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Clowning at a Moscow Cancer Rehabilitation Center with "Nasha Cemyeyka" - a Summer Arts Camp for Russian Orphans (left to right): Maria Yeliseyeva, Janna Novikova, Sveta Hokhlova, and Wolfgang

"Shhhh, Lena! Lena be quiet! Lena stop it!" But Lena would not calm down. In a large room full of clowns eagerly sharing their experiences, best wishes, and goodbyes, one 14 year old Russia girl is constantly interrupting those speaking. This is at a farewell meeting of Patch Adam's Annual Russian Clown trip -- a meeting with 30 international clowns and 15 Russian clowns and orphans. Lena is one of the Russian orphans whose social skills are very poor -- a difficult teenager who constantly presses a lot of adults buttons. Russians in general don't keep so quiet in these settings it is their style, but Lena is being singled out amongst the rest because of her history of disruption.

Maria, seeing this, quietly moves over to Lena. Instead of taking her out of the room, she pulls Lena into her lap. She takes her head in her hands, tilts her face back to hers and, with the most beautiful smile, Maria kisses Lena on the forehead and then the nose and then the cheeks, quieting Lena through love rather than scolding.

This is Maria Yeliseyeva's way and this is her story.

"When I was ten years old, my parents divorced. I didn't want to live anymore, so I stopped eating. One day, I collapsed on the Moscow metro, and was taken to a hospital, where I recuperated for a month. Late one night, I heard a child crying and whining. An orphan with pneumonia was whimpering in pain in her bed in the hall. When I got up and investigated, I discovered the mustard plaster on her chest was burning her, as it had been there for too many hours. In those moments of caring for this child, I experienced an epiphany, a reason to live. I decided I would grow up and work with Russia's orphans to better their lives.

"Many years later I would be standing in this very same hospital, talking to an American [Patch Adams], part of a group that comes yearly to Russia to clown in hospitals, orphanages and homes for the elderly. I would point out an orphan to this clown, and explain how this child had once been ill, but was now living on the hospital ward, where the kindly nurses were raising her in love and safety. I would tell this American clown the significance to me of this place, as it marked the very beginning of Maria's Children.

Maria's Children

An Arts Rehabilitation Center for Russian Orphans

Maria's Story by Maria Yeliseyeva

"One day, Dr. Patch Adams, an American physician, humorist, and clown, appeared in [my art] studio, along with a group of clowns. It was an unforgettable moment. Suddenly, I realized the world in which I had lived was black and white. Patch held out his big hand and offered me a world of color, opportunity, possibility, and delight.

"Soon I found myself in my first clowning experience, in a hospital and orphanage. The boy Sasha was on my lap, crying as we were saying goodbye. Later, I was weeping on the bus. Patch put his arm around my shoulders and said, It's good you are crying. At first, it happens to everybody. You must remember that these children need us.

The next year Maria couldn't clown with Patch as she had a new born baby daughter.



At the Home for Retired Performers - Maria on guitar, with Janna on her right and Nadya on her left. "We visit often, clowning just long enough for these extraordinary, forgotten artists to grab the stage and regale us with songs, dancing, recitals, and stories."

"But my dream about clowning remained alive. The next autumn Patch wrote and asked what he could bring me. I asked for a clown wig. In that same letter, he gave me his first task. He asked me to organize a visit for the clowns to an orphanage in Moscow. The first orphanage I inquired at refused to talk to me about the clowns. They said their children were too little (only three and four), and besides, they all had some physical defects. They were freaks, as their headmaster put it, so they couldn't be shown to anybody. With that, I realized my task would not be so easy, so I decided to go above the heads of the individual orphanages.

"I phoned the local authorities, and they sent me to orphanage N103, saying that their headmaster would be interested in something like the clown visits.

"Then, with friends from Italy, I went to see the orphanage. We carried a big bag of candy. From the outside, N103 looked like an ordinary Moscow school. The windows were not barred yet. But inside, it was not the atmosphere of a Moscow school. The walls, painted an ugly institutional green, were absolutely bare, the corridors gloomy, the lights dim. We entered a classroom where about twelve children, age eleven to twelve, were watching TV, or doing nothing. There were only desks, a bookcase with some silly huge dolls standing on it, and a TV set. It was clear nobody had ever played with the dolls.

"The children lined up and began to sing something about the sun and the rain. The song itself was not sad, but the children were singing it with such anguish in their voices that my friend and I nearly burst into tears . . . We parted warmly and I promised that soon I would bring clowns to the orphanage.

"At last that special day arrived. The clowns danced and played with the children, talked to them, and gave them souvenirs. Patch

walked about the hall with radiant children standing on his shoulders. Several children from the classroom I'd visited rushed up to me. I laughed with them and said, "And I thought you wouldn't recognize me in this wig and make-up. They were laughing happily and we played together till the end. I promised to come and see them again.

"I wanted to talk to Patch and the clowns, and understand why they went to the trouble, in their lives as ordinary teachers, doctors, students, artists, and musicians, of buying all these clown clothes and coming to visit our sick and abandoned children. To continue my English lessons, I enrolled in English courses. And there I met Ilya, the man who would one day become my husband. He loved computers, lawns, and asphalt, and I loved the style of modernism, old hats, and art. We first noticed each other only two months after our classes began, when he was helping to format the text of my magazine article about Patch.

"Are you really going to see those children again? Do you mean it?" he asked me. Ilya told me that when he was a student he used to visit a Moscow orphanage and had made a lot of friends there, but had lost touch with them. I told him I'd be returning to N103 soon, and had just called there the day before. He decided to go with me.

"We spent every Friday in the orphanage. Sometimes Ilya played different noisy games with the children, but more often we drew pictures with them. I showed the children a photo album of my studio. They especially liked my mural, Fairy Island. We want to draw like that, they clamored, interrupting each other. I tried to convince them we should do something different and new, but they wouldn't think of it, and enthusiastically got down to work. They didn't know how to use the brushes, chose the ugliest of colors, spilled the water, quarreled, and snatched pencils and felt-tip pens

from each other. I had to pencil in the landscape and some details, which we later attached to the picture. The children just didn't believe they could do it themselves.

"Three and a half years later Pasha found that picture, all crushed and torn, behind a wardrobe in a small room adjoining the classroom. We exhibited that first panel together with the other, increasingly beautiful murals at a presentation, Maria's Children, which opened in the Central House of the Artist, in downtown Moscow. We couldn't believe that Fairy Island-2, and a dozen other murals sparkling with joy, had been created by the same children. Neither could the crowds of visitors and guests who viewed that exhibit.

"Our work helped us to see the life of the orphanage from the inside, and very few people have this opportunity."

"We were surprised to learn that the children had to stay in their classrooms from morning till night. The bedroom, a large room where the children and teenage boys and girls all sleep together, is locked before breakfast and is opened only when it's time to go to bed. The children's clothes are all kept in that room, so when it is cold, they can't go outside. But they would go anyway, without warm clothes, even when it was freezing outside - if they could sneak unnoticed past the caretaker.

"We heard the expression "our idiots" very often, but didn't understand at first that this was a diagnosis that seemed indisputable to the orphanage officials, rather than a term of abuse. We learned, then, that all our orphan children had been tested at age six and found mentally retarded, though we later had them tested and found them to be of normal intelligence. This mental retardation diagnosis is why they live and study in this specialized orphanage, where the education is minimal, rather than a regular one. And so it became clear why these clever children, who were so quick to understand what we explained to them, could hardly read. They wrote with very poor punctuation and spelling, and made so many mistakes. Now, at fourteen, they didn't know the multiplication tables and many other simple things. They didn't know, for example, that if you put a hot frying pan on a plastic bag, it will melt. So these undereducated, unsophisticated, and needy children are extremely vulnerable.

"We began to understand we were wasting all our strength on the struggle with this orphanage, so we decided to create something positive that would oppose the paradigm of the existing system and offer something creative and functional to replace it. Soon our larger project was written. We presented it before the authorities as a pilot project for an orphanage for artistically gifted children.

"And so began an ordeal. First, we learned it's very difficult to take children from an orphanage. In fact, they belong to the headmaster, whose salary depends on the number of children in the orphanage. Next, we discovered there have never been any private orphanages in Russia, and the officials don't know how to legally register such a thing. And even if it were possible to overcome these difficulties, who would take the responsibility of supporting the children for whom the state is now formally responsible?

"Now, many people ask me how I imagine our future. The children are growing older, and some of them are leaving the orphanage next year. People wonder if it isn't too late to think of this project. But I don't agree. The children need us, especially now when they

are on the verge of becoming adults. What can the state offer them?

"These children leave the orphanage at age 16. Since they were considered retarded, their schooling was very basic and incomplete. At 16, their development is the same as a child of 12, and they are absolutely ignorant about life. When they leave the orphanage, they are given a key to a communal flat and sent to school at a shoe factory. The usual story after that is they then either sell the room or can't live there because the neighbors do everything possible to make their lives unbearable. Many become alcoholics and drug addicts. The girls become prostitutes, and the boys end up in prison. According to data presented by B. Altshouler at a conference last year, 10% of these children commit suicide after leaving the orphanage.

"We are willing to create a home for our children where they will be able to ripen and adapt to the world they must live in. They will be surrounded by love and the attention of their older friends and our staff. I do hope it will be like the gentle birth which they have been deprived of. People prefer to adopt little babies. Nobody wants awkward teenagers. We will take them and teach them everything we can. We do not expect to save all these children, but we can do everything possible for those ten kids with whom we've been together for four years.

"These teenagers will live in our common home, go to a normal school, and spend their holidays and weekends in our friends' families. We'll give them different artistic professions: a scene painter, ceramist, or designer. Only those who really dream of making shoes will go to the shoe school. This home will be part of the Art Centre, where the children from the other Moscow orphanages will be able to come and learn and participate. All the other children will also be welcome at this Centre. If our original ten orphans grow fond of some smaller orphans, then we will organize a new group, and find a way to house them.

"While Ilya and I were dreaming and working for all this, our fourth daughter was born. Now she is nearly three, and we have just added our fifth and eldest daughter. She is Janna, now safely with us and out of the orphanage. And so, Maria's Children are beginning to come home.



"Clown Family" - clockwise from top left: Ilya (Maria's husband), Maria, Pasha, Sveta, and little Asya waiting at the airport to greet Patch and the clowns



Baby Orphanage at Malakhovka -- with the babies are (left to right) Janna Novikova, Julie Pedersen, Maria Yeliseyeva, Nadya Varaksina, Asya Yeliseyeva (peeking out) and "our favorite caregiver, Zoya"

Julie Pedersen is an American social worker that lived in Russia for half of last year. She plans to return next year to continue with Maria's Children, and work with a stateside adoption agency helping parents through the maze of adoption.

Tucked away in the corner of Malakhovka, a tiny village about 50 km southeast of Moscow, stands the home of Maria's smallest children. This "Dom Rebyonka" or literally translated "baby home" is where Maria, her family, friends, and older program participants have been volunteering their time once weekly for the past year. Maria had been attempting to get involved with several Moscow baby houses over the past few years without success when the opportunity to get involved at Malakhovka came about.

Some experts report that almost all children who leave the baby home leave it with some degree of developmental delay. Although some of these delays are due to preexisting pathology, many of them are due to the sensory deprivation they were exposed to while at the baby home. The goal of Maria's Children is to develop a network of volunteers who could go there daily and provide the babies with some much-needed stimulation and love to help combat this deprivation.

Upon entrance to this baby house, the first noticeable impression is its dark, gray, gloomy interior. Maria, of course, had an answer to this. We'll paint the walls! So Maria's Children went to work painting murals on a three-story stairwell. Walls that were formerly dark and gloomy now had color and life. Vibrant beauty took the form of flowers, trees, butterflies, fish, clouds and rainbows. Now even a four year old orphan can walk by these walls and dare to dream of a brighter world that can exist outside of this orphanage.

Because of the large number of children residing in this baby house (about 150), Maria's Children decided to devote their weekly visits to one group. When walking through the entrance to group 7, a large playpen is seen in the corner, a small table is placed in the center of the room, a bigger table and a changing table are against the wall and toys are neatly lined up on the shelves but are seldom played with. In an adjoining room the babies' cribs, where they spend much of their time, are lined up in rows.

The schedules of these babies are very regimented. They are to wake up, eat, have their diapers changed, take naps, and go to bed at the same time every day. Maria's Children volunteers often find fitting their visits within this rigid schedule a challenge since many staff members are generally very resistant to deviate from this schedule. One reason for such a schedule may be the lack of staff present during the day. One to two people are charged with the care of these babies at any given time making the possibility of caring for individual needs almost impossible.

Although some of the staff are very good and appear to care about the babies, others adhere to the old Soviet mentality that the babies/orphans shouldn't be touched or treated like they are special. A few believe that orphans aren't really human. One staff member told us upon the arrival of one of our weekly visits, "You shouldn't come. The babies cry when you come." Our perception of the situation, of course, is that the babies don't cry when we come - they cry when we leave. As evidenced by their smiles, laughter and the arms that reach out to us, the babies enjoy our presence.

Most of the 16 babies in group seven appear far below their chronological age. This is largely due to sensory deprivation through lack of stimulation and individual nurture. Babies who should be walking are not.



Babies that should be talking, look at us with blank stares. Babies that should know their own names show no recognition when their names are called. One staff member, when asked the name of a particular baby, would have us point to the crib we took the baby out of which had a number on it. The babies do not have individual clothes or possessions - only collective possessions. The babies have nothing to call their own - not a teddy bear, a doll, a familiar face, or a hand that reaches out for only them. They need people in their lives daily who will play with, touch, hold, hug, teach, and love them.

In the Russian orphanage structure, all orphaned children aged 0-4 are placed in these baby homes. Between the ages of four and six, they are tested and given a label that will most likely stick with them the rest of their lives. Once given, the label becomes a part of their identity and is difficult if not impossible to remove or change.

This label is in effect a "diagnosis" based on a one-time visit with each child that may only last an hour or less. A part of their diagnosis may be what is known about the family rather than a reflection of what was actually observed in the child. Depending on how the child reacts to this test, it could mean the difference between a life of limited opportunities and totally institutionalized life. In other words, a child who is particularly shy and has limited exposure to life outside the baby house may be given a far worse diagnosis than is accurate, just because this child wouldn't talk or was afraid of a panel of strange adults he or she didn't know.

The label or diagnosis will also determine where these children go after they leave the baby house. If the child is lucky enough to be diagnosed as "normal," they will most likely be assigned to an orphanage where they may leave during the day to attend a regular school. This is a very beneficial thing for the kids who live in the orphanage as it allows them to learn important socialization skills that they may not have the opportunity to learn anywhere else.

This does not mean, however, that this is an easy road. Because of the stigma attached to orphans by many people in Russian society, teachers or other children may be cruel or condescending to the orphans because they live in an orphanage. It is rare for a child who has spent their entire life at a baby house to come out with this diagnosis mainly because of the lack of sensory stimulation and limited opportunities for social interaction outside of the institution.

A common diagnosis given to children who have spent their first four years inside the walls of a baby house is that of "debil" or lightly retarded. Most of the kids Maria's Children work with have this diagnosis. If the children are

given this label, they will live in an orphanage where some schooling is done within the walls of that institution. However, this is inconsistent and doesn't meet even minimum educational standards. The kids in our transitional program all come from this type of orphanage and lack not only adequate education but also the ability to carry out everyday life skills such as budgeting and cooking. Skills that Maria's Children is working toward helping them learn.

A Psycho neurological orphanage also exists for the children who are labeled "disabled" and deemed unable to function in society. This may be a physical or a mental disability. Very few, if any, opportunities to go beyond this orphanage exist. Once these children are of age, they will most likely be transferred to an adult institution where they will probably remain until they die. Maria's Children currently does not work with any children from this type of orphanage.

It is apparent to those who work with Maria's Children that intervention needs to start at the baby houses. This is where much of the harm to these children, some irreversible, is done. This is also where love, affection, and healing touch can make an integral difference in the lives of these children. Our visits are also advantageous to Maria's older participants. Here they cannot only have the opportunity to share themselves with the babies but they can also develop their own nurturing skills. Maybe they can even learn a little more about themselves in the process.



The babies' cribs, where they spend much of their time, are lined up in rows.

Unfortunately, it will take time to recruit our volunteers and raise the money needed to buy diapers and other things for our Baby House visits. But, in the meantime, Maria's Children volunteers will be at Malakhovka every week to nurture and love our group of babies. At least once a week the babies will hear their own names, have a dry diaper, and be given the special individual attention they deserve. And in their halls the mark of Maria's Children will long stand, a rich, vivid reminder that dreams can come true.

Life and the Baby House

by Nadya Varaksina, age 17

This story was told to Julian Davies by Nadya. Julian is a fourth year medical student at University of California at San Francisco, but managed to spend six months this year in Moscow with Maria's Children. He is responsible for their wonderful web site www.mariaschildren.org and for helping with this article. In Julian's words, "I found that the best way to get their impressions was to all sit around the computer, and let them tell their stories, provoking and asking questions a little, while I tried to translate on the fly, hoping to capture their voices in English. It doesn't work so well when I ask them to write stories down. It feels like a school assignment to them, and they leave out all the color, so the stories become very stilted. You can tell that Nadya has such a poetic, open heart. She hopes to work for Maria's Children as an art teacher, and dreams of visiting Australia, where life seems friendlier."

I remember when I was first at the baby house. When I was painting the walls there, I had not yet seen the babies. Then we went to the babies' room. I even didn't know that it was an orphanage - I thought it was a kindergarten. They said to take a baby, and I took Nadya; since Sveta was taking Sveta, I of course took Nadya. At first I was scared - they were crying and I didn't know what to do. She pulled my hair and bit my finger. I wanted to give her back. But then she smiled at me, and we played together. And then Masha said that these children don't have parents. This was so sad. They don't eat well, they don't get changed enough and have red "popas" (bottoms). I thought that we are also from an orphanage, and realized that I also must have been in a baby house like this - this made me so sad. I thought about it all day, and cried.

But then we took the babies outside. And I changed a baby for the first time in my life - it was hard, and Ilya helped me. And the first time I fed Nadya, she kept trying to grab the spoon and play with it. By the end, we were both covered with kasha. And then we put them back to sleep. I had thought there was only one group of children there, but they said that we would go meet the other groups. The other children were bigger, and some of them were sick from birth, with big heads. I asked Masha if they would live, and she said maybe not for long. This was so sad. Some of the older children seemed so scared, which was also sad. We found one group where they were sitting on their potties all together - this seemed unusual.

The first day was bad - sad, very hard. It was hard to think that I was once in a place like this. It was heavy day, and it made me

tired. But I wanted to go back to help, to play with them so they wouldn't cry. So I went back, and took Nadya every time; I was scared to take boys - they cried so much. But Nadya was so glad to see me every time, she had beautiful eyes, and was a happy girl, like me. We understood each other's moods. And I loved to touch her head - it was so soft. By the third, fourth time we could see they had changed - they weren't so pale, so sad, so scared. They babbled more, and didn't smell so bad, because we were bringing pampers. When they heard us coming, they all got up in their cribs and were waiting for us.

When Nadya got sick and went to the infirmary, I was sad, but they gave me Alyosha and we went for a walk outside. When I put him back in his crib, he cried so hard. I picked him up and he stopped, but started again as soon as I put him back. I went to peek in on Nadya, and that was the last time I saw her, lying in the infirmary. The next time we went, I learned that Nadya wasn't there - she had been adopted, and was in America. Of course, this was good, so good - she was so lucky. But I was sad that I would never see her again.

When I think about myself, I wish I had a family of course. But then I never would have met Masha, and all of my friends here. I think that if babies have no parents, or if the parents can't be mamas or papas for their children, that the most important thing is that they are alive. And so they can find friends. They have some influence over whether their life is bad or good. The vospitateli (orphanage guardians) won't be there for your whole life, so you need to decide to make your own life. And when orphans have kids, they shouldn't do what was done to them.

What I remember most about when I was young was that there was nothing to do in the orphanage. They wouldn't even let us go outside sometimes. They made us have a permission slip to go out, but I would tell the guard that we were out of paper, and he would let me go. I used to visit a dog on our street every day. Finally, when Masha and the clowns came, I could write letters to them, and go to the studio.



Nadya with Nadya

From www.mariaschildren.ru Visit the website for some amazing stories



Our studio is a place where boys and girls from state boarding schools come to make art. They are all very different from one another, but there is one thing that unites them: they are children who have been unlucky in life - from the very beginning and due to circumstances beyond their control. They are orphans. Some of these children belong to the group now put into the general category of "social orphans," that is children whose parents are in fact alive, but have relinquished their parental rights or had them revoked. At seven years of age, children leave their baby house to enter an orphanage school, and if they cannot read or write - or if they speak poorly, as often happens - they are diagnosed as "debil". From that point, their path is set: special school, technical high school, unskilled work, a room in a communal apartment, and the stigma of being "underdeveloped".

The number of orphans in Russia is currently approaching one million. Lacking life experience in a normal family, and faced with modern demands of education and psychological stability, the majority of these children are unable to fully integrate themselves into society. Their own children end up in baby houses, and the cycle continues.

Although there is a lot missing from the lives of orphans living in state homes, these children nevertheless become accustomed to state support, which often leads them to develop a possesive approach to society. We are trying to change this situation.

Maria's Children uses arts therapy to help in the social, psychological and intellectual rehabilitation of orphans and special-needs children. In this way, we seek to enable them to become fully-valued members of society, sharing the same rights as everyone else. We would like there to be the greatest number possible of happy and successful people in our society. If you want to help us you can transfer a donation .

Our arts centre arose as a result of extended work by Moscow artist Maria Yeliseyeva and other volunteers with a group of orphans from state boarding school No. 103. Maria and her friends regularly visited the orphanage, took children into their homes on weekends and holidays, and began to paint with them. Art was the

key that opened a new world for the children, and there was a place in this world for the love that had been taken away from them. In our studio, we try to create an atmosphere of warmth and goodwill which, combined with contact with children from regular families, helps to prepare orphans for independent life, facilitates their social adaptation, expands their outlook, and noticeably corrects their psychological and emotional upbringing.

At the moment, there are more than two hundred children from various Moscow-area orphanages who work in our studio; among them are children with cerebral palsy and other conditions. They study drawing and painting, sewing and embroidery, music and ceramics, theatre and elements of circus arts, and are offered consultations with a psychologist. Throughout the existence of our centre, our students have created a great number of creative works, including more than a hundred collective panels, many of which adorn private collections, and public and government organizations in Russia and abroad. Every year our works are shown at various exhibitions, including an annual one at the Central House of Artists in Moscow.

In addition to serving as an arts studio, our centre is the basis for a number of special programs, including a social adaptation program for orphanage-school graduates, the goal of which is to assist them in their integration into society. We have already been able to help many graduates to continue their education in a chosen field, find work, and set their lives in order.

A fundamental element of the social adaptation program is the creation of a charitable children's centre called the "Pelican Arts Club" . Its basic task will be to help children leaving the confines of specialized orphanage schools to assimilate into society. The Pelican will be more than just a restaurant - it will be a new kind of establishment. The fundamental goals of this establishment will be focused less on commercial gain (although we do intend that the project become gradually self-supporting), than on facilitating the social adaptation of various categories of at-risk youth.

Our young friends come through the studio doors not only for classes of various types, but also to learn sympathy, responsibility, and other necessary qualities of life. In the course of just one year, children volunteer at a baby house, at the First Children's Hospice for Children with Oncological Diseases, and in various public and governmental organizations that work with people with special needs and developmentally-impaired children. Practically all of our students take part in regular creative and clowning activities which we lead in Moscow and the surrounding areas. We regularly visit a number of hospitals in Moscow, such as the Children's Division of the Oncological Centre, where we have clown celebrations for the young patients. In addition, we organize creative trips which have allowed our students to visit many cities in our country. During these trips, children visit local hospitals, orphanages, and shelters, and also have a chance to draw from nature and familiarize themselves with the history and culture of other cities.

Come and join us! We'd be thrilled!



Every summer, with the help of an international team of volunteers, we organize an arts camp for children. For two weeks, the children have the opportunity to take part in various master classes, relax, and make new friends.

In fact, everything mentioned on this page is just a small part of what goes on within the walls of our studio. The most important thing we have here is an atmosphere of creativity, friendship, and mutual trust between children and adults, which we hope will help every person, big or small, to find their place in life. Through the years of our studio's existence we've formed a fantastic team made up of teachers constantly at work on the project and a great number of volunteers. Come and join us! We'd be thrilled!

One summer Shobi did!

I'll never forget leaving the USA dropping down into Russia not knowing what or who would meet me at the Moscow airport. I was told to walk through the green line. I did and there was a group holding a sign "Shobi" There were 3 of the most energetic Russian teen boys waiting to hall me away to Maria'a Apartment in a Taxi through Moscow. What fun! See my report on the trip

See also an article on their summer camp

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