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# Guest Opinions

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## Guest opinion: White canes for Russia

By Harris Sussman  
Sunday, March 1, 2009

When I'm in Boulder my friend takes me to The Boulder Dushanbe Teahouse. It's just around town or around the next bend in the world. Last year our son and his wife went to Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Between his Russian and her Farsi, they had no trouble meeting people. The world may not actually be any flatter, but it is certainly more interconnected than before. I met my wife Svetlana when I spoke at a conference on conflict resolution in St. Petersburg, Russia, where she was born when it was Leningrad, and where her father was born when it was Petrograd. (Are you with me so far? This is the new global do-si-do.)

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When he was 2 years old, Svetlana's father became blind as a result of complications from measles. He went on to graduate from university, get advanced degrees, work as a professor of physics for 57 years, and publish over 100 scientific papers. When he died in 2005 at the age of 84, it occurred to us to ask what life was like for other talented blind students and professionals in St. Petersburg these days. Since then, we have run the only project in the United States dedicated to helping them. We just returned from visiting there. It was a busy week.

We had a party at the apartment with 13 blind people and eight sighted people. There was a blind artist and her 72-year-old father. He has been buying art materials and storing them for her to use after he dies. There was a professor who was attacked three years ago by someone who threw acid in his face, blinding him. He played the guitar and sang songs he wrote. A blind piano player is a graduate student in electronic music and runs a radio station. A blind software programmer develops applications that he distributes free to

blind people around Russia. He also sang and played guitar and his wife told us that next time we should ask him to tune the piano for us.

The director of the Braille publishing house was there with his wife, both blind. We've been to their apartment where she cooked dinner for us and he taught me three or four toasts (I lost track). A young blind woman who teaches English sang Irish-inspired folk songs she had written between going to Esperanto conferences. A blind and deaf man is a computer consultant and a psychology student who often writes me on Skype chat. A blind woman who is director of a support group of 400 blind students and professionals recited a poem.

The support system for people with disabilities is not good. It can take a year to get medical approval to get a walking cane from Social Services. As a result, many blind people can't get out and about.

We have provided graphite folding white canes for more than 150 people so far, with no doctor's approvals, no waiting period. The Russian canes are all the same length, whether you're short or tall. We give people canes customized to their height. They're the best canes they've ever used. We buy them from a company in Southern California for about

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\$30 each. Then we find a traveler to take them to Russia in their baggage. Various students, business travelers, and tourists have been couriers for us.

We have also been buying digital voice recorders for students to record class lectures. We have given about 90 so far and about 30 computers. Sometimes a person might be nervous about taking things into Russia. Nothing we have taken ourselves or sent with other people has been stolen, lost, or confiscated.

We know that Russia is not the country most Americans feel the most sympathy for. But people in need are world citizens. We reach across political borders, through our accidents of contact, through tourism or in-laws or what-have-you. Svetlana's friends were perplexed by our efforts at first. There isn't a culture of philanthropy in Russia. Now they're offering to help.

Through us they have met some blind people for the first time, although there are 11,000 blind and visually-impaired people officially registered in St. Petersburg. We stay in touch by e-mail and look forward to meeting when we visit again.

Since the start of our project, we have been able to improve the short-term practical needs and comfort for almost 300 people with vision loss. They have some possibilities they didn't have before through encountering some outsiders who follow through in helping them from such a distance. We will continue, as we begin a fifth year of this effort, only with support from others who believe in creating new international links, unofficial, informal, and life-changing. We have found we can make a difference through forging relationships despite our differences. It has not just raised the spirits of those we help, but our own as well.

Harris Sussman is co-director of the MN Adamov Memorial Fund, [mnamadovfund.org](http://mnamadovfund.org)

Comments

Posted by onoma on March 1, 2009 at 4:35 a.m. (Suggest removal)

Great opinion piece, thanks! Be sure to visit his website with much more information.

Posted by cawrigh on March 1, 2009 at 6:18 a.m. (Suggest removal)

Nice description of a private voluntary charity outperforming Russia's politically controlled system.

Chuck Wright  
<http://www.jp.org/>

Posted by onoma on March 1, 2009 at 8:37 a.m. (Suggest removal)

With a foreign nation, especially Russian, I would hesitate to become financially involved until knowing the people well. Unfortunately, these can be scams. But there are other opportunities to make friends, in another culture, without providing money and develop a level of trust before assisting.

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