

No Reservations Needed

The Hospital Clown Newsletter has reported on *Maria's Children* for many years. This wonderful program is the extension of the great heart of a great lady Maria Yeliseeva of Moscow Russia. Please see www.hospitalclown.com/past issues for other reports on her program. Shobi has visited Russia twice. I stayed at Maria's house in Moscow and went on Volga River Camp trip with orphans from several Moscow Orphanages in June 2001 This is where Shobi met Chip Daly. Chip is an avant supporter of *Maria's Children*. Besides being a clown Chip is a traveling nurse.

By Chip Daly of Lebanon, New Hampshire, USA

Currently Maria runs an art studio in downtown Moscow for orphans. She works with 200 plus children from eight different orphanages. She brings in a group of 15 to 50 children at a time to her studio. They have two sessions a day. One from 4 until 6 and the other from 6 until 8. It now operates 7 days a week thru the school year.

They also do weekend projects thru the year like painting murals on walls of hospitals or other orphanages. The children go along to help, which is a great way for them to learn responsibility and have fun at the same time.

One mural they painted recently was for cancer children. Apparently there is this room that children with cancer go to get radiation. The child is in this room for about an hour all by themselves with no entertainment. Now at least they have a nice painting to look at and enjoy. And if you have ever seen a Maria's Children mural you know how much detail and hidden figures are in it. It can amuse you for an hour easy.

She also takes some of the older orphans to the baby orphanage once a week. There the children play and hold the babies. They also learn how to change diapers, feed the babies, and other life skills they may need when they get older and have children themselves.

Clowning is a big part of Maria's programs too. Maria is a clown and she teaches clowning throughout the year. She takes a group of children who are interested in clowning to other orphanages to clown around for the children there. They even visit an orphanage for children who are deaf and blind. They also go to hospitals and clown for sick children there.

And of course now Maria has expanded her program to help the children of Beslan. These children are not orphans, but they are children in need of therapy, laughter and joy in their lives. That is the main thing Maria brings to the table for children of all kinds... joy, love and laughter. In the summer she runs other programs like the summer camp.

Below is Chip's experience of Maria's Children Summer Camp.

My last Russian summer camp trip was an amazing boat trip up and down the Volga River. This year's camp was stationary on a lake. Well, I use the term stationary as a relative term meaning we wouldn't be moving our site, but rest assure, we were not stationary on the camp site at all. In fact we probably were more active here than on a boat. Between games, clowning, boating, swimming, juggling and more, we had no time to rest in the 12 days I was there. My reservations subsided very quickly.

Previous summer camps were attended by orphans from Maria's Children, Moscow and St. Petersburg. This year Maria decided to also invite some children from Beslan. The Beslan siege was a horrific event in Russian History where a school in the small town of Beslan was seized by terrorists. More than 1000 people, including hundreds of children, were held captive in a gymnasium for three days. The children who came to our camp were either in that gymnasium or one of their family members were killed in *the seize*. I was certain these children would be reserved, especially at the beginning. All I can say is, never underestimate the human spirit!

In Moscow we were greeted by our friend Pavel and drove to our pre-camp destination. It was at a hostel type setting, and here we met some of the other Americans, Italians, and Dutch, who would be at the camp with us. We spent two days playing games and getting to know each other and working out the kinks that can happen at camp. After two days of setting the rules and getting to know each other, we finally boarded our bus to Lake Seliger for the eleven-hour trip.

Along the way we had to stop a few times for potty breaks. One such break we ended up at McDonalds. Here, my wonderful friend Theo Schilder and I clowned around with the locals having lunch. I am not sure we could have gotten away with that in America, but maybe. It was a nice warm up for things to come.

We used the morning and afternoon of the next day to get things ready for the children and make some last minute preparations. The first bus to arrive, around 5pm, was the Beslan bus. Immediately the children came off the bus laughing and playing. I was certainly wrong about them being a bit reserved. The next bus arrived at 8pm. It was carrying the orphans and their teachers. The reaction was much the same as the other bus – lots of laughing and playing.

Maria Yeliseeva with the

The Sorting Shoes



The Sorting Shoes (Continued from previous page)

After the children took their luggage to their respective rooms, we headed to the camp fire. It is here that the children would learn which family they would be in. At Maria's camps we divide into four family groups. Each family consists of two family heads and a variety of ages to make up the core group. During the 12 days families would eat together and organize activities and other such things together. This way, the orphans can at least get a sense of what a family is like.

My friend Theo and I were the family heads of the Elephants. We had elephants, lions, giraffes, and zebras as our family groups. At the camp fire we had Theo's huge clown shoes set on a table. Each child would have to come up and put their hands into the "sorting shoes" (ala Harry Potter's sorting hat) and ask which family they would be in. After the shoes told them what family they would be in, the family heads of that respective family would come down and swoop the child into their family in some sort of ceremonious way. It was a wonderful way to introduce the children to their perspective families and the other family members, and a magical start to camp.

After we sorted into families, we went back to our respective cabins. Our family gathered at Maria's cabin for tea time. We discussed what it is like to be a family and what we expected for the week. The children offered their opinions and by bedtime we had a nice foundation for our family regulations. We shoed the children to bed, around 11pm, and the adults stayed up a little later getting to know each other and reminiscing about past camp experiences.

We did this family gathering every night, and it was a wonderful way to end our days. The children all got diaries from Theo and his daughter Bregje. We asked that they keep a journal and every night they would get to read their journal if they wanted to. Pretty much every one of the children wanted to read their journal.

In the morning around 9am Theo and I went around waking everyone up. We did this by using puppets and going room-to-room singing . . . "Dobre Ootra" . . . which means "Good Morning." As children woke up they would join us. By the time we woke everyone up we had about 8 to 10 people in our group.

Did you just wake up your family only?



Theo and Chip playing _____

After waking everyone (**In your family?**) up we stopped by Pavel's place to have breakfast. Pavel made an outdoor fire pit and cooked breakfast every morning for his family (**Was this a camp family?**). But of course anyone was welcome to stop by for food and a visit. Theo and I did this every morning.

After breakfast at Pavel's place we would head to Maria's cabin where we ate breakfast with our family. Yes we had two breakfast's everyday . . . and I still managed to lose 5 pounds while I was there. I guess 17 hour days will do that for you.

After breakfast we played games with our family. We played some name games using imaginary balls. This was a nice way to introduce everyone in the family to each other. It was fun to watch the children learn the names of everyone while passing an invisible ball around. Some of them got creative and pretended to drop the ball or throw it over someone's head.

We also played evolution. This was a new game to me. It was a fancy version of rock, paper, scissors. Basically everyone starts out as an egg. You find someone to play rock, paper, scissors with, and whoever wins becomes a chicken. As a chicken you found other chickens to play against. The winner of that became a dinosaur while the loser went back to being an egg. If you won as a dinosaur you became Elvis. If you won as Elvis you became a meditating Buddha, the final character to become. Everyone continued to play until you had a bunch of Buddhas around humming. It is quite fun I must say.

After lunch we presented our master classes to the children to let them know what they would be doing for the next 10 days or so. We had classes such as clown games, juggling, cooking, arts and crafts, yoga, painting, archery, and more. Every day after that children got to choose which master class they wanted to go to each day.

After showing our master classes we had some free time and a group of us gathered at the soccer field to play a game of soccer. The children love this activity. Then we ate dinner and had a disco party. We danced for a couple of hours and then headed off to our tea time. It was fun to hear the children read their diaries for the first time. Some of the most animated ones were the youngest children. That was very interesting to see to me. I was sure they would be the shyest. But NOOOOO!

The following day we got into a bit of a routine. We woke people up, ate our two breakfasts and then held master classes. We ate lunch. Then we gathered to go swimming. The first day we all went together, but we quickly learned that was a horrible idea. So subsequent days we divided into family groups at free time to go swimming and boating. After our free time we ate dinner. After dinner we had our evening activity and then tea time and then bed time. That was a typical day at camp for the next ten days . . . with a couple of exceptions.

Some of the highlights of our "typical" days were as follows . . .

Playing taxi driver is always a highlight. It was fun to watch the creativity of the children. *Taxi Driver* is played three chairs up front. There is one taxi driver driving along waiting to pick up passengers. The first passenger gets in and with them they bring a symptom of some kind . . . it can be anything they want . . . we have had sneezing, itching, being pregnant, random screams, etc. The driver gradually demonstrates that symptom. Then the driver picks up another passenger. That passenger brings in something different. The first passenger gradually displays that symptom as does the driver. Eventually the driver decides they want to get out, so they jump out of the taxi. The first passenger slides over to take the wheel and the

second passenger slides over to make room for another passenger. The process repeats itself and you can rotate as many children as you want thru the line.

Juggling was always fun to watch. Some of these children were truly talented. Even though a lot of them, especially the orphans, have been told they have no talent. Some of them weren't very good at juggling, but that didn't keep them from trying and laughing while doing it.

Cooking classes were a big hit. The children would cook a batch of bread or cookies or whatever they wanted. They would then choose a family to deliver their goods to at tea time. It was a delight to see their excited faces as they showed off what they did. And they were good cooks too.

The painting was extraordinary as usual. Maria makes sure of that. Clowning actually seemed almost secondary this year, but we still had a few highlights there as well. One boy named Artur turned out to be such a natural clown. He even made up his own skit, taught Theo what he wanted him to do in it, and then the two of them put on a performance at the talent show. It was one of the most amazing skits I had ever seen, especially considering it was all put together by a twelve-year-old boy who had never clowned before in his life, and it was put together in just a couple of days.

One of our evening activities was Spa Night. The children would come in and the adults would give them back massages, foot rubs, and hand massages. It was fun to watch some of these children get pampered by adults. Something I am sure they don't get much of in their orphanages or at their homes in Beslan. But, the really special part for me was when the children started giving the massages. They would give them to the adults and some of the older children. In turn, some of the older children did the younger children.

It all included a washing of feet before massaging them with shaving cream and oils. Jesus would have been proud. Towards the end of the activity I was trying to gather children and let them know it was tea time.



But one young girl from Beslan, Lolita, wouldn't let me leave until I allowed her to give me a hand massage. When I said no, she put on the cutest pout face you can imagine. I couldn't resist. Afterwards she was extremely happy.

Let me put that in another way . . . she was happy that she was allowed to give ME a hand massage. Does that tug at anybody's heart but mine? These are children who have been thru an unthinkable event in their lives and they were happy to be serving others. I don't know how that is possible to be honest, but I am thankful to have them as my friends.

On our last night at camp, our family gathered by the lake at sunset. We had made rafts out of wood and Maria had candles to light. The children wrote a wish on a piece of paper. We put the wish and one candle for each wish on the rafts and sent them out to the lake. The children were amazed as they watched the wishes float further and further out onto the lake. It was such a magical ending to a magical time. (Below they gather to say "Goodbye" to the lake)



Some of these children have horrific stories. I didn't get to learn all of them, but the few I did learn about were enough for me to realize I am truly blessed beyond my worth. One such young lady was just adorable, lovable, caring, and kind. Yet here is her story as told to me by my friend Maria. Ira is twelve now. At the time of the siege she was nine. She was in the gymnasium for three days without food or water and without being allowed to go to the toilet. She was huddled in a corner for that time as the terrorist had control. After three days, the Russian Army burst in. There was noise, bullets, screaming and agony. She obviously survived, but many around her didn't. She had some scrapes and bruises, but no big injuries that could be seen. For a month after this event she complained of pain in her arms and legs and the doctors assumed it was psychosomatic. Finally they were convinced to do some x-rays and they found tiny bone fragments all over her body. These could be surgically removed, since they were not her fragments but fragments of someone who had been blown up near her. I don't know how she had turned out to be so sweet after something like that, but I do hope God blesses her many times over for the rest of her life. If anyone deserves extra blessings, it is Ira and the children from Beslan.

One of the orphans I met had such an infectious smile and laugh. He was a bit unweary too, which made him that much more adorable. And to think he was dumped at an orphanage just one month before camp with no paperwork or explanation to as why. Nobody knows who his mom or dad is and he hasn't told anyone yet. All they know about him is his name and birthday. He doesn't give out any other info apparently, but he was very outgoing at camp. He grabbed the hearts of the ladies working in the kitchen. This is probably because he did their dishes for them everyday after lunch. And he loved it! He even wrote in his diary that he loved doing dishes for the girls. They cried the day he left and promised to visit him at his orphanage. I hope they keep that promise.

Then there is the young orphan girl who is at a home for children with mental disabilities. She is a bright, caring, funny 12 year old who does not belong in that kind of orphanage. It is not necessarily a bad orphanage, they just don't try to educate the children there because of their disabilities.



Chip always in his red nose is on the bottom Maria is in the middle and Theo to her left

The reason they won't send her to another orphanage to get a little better education? Because her father won't let them. Yes that is right, her father still has control of what they do with her even though he won't take care of her himself. One of the funny quirks in the orphanage system in Russia.

Luckily my friend Maria has done some tremendous work to change attitudes there and she continues to do so. Without her these children have little chance at a normal life after being kicked out of the orphanages. She helps them to find jobs and seek higher education once they get out of the orphanage.



Maria has taken a group of 18 children to do an art tour in Italy. She hopes to do a tour to Armenia next. She took a tour to America back in 2001. All of this is to expose the orphans to other cultures and to help raise money and awareness for the children in Russia. All of her programs run on money by private donations, a few grants, and some nice donations from large corporations like IKEA and Coke. It is a continuing struggle though and you can help by logging onto www.mariaschildren.org to learn more. You can donate money, buy paintings or cards, (see painting to the left) or volunteer if you are interested in programs like the summer camp. You can also contact me if you have any questions about Maria's Children

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