



Mobility International USA

FLEX & YES Students 2006-2007



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FLEX Students Arrive in the US!

High school students with disabilities from Tajikistan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Russia traveled to Eugene, Oregon in July 2006 to participate in a one-week Leadership and Preparatory workshop with Mobility International USA (MIUSA).

The students were part of the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), a program of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the U.S. Department of State. At the MIUSA Workshop, also sponsored by the ECA, the students prepared for a one-year academic exchange program in which they would attend schools and live with host families throughout the United States.

In Eugene, FLEX students participated in interactive seminars and inclusive community activities, including an outdoor challenge course coordinated by the City of Eugene. MIUSA provided unique opportunities for students to learn about disability rights in the U.S., enhance skills for independent living, connect with other students with disabilities and prepare for their year in the United States.

The FLEX program was established in 1992 to provide opportunities for high school students from the countries of the former Soviet Union to experience life in a democratic society in order to promote democratic values and institutions in Eurasia. Since 1992, approximately 14,000 students from the former Soviet Union have participated in the program, including approximately 80 students with disabilities.



U.S. Host States

Student Name	Host Community
Rustam Abidov	Texas
Maksym Balanyuk	Washington
Yekaterina "Katya" Belova	Idaho
Vasiliy Belyavin	South Carolina
Karina Burundukova	Iowa
Daniyar Chambylov	Wisconsin
Ilya Fedorov	Oregon
Irina Glazkova	Michigan
Iffah Ishak	Alaska
Alina Ivanova	Washington
David Khvedelidz	Pennsylvania
David Koberidze	Oregon
Yong Loo "Shannen" Lim	New York
Gemmalyn Decan Morta	Indiana
Marta Nikolayeva	Florida
Nadiya Onipko	Texas
Mark Velasquez Puzon	Ohio
Ahmed Fayez Said	Kansas
Serhiy Savenko	Florida
Kseniya Shalashenko	Michigan
Alexandr Spirchagov	Ohio
Yuliya Terepa	South Carolina
Ekaterine Tskhvariashvili	Washington
Dmytro "Dmitriy" Vorobey	Washington
Darya "Dasha" Yezhova	Indiana



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Flex Alumni Speak!

Be Brave, Open, Friendly and FLEXible!

Tips for a Successful FLEX Year from FLEX Alumna Volha Navumchyk, 2005-06

In 2005-06, I lived and studied in Victorville, California as a FLEX exchange student. Although my hearing disability made perfecting my foreign language skills a bit of a challenge, it never got in the way of having a wonderful year in the United States!

In my opinion, the key to having a successful FLEX year is to take advantage of opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Sometimes it may seem that it's more important to concentrate on homework and grades than to try new activities in your school and community. In reality, when you think back on your exchange year, you will not remember how many homework assignments you completed or the grade you received on each and every exam. What you will remember is how much fun you had with your friends and host family.

So, how do you get involved in your community? I admit that it is sometimes a challenge to get involved in community activities and volunteer service, especially if you live in a small town. Just be creative! Always be open to new opportunities to get involved, even if an activity seems uninteresting to you at first. You don't know until you try! You can also make up your own community service project by looking for ideas online or by talking to your friends and family. Whatever you decide to do, try to involve as many people as possible. It's a great way to make new friends.

Finally, a few words of advice to Deaf exchange students: Don't worry too much about your English language skills. In everyday life I rely heavily on lip reading, and I communicate orally very well. When I first came to the U.S., my written English language skills were quite sufficient, but my spoken English was very poor (and that was expected, of course). I found it difficult to understand what others said to me. Scary? Yes. But I didn't get discouraged. I always had a notebook and pencil with me, so people could write to me, and I could write to them. It was a very simple, convenient way to communicate. Most people were very understanding, and I never met anyone who refused to "talk" with me in this way. In fact, I experienced quite the opposite. My peers found it interesting, and I met many new friends just because of my way of communicating!

Thanks to the support of my host family and friends, after four months of living in California, I had learned spoken English so well that I no longer needed a notebook and pencil to communicate. Based on my experience, I strongly encourage other Deaf students to use every opportunity to talk with people in their host community. Don't be shy! Ask others to correct your mistakes, and don't get upset if you have difficulty understanding English or if people don't understand you. Just explain your disability, and reach for a notebook!

Finally, I would like to add that everything I learned during the MIUSA workshops in Eugene was very helpful to me as a FLEX exchange student. Try to remember everything you learned from MIUSA and use this knowledge in your everyday life. This really works!



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CONTEST: GET INVOLVED AND WIN A COOL PRIZE!!!

To win a MIUSA video, MIUSA t-shirt, or gift certificate at the Re-entry Workshop, write a short essay or poem, or submit a photo about your experiences in disability rights! For example, tell us about your participation in one of the following activities:

SPEAK YOUR MIND

- Write or give a report about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Interview a disability activist (someone who works for the rights of people with disabilities)
- Take part in an activity that is about getting equal rights for people with disabilities
- Interview a high school student who has a disability
- Interview a college student who has a disability
- Interview a teacher who works with students with disabilities to learn about rights and accommodations for students with disabilities

CHANGE THE WORLD

- Interview someone who has a different disability than you do, to find out about their life, accomplishments, goals and advice
- Write an article about disability rights in the US to send to students in your country
- Write to students with disabilities in your school in your home country about your FLEX experience
- Visit the website of a national organization by and for people with disabilities
- Visit the website of an international organization by and for people with disabilities
- Write or give a report about the civil rights movement in the US for the rights of people with disabilities

HAVE FUN

- Watch a sporting event that includes people with disabilities (wheelchair sports, beeper ball, Deaf Olympics, etc.)
- Play a sport that includes people with disabilities (can also include people without disabilities)
- Visit a community recreation center and ask what accommodations are available to make community activities accessible to people with disabilities
- Volunteer with a community recreation or sport program for people with disabilities
- Participate in a community recreation or sport program for people with disabilities

**Submit your
Photo, poem or essay to
exchange@miusa.org
by April 13, 2007**

JOIN FORCES

- Participate in a conference by and about people with disabilities
- Go to a meeting or conference of women and girls with disabilities
- Take a sign language class or learn some ASL
- Visit an Independent Living Center / Center for Independent Living
- Visit an organization led by and for people with disabilities
- Volunteer with an organization led by and for people with disabilities

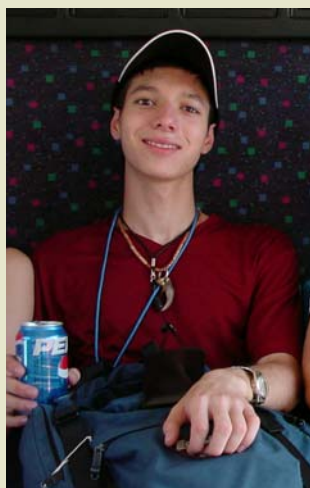
DO YOUR PART

- Volunteer with children with disabilities
- Be brave and ask for an accommodation for yourself, at school or in your homestay, to make an activity more accessible for you
- Do something that you thought that you couldn't do because of your disability
- Learn a new skill that makes an activity more accessible to you: use a cane or wheelchair, handle money, use a TTY, etc.



What are 2006-07 FLEX / YES Students up to?

Rustam - Enjoying Community Involvement and Events



The best thing about my exchange experience has been meeting interesting people and visiting new cities! I have learned a lot of very useful things, such as some of the differences between cities and states. I am also learning a lot about computers from my host dad.

At school, I am a member of the Student Council and have completed almost twenty-five hours of community service. Most recently, I volunteered at a local food bank. I'm also a member of the swim team. On Halloween, I went to my first Hawaiian Halloween party. That was a lot of fun!

At first, it took me awhile to get used to new home customs and traditions. However, a lot of people in the US think that I'm American and that I left the US a long time ago, and then came back.

I don't know what made them decide that I'm a native! Even students at school ask me why I left the US, and I have to explain to them that I'm an exchange student!

Finally, I want to say that I love Eugene, Oregon and miss everybody! At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned that every single person needs help sometimes. If someone needs help to do something, we should help him, because if one day we need help, we'll be very glad if someone will help us!



Maksym- Sports and Travel

The best thing about my experience as an exchange student is getting to do fun things, like playing sports, watching movies and spending time with my host parents. This fall, I was a member of the varsity cross-country team at my high school, and am planning to play sports again in the spring.

Recently, I volunteered at a library fundraiser and have been helping keep statistics for winter sports at school as part of my community service. I also got to visit Seattle with other exchange students this fall, and visited Canada with my family. Both trips were a lot of fun.



Katya- Skiing to Success

EVERYTHING about my experience in my new home and school has been just great! My host family wants me to have a great experience, so they have taken me to many different places and let me try new activities. I've already gone hiking, water-skiing and snow shoeing, and I'm going to try skiing!

I have met a lot of new people at school, and they are all very friendly to me. This fall, I took a PE class, and we played 13 different sports, including softball, aerobics, basketball and volleyball. I'm getting better at volleyball, but even though I'm not very good at it, I'm not upset. I see now that there are a lot of people who can't play volleyball.

I'm also a member of the Drama club, and had a part in the school production of "Skin of our Teeth." It was a lot of fun, and I met a lot of new people.

The hardest thing I've tried so far was water-skiing. My host family and their friends were really helpful, and they invented a billion ways to help me with it. However, I spent A LOT of time trying before I actually got up, and by that time everyone started thinking that it was probably impossible to get up with one arm. But it wasn't!

I particularly enjoyed my first Halloween in the United States. On Halloween, my host mother picked me up after school and said that we were going to a party. There were a lot of little kids there, 5-7 years old, who were going "trick-or-treating." Some of the parents suggested that I join the kids to experience this traditional American holiday. I had a costume on (I was sunshine), so I agreed. It was so much fun!!! I liked running from house to house saying "trick or treat!" and asking for candy, and it was interesting to see how different people reacted.

I'm having THE BEST EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE!!!





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Vasiliy- Making Music Count



The best thing about my FLEX experience so far has been playing oboe in the orchestra. In Russia I was a soloist and did not play in a group. Playing in a group has allowed me to meet many people and other musicians. It has opened a new world for me. In

addition to playing in the orchestra, I am a member of the school band and am often a soloist.

Another highlight from my FLEX year was meeting a famous pianist who is Blind, Jaelyouk Lee. In September, Mr. Lee performed at Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. A group of students from my school had an opportunity to attend the concert. Mr. Lee also performed at my school, and has invited me to visit Converse College and to perform at the College's spring piano recital.

I've also done some community service this fall. In October, I helped clean some of the administration buildings at the School for the Deaf and the Blind, where I am a student during the week, and visited the United Way in Spartanburg. I learned a lot about the things that the United Way does for my host community. During International Education Week, I had an opportunity to give a presentation about my country and the Russian language to my classmates.

As for a funny story from this fall, after I arrived in the U.S., I decided to let my hair grow out. Then one day my host father forwarded some photos of me to my parents in Russia. Their first comment was that I looked like a monkey and needed a hair cut. I got a hair cut the next weekend.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned about the customs of the United States. I also learned to ride a bike, and loved the zip line! Overall, the Workshop helped me to understand my daily life and to be more comfortable in the U.S. I feel that I have everything and more here in the United States. I am very happy!

Karina- Giving Back to the Community



The best things about my FLEX experience so far have been trips to Adventureland Amusement Park and to the zoo. I got to see animals that I had

previously only seen on T V and rode many exciting rides at Adventureland. I also took part in the homecoming parade, an important event in my community.

Outside of class, I'm involved in Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), the International Club at school and my church youth group. I also volunteer at Stepping Stones, an early childhood learning center, and help serve meals to the needy as part of the outreach conducted by my church. This winter, I hope to try ice-skating.

The Preparatory Workshop in Oregon helped me to learn more about the differences in the lives of people with disabilities in the U.S. compared to Kyrgyzstan.

I am really enjoying my stay and having a GREAT time!



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Daniyar- Cultural Understanding

The best thing about my experience so far has been getting to know American culture, my host family and my school. Now I understand two different cultures. My school experience is different too. In my U.S. school, we have a lot of extra-curricular activities, which I didn't have in my school at home.

So far, I haven't been involved in any extra-curricular activities, but am hoping to participate in a volunteer group called the Viking Councils in January.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned that I have the same rights as people without disabilities. This gave me a lot of confidence, and has made my life much easier.



Mohammed— Scoring Goals and More

I have had many great experiences since I arrived in the U.S. I visited the White House with other exchange students, and actually saw President Bush and the first lady boarding an airplane during my visit. I also had an opportunity to visit Annapolis and the naval academy. This fall, I went fishing with my host family and went on a hayride with my local coordinator in Virginia. It was very cold!



This fall, I was a member of the soccer team at school and we took third place for the first time in fifteen years. It was really great because I had stopped playing soccer at home when I had an accident and this was the first time that I really got engaged again in competitive soccer. I scored five goals throughout the season.

The message I have for other students with disabilities is that they should not stop seeking solutions to their problems. At first, it was hard for me to accustom myself to the weather, and to new foods and a new school, but there is light at the end of the tunnel!

Ilya- Speaking Russian or Chinese?

I think that all of the things about my FLEX year have been great - my family, school, friends and many other things. I'm very lucky because I have the best family ever. I've gone to some very interesting places with my family. I also have a great school. My classmates and teachers are always there to help me.

I am not involved in any extracurricular activities at school but learn something new about the U.S. every day. This has been very fun and interesting for me.

A funny thing happens to me almost every day at school. Every time I tell one of my classmates that I'm from Russia, they ask if I speak Russian. It's absolutely true! The funniest thing is, sometimes I say, "No, I speak Chinese," and my classmates will ask me to say something in Chinese!

Ilya continued on page 9





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Ilya continued

My goal this year is to become more independent and learn as much as possible about the U.S., and I'm very thankful that the people around me are so happy to help when needed.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned how to talk with people and that I shouldn't be afraid to talk about my problems. Thanks to this advice, I haven't experienced any culture shock at all.

Irina- Capturing Life on Camera

My best experience as an exchange student was moving to my permanent host family's home in Michigan. They are such nice people and I love them. I think my host family is the best in the world!



My new school is great too because of my classes, especially my drama class. Actually, I was really scared for the first couple of days because my school has 2000 students, but only for a few days. This fall, my class put on a production of a

musical called *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I painted decorations and I helped with refreshments for three nights.

This fall, I have also been involved in Quiz Bowl, French club, drama and a lot activities in the my church, including Bible study and Sunday School.

A fun story I want to share is about "Photomania 2006." It's a competition organized by my church. Our assignment was to take pictures near a police car, fire station and - the best part - near an ATM machine. We had to ask drivers to wait for a couple seconds so that we could take the picture, and when we finished there were more than 20 cars waiting for the ATM!

Alina- Taking on Drama for Fun



Alina is taking chorus, drama and Spanish, in addition to her core classes, and is doing very well in all of her classes. She recently took part in her first choral concert and in a district drama competition.

Alina has made many friends at school and through a local youth group. Alina's new friends recently celebrated her eighteenth birthday with her at a party hosted by her host parents. Alina writes excitedly, "I'm an adult now!"

Alina has also had a lot of new experiences with her host family this fall. She has ridden a tandem bike with her host father, (her first time ever on a bike!), went swimming in a local river, learned karate kicking and went trick-or-treating on Halloween.

Alina spent a day volunteering at the local middle school to talk about her country and her disability, at the end of which, the middle school students didn't want her to leave! She is scheduled to do similar presentations at the local library and in several classes at the high school later this winter. Alina has also volunteered at the humane society, where she spent time with some resident cats, and has done some babysitting for parents in her neighborhood.

According to Alina's host mother, Vickie, "She is a wonderful young lady and we feel quite honored to have her in our home."



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David—Teaching Kids about Georgia

I am happy in my new family, because they are really kind people. They treat me as a member of family. I also like my school, and especially my teachers, and have made many friends at school. With the support of the Springfield Lions Club, my local coordinator helped me to get contact lenses this fall, which have really helped me.



I spend a lot of time doing my homework, but am also a member of the Art Service Club at school. A highlight of my exchange experience this fall came during International Education Week. For the event, I prepared a presentation about Georgia for a second grade elementary school class. I really enjoy kids, and they were very excited to learn more about my country.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned more about people with disabilities. Someday, I hope that my country has an organization that will help people with disabilities to adapt well in the community.



David—Seeing Life Clearly

My best experience as a FLEX student so far has been communicating

in English, and getting new glasses. I no longer need any help with reading or writing.

I have been swimming at the YMCA this fall and am planning to join the racquetball team at school. I have also done community service for poor and homeless people in my community, and have prepared a number of presentations about my home country.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon, I learned a lot about communicating with people from another country, and that was a great introduction to life in the U.S.

Gemmalyn- Exchanging World Knowledge

I like school because I'm getting a good education at the Indiana School for the Deaf and have joined sports. I also like my home and helping my host parents, and getting to know my German exchange sister. Math and English are hard for me, but I study a lot for both.

In the fall, I played volleyball and am on the cheerleading squad for basketball. I am also a member of the Junior National Association of the Deaf.

Being with a lot of Deaf and hard of hearing people has been very interesting. I've learned a lot about American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Culture.

This fall, I gave a presentation about the Philippines to high school and middle school students. I wore two different dance costumes and performed a traditional dance after I talked about my family and cultural background. I also taught the students some words in Tagalog. The students enjoyed it and asked me a lot of questions about my home and school.



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Nadiya - Cooking with Confidence

I love my host family very much as they always take good care of me. I really enjoy community activities, and have participated in a lot of fun activities at my host parents' church, including a mystery dinner, Christmas party, Father-Daughter evening, talent show and much more. It is a good way to learn more about my friends and family.

I also like that my family likes to cook great food. Honestly, before I came here I didn't have any cooking skills at all, and now I have some and that's great! No doubt, by the end of the year I will be a professional cook!

I really enjoy my school too. All of the students are ready to help me if I need it. They are extremely friendly and polite, always smiling and ready to open the door for me. The teachers are always willing to help and to answer all of my questions, which helped me a lot at the beginning of the school year. I also like that my school provides some accommodations for me like an elevator key, accessible bus and special pass that allows me to leave class a few minutes before the bell rings so that I can walk to my next class.

I have been involved in many activities at school and at church this fall, including the Interact Club, a volunteer group at school. Our last big project was in an elementary school where we passed out candy and played games with the kids. It was a great time. This month, one of the Club's projects involves collecting presents and money for hospitalized children. I have done a lot of community service with other exchange students, as well, including selling cookbooks as a fundraiser and cleaning an area of the beach.

One of my best experiences happened back in September at a dance organized by my parents' church. Honestly, I don't usually go to dances, as I can't dance very well, but that evening I danced more than five times and for me it was something totally new that I had never tried before. It was really fun and exciting for me.

At the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon I learned about independent living and how I can accept help from other people and still be independent. But the main thing that changed was my attitude toward special equipment. For example, I learned that if I use an elevator at school or an accessible bus, it doesn't mean that I am weak. It indicates that I am strong enough to be independent and use all kinds of equipment to make my life better. That's why I bought a cane and it is the reason why I want to get a driver's license as soon as I return to my home country!

I am looking forward to see everyone again in Oregon!

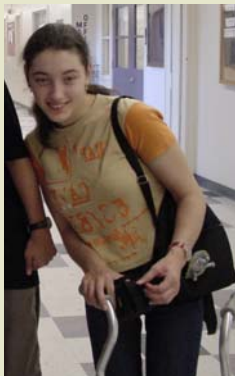




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Marta— Ambassador of the Arts

The best thing about my FLEX experience is that I now have many new friends. Also, my school is very accessible for kids with disabilities. I can easily use a wheelchair at school.



I am a member of the drama club at school, and am taking a drama class. Recently, I volunteered at the Osceola Performing Arts Center in Kissimmee, Florida. I operated the lights during ten performances of a theater production. I also went to my first Homecoming dance this fall, and am excited to find out about opportunities to participate in wheelchair dancing and wheelchair basketball.

As for a funny story from this fall, one day I came home with my area representative and nobody was home. I opened the door and the alarm started going off, and I didn't know how to turn it off. At the time it wasn't very funny, but now that I look back on it, it's very funny!

Mark—Reading to the Top

Mark attends the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB) during the week where he is involved in a number of extracurricular activities. This fall, Mark played the drums in the marching band and was a member of the track team. He is currently participating in wrestling for the first time and is excited about the start of

the regular band season. Mark plays the guitar and flute, and has been reading non-stop using his Braille Lite. Recently, he entered a contest between students competing to read the most books in a given amount of time.

Mark has enjoyed all of the off-campus activities he has gotten to try this fall, as well, including skating and going to the movies, and has been volunteering with other PAX exchange students.

As much as he enjoys school, Mark loves coming home to his host family on weekends. His host brother, whom Mark describes as a "computer genius" who has helped him a great deal with the technology at OSSB, also attends the School for the Blind during the week.

Ahmed- Learning about Culture in the US

The best thing about my exchange experience has been meeting people.



Before I came to the U.S., I thought that people here have a hard time living with people from other cultures, but I have a really nice family and they have taught me a lot about people and life and other things.

They make me feel like I'm one of them.

This fall I was a member of my school's cross-country team and will be taking music soon. I also participate in a youth group at church and look forward to giving more.



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Serhiy- On the Bus

The best thing about my FLEX experience has been playing guitar in a band. Before I came to the U.S., I didn't dare to dream that I could do this! The hardest thing for me has been adjusting to attending public high school. In Ukraine, I attended a school for Blind students, and here I really have to work hard to do my best.



This fall, I got involved in the emergency broadcast radio system, and am getting a license to operate the radio in Florida. I also participate in activities at my church and recently volunteered with my area representative at the Chamber of St. Cloud where I helped set tables during their annual membership dinner.

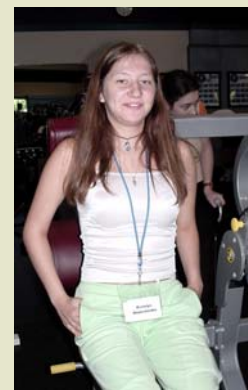
I would like to share a funny story from my first day of school. It actually wasn't funny at the time! At the end of the school day, I went to look for my bus but had forgotten my bus number. The school police officer had to stop all of the buses for me! Then, during my bus ride home, I forgot my bus stop. Fortunately, I knew my neighborhood but had to walk a long way home with a backpack full of books on a very hot day. The temperature was around 100 degrees! Ever since that day, I have never missed my bus or my bus stop again!

Kseniya- Singing with the Choir

One of Kseniya's most memorable experiences as a FLEX student came during a recent volunteer experience at a local church where Kseniya sings in the choir. Kseniya attended an event called "Breakfast with Babies," at which members of the community seek to help mothers experiencing family difficulties. Kseniya is very excited to continue her volunteer work at an elementary school later this winter, and credits the Preparatory Workshop in Oregon for demonstrating that volunteer work could be a lot of fun and a great way to make friends.

Kseniya relates this story from the fall: My host family and I went to Disney World and I used a wheelchair for (almost) the first time in my life. It was so much fun, because my host sister was wheeling me and she was scaring me all the time!

I am very excited about the April Workshop!



Aleksandr-Enjoying a Little Bit of Everything



Alex has been very active at school this fall. He played soccer on the JV and Varsity teams, and is currently practicing with the basketball team. Alex also plays cymbals for the Kenton Wildcat Marching Band, and is learning to play more percussion instruments, including the snare drums. He recently participated in a soil-judging contest as a member of the Kenton Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter and was awarded the Green Hand Award in FFA.

Alex has been busy as a volunteer in his host community, as well. He volunteered at two events for Grange Halls in Kenton and volunteered with other World Link exchange students at a craft show. Recently, Alex served as a mentor for local teenagers and joined young people with disabilities engaged in horseback riding. He also found time to give numerous presentations this November during International Education Week!

As much as Alex enjoys school and extracurricular activities, he says the best thing about his exchange experience so far has been his host family.



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Yuliya—Spiders, No Problem



The best thing about my FLEX experience so far has been my host family. The teachers and students at my school are very friendly too. At first, I was worried about making friends at school, but when my classmates found out that I was an

exchange student, they were very curious to learn more about me and my home country. Also, travel is one of my hobbies and I've gotten to travel a lot with my host family since last summer. I've been to Georgia and twice to Florida, and have visited a lot of cities in South Carolina. We actually went to Disney world over New Year's and there were fireworks and a lot of Christmas celebrations.

Another thing I have really enjoyed is my dance class. Another exchange student and I attend a dance class once a week. We dance and have a lot of fun, and our teacher is very interesting. My host mom is a doctor, and I've enjoyed helping out in her office as a volunteer.

A funny story I would like to share started as an experiment in my psychology class. I've always been afraid of spiders, so we conducted an experiment during which a really big spider was placed on my head, then on my hand. I finally realized that they are very small, after all, and am no longer afraid of them!

I can't wait to go to Oregon to see everyone again.

Ekaterine "Eka" - Rush Mail Delivery

I am having a great exchange



experience and really like my family. This fall, we went to the ocean and visited Oregon, and enjoy swimming and bowling together. My high school is very big, and I have gone to many pep assemblies and football games. I also

went to my first homecoming dance!

Right now I am volunteering as a teacher's assistant in the first and second grade Sunday school class at a local church and have been involved in various community service projects through the Service Club at my high school. I am also involved in a local youth group.

A funny story from this fall: I put off writing my essay for the Close-up project in Washington, D.C. until the very last minute and my host mom and I had to rush so fast to get it to the post office in time to meet the deadline! She still loves me though!



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Dmitriy "Dima"- Time is Flying

Everything about my FLEX experience has been great. School is going well and I'm making a lot of new friends. Right now, my classes include art, computer science, French and U.S. history, as well as weight training and swimming. I've also been taking guitar lessons since September and am involved in the International Club at school.

Outside of school, I am involved in a youth group through my host family's church, and have done some community service through church. I also have a great host family. I really enjoyed spending Christmas with them, and getting a stocking. In many ways, it feels like I just arrived and already I am making plans to return home in May for graduation. Time is going very quickly!



Darya "Dasha" - The Chicken Story

I've had lots of great experiences living in the U.S. In fact, one of them happened when my host mom, host sister and I went Christmas shopping downtown. We spent six hours in one huge shopping mall. It was so beautiful inside, with glass walls and lots of plants, like a museum!



Another great experience this fall was celebrating my first Halloween. I enjoyed giving candy to little kids and trick-or-treating with my host family.

I am involved in lots of activities besides school. I'm involved in the Key Club at school and enjoy dancing, and in December I will participate in my first concert in America! I have also done different kinds of volunteer work in my community. For example, a few weeks ago we cleaned trash out of a stream.

My funny story: I noticed right away that some people don't know very much about my home country and sometimes ask silly questions. When I first arrived in Indiana, my host parents took me to a cafe, where I ordered chicken. My host parents were so excited that I had finally come to Indiana, that they told the woman who was working there that I was an exchange student from Russia. The woman was surprised and asked if we have chicken in Russia!

I learned a lot in Oregon, for example, about disabled people's rights. It has helped me to get everything I need as a visually impaired person. Thank you for your help and support in making my year in the U.S. a success!



Students in the News

Blind Russian Exchange Student Inspires Others in Spartanburg High School Orchestra

DUDLEY BROWN, Staff Writer—GoUpstate.com

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Vasily Belyavin almost becomes a part of the music he plays in a way that his instructors wish all students could. He doesn't play just the notes from a sheet of paper -- he seems to visualize them and feel the music. "With Vasily, it's already in his mind and he's operating at a higher level of thinking," said Paul Buyer, a Spartanburg County School District 7 orchestra teacher, of how Belyavin approaches playing the oboe in the orchestra.

Belyavin, 17, is an exchange student from Russia. Blind since birth, he began playing the piano and recorder by sound and memory at age 6. He'll listen to others and record them playing a song so he can memorize it.

He's going to be a soloist during a Spartanburg High School Chamber Orchestra concert at 7:30 p.m. Monday at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church.

"Listening to him play is phenomenal," said Hannah Albenesius, who is in orchestra and band with Belyavin. "That's all I can say. He has such a gift and a great memory. I'm shamed in front of him."

Albenesius is an oboe player in the orchestra, and she'll play a song for him and he'll record it on a small, inexpensive tape recorder. It took them five days to record a song for the orchestra's first concert of the school year. Belyavin would listen to each day's recording, practice it and memorize it before learning the rest of the song.

Albenesius said she's heard recordings from the tape recorder, and the oboe doesn't sound the same, but Belyavin is able to make sense of it. "I'm amazed," Albenesius said.

Belyavin is from Yekaterinburg, a city of 1.5 million people. The city is an industry and cultural center in its region east of the Ural Mountains.

He participated in a contest through his school in Russia to come to the United States to study this year. Students were tested on their knowledge of English, which Belyavin said he's not the best at. He feels confident in his understanding of another language, however.

"I know that my English is not very good, but I know that another language can help me always," said Belyavin on his scholarship application. "That is the language of music. It is an international language, which does not need any translation."



Photo by MIKE BONNER : Vasily Belyavin, a Russian exchange student who learned to play the oboe through memory and sound because he is blind, will be a soloist in a concert at Spartanburg High School. Paul Buyer, orchestra teacher, listens as Belyavin rehearses.

Story continued on page 17



Students in the News

Belyavin continued

His interest in music began with a piano in his family's apartment. He said he started playing with the piano and his mom found a piano teacher for him. The teacher recommended that he start attending one of Russia's best music schools, where he began playing the recorder before playing the flute and oboe. "I had a very wonderful teacher, and she explained everything," Belyavin said. "She did much more than she got paid for."

Belyavin attends two schools six days a week in Russia. Each day from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. he's at what he calls his "regular school" learning literature, history, math and science. From 4 to 8 p.m. he's at music school, where he plays the piano, oboe and studies music theory and music literature.

A soloist on many occasions, Belyavin said his time in Spartanburg lets him play with an orchestra. Buyer said they've worked out little ways to communicate during a performance, like a subtle tap they'll use Monday night to know when Belyavin is ready to begin a piece.

He's enrolled at the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind and takes courses at Spartanburg High School, where he's in the 11th grade. He's interested in history and politics. "I think everyone should be interested in politics in their own country," Belyavin said.

He said he likes to compare different things he's learning about the United States to Russia, but he tries not to say one country is better.

Steve and Aimee Miller's family is his host family. They're the parents of 10 children and their 8- to 10-year-olds like playing with Belyavin.

Steve said Belyavin likes to listen to National Public Radio and local talk radio. He said listening to Belyavin practice the oboe at home is very enjoyable. "Unlike someone practicing to get good, he's already very good," Steve Miller said.

Albenesius said Belyavin also has a good sense of humor. "He finds funniness in everything, like little English words," said Albenesius, who said one of the words he found humor in last week was the word "khaki."

He's also an inspiration to some at school. "In addition to overcoming perceived handicaps he's really dedicated to music and the students have latched onto him," said Brad Stewart, District 7's orchestra coordinator.

Belyavin will return to Russia at the end of the school year. "I'm going to miss him so much," Albenesius said. "I try not to think about it. It's going to be a big piece missing in band and orchestra and life in general."

For more information and the complete article visit:

<http://www.goustate.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070128/NEWS/701280309/>



Opportunities for You to Check Out!

Tolerance.org

Have a great idea about how to challenge social boundaries and bring down the walls that divide your school? We want to help, and, to prove it, we give \$500 grants to support youth-directed programs and projects that address social boundaries in schools or communities.

<http://tolerance.org/teens/grants.jsp>

Do Something Today!

We believe young people have the power to make a difference. It is our aim to inspire, support and celebrate a generation of do-ers: people who see the need to do something, believe in their ability to get it done, and then take action.

Our website is a community where young people learn, listen, speak, vote, volunteer, ask, and take action to make the world a better place. Currently, only 23% of this generation actively volunteers. Our hope is to create a do something generation: a world where more than 51% of young people are involved with community action.

Young people like you have incredible ideas, but sometimes you don't have the dough to say "Go" for a community project. Right? Not anymore.

Do Something puts the *fun* back in funding by giving you the big bucks to get things going in your neighborhood. With a little moolah, some attention from the media and great resources from us, 25-and-under across the US and Canada can make things happen in a huge way!

In 2006, Do Something partnered with GameStop to give out grants (\$500 a pop) to 30 incredible young people across the US and Canada. Their projects were amazing, to say the least. See for yourself. Then take that inspiration, start your own project and apply for a grant. Check out the current projects and grants:

www.dosomething.org

Gloria Barron Prize

The Barron Prize honors young people ages 8 to 18 who have shown leadership and courage in public service to people and our planet. Every year, ten national winners each receive \$2,000 to support their service work or higher education. For more information and to nominate someone from your school or community, visit www.barronprize.org. The deadline for nominations is April 30th, 2007.

Youth Service America (YSA) is a resource center that partners with thousands of organizations committed to increasing the quality and quantity of volunteer opportunities for young people, ages 5-25, to serve locally, nationally, and globally. Founded in 1986, YSA's mission is to expand the impact of the youth service movement with communities, schools, corporations, and governments.

YSA envisions a global culture of engaged youth who are committed to a lifetime of service, learning, leadership, and achievement.

For more information and resource links visit: www.ysa.org



More Opportunities for You to Check Out!

Teen Ink

A national teen magazine, book series, and website devoted entirely to teenage writing and art. *Teen Ink* magazine offers some of the most thoughtful and creative work generated by teens and has the largest distribution of any publication of its kind. We have no staff writers or artists; we depend completely on submissions from teenagers nationwide for our content.

Every day, we offer teenagers the opportunity to publish their creative work and opinions on the issues that affect their lives. Hundreds of thousands of students have submitted their work to us and we have published more than 25,000 teens since 1989.

The Young Authors Foundation, Inc. is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization that supports all *Teen Ink* publications. The foundation is devoted to helping teens share their own voices, while developing reading, writing, creative and critical-thinking skills. All proceeds from the print magazine, website and *Teen Ink* books are used exclusively for charitable and educational purposes to further our goal.

Teen Ink offers a variety of contests that inspire teens to do everything - from offering a creative environmental solution and volunteering in their community, to writing about a family vacation and shooting great photos of their friends. Find out more about our contests! Visit: www.teenink.com

Young Caucasus Women Project

Female high school students from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia who are currently in the U.S. on the FLEX program are being recruited for a special training course in citizen journalism. Training for the *Young Caucasus Women Project* will be provided by 50 volunteer mentors, who are educators, Peace Corps volunteers, aid workers, and journalists throughout the world currently engaged in the dissemination of news in developing countries. The goals of the program are to promote weblogs as a method of democratic expression and to expose young women to journalism and technology. Each week the mentors assign a topic for the participants to respond via weblogs. Information about the program can be found at the following website: <http://youngcaucasus.neweurasia.net/>

Global Nomads Group (GNG)

GNG is a non-profit organization dedicated to heightening young people's understanding and appreciation for the world and its people. Using interactive technologies such as videoconferencing, GNG brings young people together face-to-face to meet across cultural and national boundaries to discuss their differences & similarities, and the world issues that affect them. <http://www.gng.org>

VOICES

Submit a story about your international experience and perspective!
<http://www.voicesoftomorrow.org/>



MIUSA Dates to Remember:

April 13, 2007:
Deadline for Photo or Essay Contest

April 14- 18, 2007:
YES Reentry Program

April 15- 18, 2007:
FLEX Reentry Program

FLEX Students in Eugene, Oregon



During the MIUSA Preparatory Workshop—July, 2006