvallis and Uzhhorod. Being a librarian I left reassured that libraries play a very important role in American society and they are very similar to the libraries in Ukraine.

In my home country, as in the United States, we believe the library is a reliable shelter of democracy. In fact, it seems to be the one place where a visitor is accepted regardless of financial state, religion, or social position. In Ukraine a modern library is not just a warehouse of books but we should not undermine the value of a book as an essential source of information. Still, a modern library is a cultural and educational centre, a place for holding various programming, such as clubs, film previews, etc.

While exploring the experiences of American colleagues at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, I discovered that American and Ukrainian librarians do believe in the following: libraries of the 21st century should change and exceed the constraints of the times. But in spite of the computerization and technological renewal of libraries the main focus of the library is still on the reader.

Learnings from an American Public Library

The work of libraries in the United States and Ukraine may be very similar, but there are some differences, and it was interesting to learn and share some of those. In the U.S. the public libraries often have three sections—services for children, youth, and adults. In Ukraine those patrons are served by separate libraries. They are located in dif-

ferent places and have their own directors and staff. But all of them are government owned and financed.

I think having one big library is much more convenient. First of all, it saves time for the parents who want to use the libraries at the same time as their kids. Also it is probably easier to finance and support one library instead of a few. This is a smart way—through children—to bring adults into the library. I noticed this happening at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, when while bringing their babies, some of the parents became interested in the library and its services.

By the way, I should mention a form of social-cultural work that I observed in the public library in Corvallis. I was deeply surprised by the fact that early literacy for children starts with babies. I was present at one of these events, called “Story Time,” and it was adorable—especially to see fathers carrying their daughters and sons. That’s when you should start to inculcate the love of books in the heart of a child. In Ukraine, early reading programs start at a later age. In the meantime, some parents who did not emphasize early literacy may wonder 16 years later “how did it happen that my son or daughter does not like to read?”

In Corvallis, I was impressed with the fact that the Mayor, the city, and the public library work so close together. Mayor Charlie Tomlinson not only visits and supports the library, he is actually one of the users and biggest fans of the library. In general, the relationship between the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library and community is really close, and it is quite astonishing that the library has 250 volunteers, who do great work helping the library to serve the community better. Unfortunately volunteer work is not well



known and used in my country. So, we have something new to learn.

One more children's program that I think is important to mention—"R.E.A.D. Dogs." I took my host parents to participate in this event, because it sounded funny—reading to the dogs? It turns out that R.E.A.D. Dogs is a wonderful event. Children with some reading problems can pick up any book that he or she likes from the shelf and just read it to a dog. I need to mention here that the dogs are specially trained, so they are absolutely peaceful and harmless. Why do kids like to read to the dogs? Dogs won't criticize or correct like a teacher or another student; a dog will help develop self-esteem and just loves the kids (even if it has a different taste in literature).

Teen game nights were also new to me. Yes, I know that some librarians in the U.S., as well in Ukraine, would say that it is inappropriate—because the library should be used to educate and teach. But as one of the librarians told me, teens do learn at game nights. They learn how to work in teams, how to socialize, their reactions improve, and it is better for them to be in the library than to hang out somewhere on the street. Also, by the time the teen reaches the game room there is no way he or she can walk by those wonderful shelves full of books and movies and leave with empty hands.

Description of a Ukrainian Scientific Library

Let me tell you a bit about my library—which deserves and receives a lot of public attention in my city. Zakarpatska Regional Scientific Library is one of the leading cultural centers in our region. Thousands of research workers, students, and specialists of different subjects find necessary knowledge there, working until closing in different sections. Our library has outlived the hard

post-Soviet depression times. Compared to those days, the main library of the region is hardly recognizable—computers, modern equipment and furniture, building renovations, wireless Internet, etc. As the main library in the region it is a methodological and leading center for 25 district libraries and 500 village libraries.

The library consists of almost 500,000 titles in 18 languages, and is used by over 20,000 readers. That is just in the city of Uzhhorod, not including branch libraries. Besides the traditional functions of libraries—the organization and storage of documents and services for the readers—our library does work on different socio-cultural activities and also does scientific research work. Our library not only has educational and informational functions, it develops civic consciousness, increases social activity, promotes good taste, and creates a special cultural environment. For any writer, publisher, or talented person, the library provides space for conducting art or social events, free of charge. Thanks to such close cooperation with the public, the library is a center of education and culture in the region.

Besides those functions, our library publishes books on the scientific work which it explores. These publications include methodological-bibliographical manuals, publications about the best libraries of the region, promotional publications for the library, etc. Our most popular publication is the annual calendar. It is an orientation point for the community and has over 200 pages of social events, anniversaries and memorable dates. The foundation of the calendar consists of sound scientific research about remarkable figures of our region written by famous local scientists. The calendar is used not only in the libraries of our region, but also in local press, cultural and educational institutions.



My Job!

I am the head of the Window on America in the Zakarpatska Regional Library in the city of Uzhhorod, Ukraine. It was created with financial support from the U.S. Embassy. The mission of the Center is to promote mutual understanding between the United States and Ukraine, as well as to provide open access to information about American history, democratic traditions, contemporary politics, economics and culture. The Center has a unique collection of books and films about the U.S.

Various activities are held at the Center. Their aim is to promote communication between Ukrainians and Americans. The Center collaborates effectively with Peace Corps volunteers and other US citizens. There are many activities and events scheduled: presentations, discussions, meetings with interesting people, etc. Among those were the awareness campaign, "AIDS - to Know for Living," timed in accordance with World AIDS Day to fight against AIDS. Another program was, "We are Different—We are Equal," organized by Window on America and the children's rehabilitation center Path to Life. The program educated youth about problems of people with special needs in order to change a stereotyped relation with society. We also sponsored a concert of the American musical band, "The Maharimbas," who visited in September, 2008 from Corvallis. This event was completely aligned with the mission of the Window on America by promoting mutual understanding by way of music. Music, as well as other kinds of art, knows no boundaries.

Weekly meetings of the English-speaking club, which have taken place in the Center every Thursday for four years, assist English learners. Called "English-Speaking House" the club fosters communication in

English with interesting and unique meetings, free-wheeling discussions, linguistic practice etc. This club, in just a short time, became very popular. Here, in addition to knowledge people make friends, get advice, and share good times. In addition, the Center has helped some U.S. citizens find their roots in Ukraine. On Thursdays at the Center, it is difficult to find an empty space! All of these events occur regularly and are promoted by means of mass media (newspapers, television, and radio). Center services are free for people of all ages and social status. To use the services of the center a person must have a library user ID.

A Visit to the OLA Conference

I was taken to the Oregon Library Association conference by Beverly Smith, President of the Corvallis-Uzhhorod Sister Cities Association (and retired from Corvallis-Benton County Public Library). I am a member of the Ukrainian Library Association and have attended international and regional conferences. So I can honestly say that the 2009 OLA Annual Conference was very well organized and interesting. What makes me happy as a librarian is that the main interests of the library professionals are the same in both countries. For example I attended the session: "Library YouTubing: Making Library Videos" because this subject is very popular now among librarians in Ukraine. Making a YouTube video is one more chance to reach potential users, and show them that your library is up-to-date with new technologies. (Editor's note: see Maya's YouTube video of her Corvallis visit at <http://tinyurl.com/MayaYouTube>)

The Value of Sister Libraries

My trip was very interesting, busy, and useful for my work—as I will provide better information about the United States and





Maya Tarasova, Beverly Smith, and Mary Ginnane at the 2009 OLA Conference.

be a better library professional. I can use the experience of American librarians each day and share it with my colleagues. I hope the cooperation between the sister cities of Corvallis and Uzhhorod will continue with our sister libraries of Corvallis-Benton County Public Library and Zakarpatska Regional Scientific Library. 🌿

