

Addressing the Needs of Teens in Korsakov

BY KATHRYN UTAN

Kathryn Utan is AIHA's staff writer.



Photo: Suzanne E. Grifman.

Some young members of the Crisis Center's teen groups pose with director Olga Komar.

“Teenagers really cannot become alcoholics, especially if they only drink beer,” 16-year-old Yevgeny states with conviction. Most of his friends nod in agreement. “Yes, that’s true,” 15-year-old Juliet concurs, explaining, “It is only vodka and other hard liquor that can turn someone into an alcoholic.” Nastya, 15, shakes her head in disagreement, saying, “I think beer can make a person become an alcoholic. It starts with taking a drink from time to time with friends, but then it can lead people to drink more and more.” The group grows silent as they contemplate her statement. Olga Komar, a folk theater producer who lives in Korsakov, Russia, listens closely to this exchange before pointing out that

one of the biggest challenges when working with teens is that they are all so sure that bad things won’t happen to them.

“For a teenager, the bad habits they pick up—smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or unsafe sexual behaviors, for example—color how they view their lives and the world around them. In fact, these habits become such a part of their lives that, unless they make a conscious decision to change, they will almost always revert to these tendencies,” explains Komar. Her goal, she says, is to make sure the young people in her community clearly understand the potential long-term effects of such unhealthy lifestyle choices. She works toward accomplishing this by inviting local youth to participate in a variety of discussion groups and oth-

er activities sponsored by Korsakov’s Crisis Center for Adolescents, which she heads.

Helping Teens Take Responsibility for Their Own Health

When the Sakhalin/Houston partners began their collaboration in January 2000, they decided that one of their areas of focus would be children’s and adolescent health. One of their first steps was to conduct a community health assessment to determine the specific needs of the area’s young population by discovering more about their risk behaviors and health concerns (See “Assessing the Health Needs of Children and Young Adults,” page 12). The following July, a multidisciplinary community advisory board was formed with the ambitious

objective of revamping public health services in the community of 56,000. The foundation “Mercy and Health” became a legal entity two months later, according to Andrei Dankin, deputy head of the organization. “Our main objective is to create a sense of worth and of personal responsibility regarding health in our community. It may sound strange, but under the Soviet system healthcare was provided by the state, so people never learned the value of their own health.”

Calling the work of Mercy and Health “noble, but difficult,” foundation member Julia Gritsai, explains, “Nothing is more important to an individual than his or her health, and instilling this notion in children is the only way to effect long-term change.” As principal of Korsakov School No. 2 and a representative in the Regional Legislative Assembly, Gritsai says she feels a special obligation to do everything in her power to improve the health status of children and young adults in Korsakov. “We are concentrating our efforts on promoting healthy lifestyles among our young people and, to this end, we have begun working with the mass media, various civic groups, businesses, and healthcare professionals, as well as with the adolescents themselves to educate them about wellness issues.” The Crisis Center is one of the vehicles the foundation uses to reach out to teens, but the name is a bit misleading because the Center sponsors three teen groups, established by Komar. One group is for those who have substance abuse problems, another is for those who are at risk—meaning they have tried alcohol or drugs, but are not yet addicted—and a third is for teenagers who aren’t at risk, but want a place where they can discuss problems related to their age. At times these groups come together, as witnessed in the exchange at the beginning of this article, and not surprisingly, the myths they be-

lieve—such as that drinking beer cannot lead to alcoholism—pervade all three.

Opening a Dialogue with Teens on the Edge

As the mother of three children ranging in age from 18 to 23, Komar knows all too well how difficult it can be to get teens to discuss their lives—especially with their parents or other adults. But, she insists, talking is the key to teaching them to respect the value of their own

“... one of the biggest challenges when working with teens is that they are all so sure that bad things won’t happen to them.”

health. “Whether it is through roundtable discussions, lectures, training workshops, art contests, focus groups, or other activities, I always want to keep the lines of communication open between the young people and myself—even if I have to drag it out of them,” she says with a chuckle. To ensure that the discussions and programs are relevant to the adolescents’ needs, she is constantly conducting surveys, asking them if what they learned was of any use to them, and evaluating the teens’ responses to the various topics.

Some of the answers are a definite surprise, while others can be readily anticipated, Komar says, citing a recent experience with the latter. “During one roundtable, we spoke to a group of boys, asking them what they would do if they suspected they had contracted a sexually transmitted infection (STI). They all

said that they would ask a close friend what to do because they would be too embarrassed to go to see a physician,” she explains, noting that a doctor happened to be present at the discussion. “He asked the boys what they would do if they had a tooth that hurt: ask their friends what to do or go to the dentist. Of course, all the boys said they would go see the dentist, so the doctor retorted: ‘You have 32 teeth, but only one penis; isn’t it foolish to trust it to the care of your friends?’ All the boys laughed, but we saw that what the doctor had said really made them think.” And getting the young people of Korsakov to think and talk about the issues that put their health at risk is exactly what Komar and the other members of the foundation hope to do.

Sergei, a 17-year-old who recently started coming to meetings of the high-risk group at the Center after a few of his friends invited him, explains, “I started drinking because I felt unhappy and alone, but mostly because it made me feel grown up.” Sergei says that talking about why he felt the need to start drinking has helped him to realize that alcohol is not the answer to his problems. Other members of the group seem to agree. “One of the things we talk about is how to find our place in life, to determine what we want to accomplish and who we really are,” states 18-year-old Aidin. “I used to smoke marijuana, but after I came to the Crisis Center a few times I began to ask myself why this was necessary. After thinking seriously about it, I realized that it wasn’t.”

The “Golden Fund”

With so many teens falling prey to the siren song of a lifestyle that embraces alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and violence, youth who have so far managed to avoid these common pitfalls of adolescence often

seem to fall through the cracks. “Prevention has become such a strong focus of our work and we are always designing programs that target specific groups of high-risk children,” Komar says. “But we never considered the needs of the teens who were doing well, who were not getting into trouble.” This changed one day when a young girl reminded her that the teenage years are difficult for “good” kids, too.

After a roundtable involving local students, Komar recounts, “A charming girl named Masha came up to me and spoke about a faction of children that our programs left out. She told me, ‘We don’t smoke, drink, or take drugs, but we still have problems.’ Her comments made me realize that it is important for us to help these children stay on the right path.” This led to the formation of the third discussion group, one created to address the needs of these young adults and to teach them how to deal more effectively with the challenges they face.

Explaining the group’s purpose further, 17-year-old Masha says, “Even though I consider myself very lucky—I have a father and mother, my family is comparatively well off, and I don’t have any habits such as smoking or drinking that could be hazardous to my health—I still have problems.” She lists difficulty communicating with others and occasional feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fear as the things that plague her the most. “Sometimes it is hard for me to talk with other people. . . . I just don’t know what to say or do and, for some reason, I find it difficult to find close friends whom I really feel I can trust,” she explains. “That’s why I like the idea of this group very much. It offers a place where I can share my deepest thoughts and feelings with others who have similar experiences and problems.”

Although most of the children in this

particular group lead extremely busy lives—in addition to their normal studies, many also attend special academies during the summer months and are active in other clubs and organizations throughout the year—Komar says they asked to hold their meetings twice a week. “We call these children our ‘golden fund’ and we try to teach them ways of



Photo: Suzanne E. Grimman.

Olga Komar, director of the Korsakov Crisis Center for Adolescents, prepares and distributes a number of educational brochures geared toward helping young people successfully navigate the often difficult teenage years.

expressing themselves, avoiding conflict, and achieving their goals in life.” For 15-year-old Olga, the group provides an opportunity to explore a wide variety of activities and interests and to learn how to communicate better with others. “Being a member of the group has also helped me to understand that I can accomplish anything I want as long as I work hard at it. Since I started coming here, I’ve even decided that I’d like to become a psychologist,” she says, explaining that many of her friends come to her when they want to talk about a particular problem they are having.

Many of the group’s activities have a broader reach than the individual members, Komar notes, explaining that the group produces a newspaper called “Be Healthy” that focuses on wellness topics of concern to children and young adults.

“We discuss each issue of the newspaper among ourselves, then decide who will write articles on various subjects such as drugs, the influence of smoking and alcohol on the human body, STIs, and the diseases that are carried by ticks,” states 17-year-old Vasil, the paper’s editor-in-chief. “We all pick a topic that is most interesting to us, do the research, and write the stories,” he explains, noting that one of the articles written by Olga and another 15-year-old named Oksana was even published in the local newspaper.

“We never considered that these children might have problems and questions that needed answering,” Komar says. “The reality is that all children need information, support, and direction. Offering this kind of help to young people may not be glamorous, but nothing could be more important.”

Every Child is Worth It

Readily acknowledging that the Russia she grew up in is a very different place for the children of today, Komar states, “Sometimes it is hard for the generations to understand one another. Through our work with the teenagers, we have come to realize that if a child smokes, drinks, or steals, it is usually because he or she does not feel loved and supported, so working with parents is necessary as well.” Other adults in the community can also contribute to the feelings of isolation that trouble so many teens, she concludes. “When we first started working with students at a local technical school—many of the members of our high-risk group go there—the teachers told us not to waste our time, that the children were already lost. It took time and patience, but as soon as the teens from this school started to ask questions, I knew our efforts were paying off. If adolescents are asking questions, they are beginning to think.” ■