

## Hosting Corner

**LINCOLN, NE** – “The Magic Friendship Bus” is a unique idea started by University of Nebraska professor emerita **Kay Rockwell**, an experienced Open World host for **Friendship Force of Lincoln**. The bus tour, whose name is inspired by the Magic School Bus children’s book series, takes delegates on a two-day trip into Nebraska’s heartland. Rockwell launched the idea with a Russian economic development exchange her organization hosted for Open World in October 2005. A bus tour seemed very logical since rural Nebraska is a great place to see how relatively small groups of committed citizens can make real improvements to local economies. The Russian participants in that first excursion toured a restored historic hotel, a renovated Victorian opera house, and a rural telemarketing center, and met with community leaders and economic development officials in several area towns. Subsequent Magic Friendship Bus tours have also been organized according to each delegation’s assigned Open World theme. Says Rockwell, “While some Friendship Force groups go to museums in Chicago, or sites in New York City, or the Smithsonian in D.C., we can offer our visitors a great big and wonderful museum directly under the stars.” She notes that the delegates also benefit from seeing unique events, such as the Sandhill Crane migration, while they experience life in rural Nebraska and identify with the issues and problems addressed at the various sites visited. The experience is also great for Nebraskans! The rural towns are thrilled to welcome delegates and share information with them. Foreign visitors to these communities also attract a lot of local and statewide press.



*Russian delegates help plant a “friendship tree” in Nebraska*

“The Open World Program is very important for me and for Kyrgyzstan in general, because our country has a lot of problems that have to do with violation of human rights and there is no agreement between NGOs and the government ... It is important for the government representatives from my country to hear the views of organizations like mine. The program brought us together and by treating us like equals gave us a chance to communicate with one another, which almost never happens successfully in my country.”

~Nazgul Turdubekova, Human Rights Coordinator  
Youth Organization for Defense of Civil Rights



*Open World delegate Nazgul Turdubekova*

## Open World in the Field

**WASHINGTON, DC** – Leo Tolstoy’s great-great-grandson **Vladimir Tolstoy**, who heads the **Tolstoy Estate Museum** outside Moscow, and Galina Alexeeva, the museum’s research director, presented on “Tolstoy and America” at the **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)** March 25. The event was a part of the NEA’s 2008 Big Read initiative, for which Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a featured book. **NEA Chairman Dana Gioia** attended the presentation, as did representatives from Open World, which sponsored the Russians’ visit in partnership with the NEA. Vladimir Tolstoy and Alexeeva next traveled to Muncie, IN, and Champaign-Urbana, IL, to take part as special guests in Big Read events in both communities. The many people who attended their talks and readings also learned about the significance of Leo Tolstoy’s country estate, Yasnaya Polyana (now the Tolstoy Estate Museum), to the great writer himself and to the many visitors it attracts from all over the world. For more information contact [mshelden@loc.gov](mailto:mshelden@loc.gov). (Local Host Organizations: Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois, Muncie Public Library; National Grantee: CEC ArtsLink)



*Village bulletin board in Jil*

## Making a Difference

**JIL, AZERBAIJAN** – Residents of Jil, an Azerbaijani village near the Iranian border, can drop off suggestions for local officials in boxes located throughout the community and read the village budget and government notices on the municipal building’s information board. That’s because **Jil Mayor Intigam Akhbarov** saw similar public outreach initiatives while visiting Texas in May 2007 on Open World’s first exchange from Azerbaijan. Mayor Akhbarov’s local host organization, the **Houston-Baku Sister City Association**, arranged for him and three other delegates from across Azerbaijan to visit two small Houston-area cities, Bellaire and West University Place, to observe municipal government in action and have interactive sessions with elected officeholders and city administrators. The city management of both Texas communities put together a full slate of activities for the delegates that emphasized transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement in government. Attending a West University Place City Council meeting, during which ordinary citizens expressed their views for and against creating a new park, made an especially strong impression on all the delegates. (National Grantee: Academy for Educational Development)



*A Jil suggestion box*



*Vladimir Tolstoy (seated) signs books by his great-great-grandfather Leo Tolstoy at the Muncie (IN) Public Library*