

# Partnership “Pre-Histories”

## Laying the Groundwork for Successful International Relationships

BY BARBARA A. GABRIEL

The international relationships that AIHA enables through its comprehensive partnership programs are sometimes rooted in histories that predate AIHA involvement. These “pre-histories” lay the groundwork for the substantial accomplishments that institutions and communities can realize with the help of structured programs. Discovering these pre-histories often involves learning the idiosyncratic beginnings of exchanges between individuals and communities that spur the growth of dreams and ideas that reach fruition after many years of discussion and foundation-building.



Dr. Leo Dubovoy, a vascular surgeon in Stavropol, and Dr. William Meffert, a cardiovascular surgeon from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, review a donation of arterial grafts to the Surgery Department at Stavropol Krai Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Philip Latessa.

One organization that has helped foster such relationships is Sister Cities International (SCI), whose mission incorporates long-term, reciprocal, international exchanges between US communities and their counterparts abroad. Nine AIHA partner pairs (see Table 1) are also official Sister Cities or Sister States (also administered under the auspices of SCI). Others have drawn on the SCI model to facilitate more successful

exchanges with their AIHA partners. This article looks at two AIHA partner relationships in light of the pre-histories that were established before their AIHA involvement.

### Iowa/Stavropol—Building on the Foundations of History

The relationship between Iowa and Stavropol Krai in Russia can be traced back to the Khrushchev era. According to Philip Latessa, project coordinator for the Iowa/Stavropol partnership and an independent consultant to the Iowa Hospital Education and Research Foundation (IHERF), there is a long and rich history of exchange between Iowa and the similarly agri-

cultural Russian region of Stavropol. “The history of exchange activity between Iowa and Stavropol goes back to the 50s and 60s,” says Latessa. “When Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev made a visit to the States, he came to Iowa, where he visited some small rural communities. That visit led to a particularly significant relationship with an American banking businessman, which in turn led to a lot of contact between our two countries.” In many ways, the fit between Iowa and Stavropol (both the name of the Russian region and its capital city) is natural. Both regions are covered in fertile soil and have economies based on agriculture and related industries and businesses. They are similar in geographic size and population, and both have many small towns, but few large cities.

Numerous other relationships grew out of Iowa’s original business-related agricultural exchanges with Stavropol. “Any formal agreements between the two states took place many years after a long history of cultural, political, and business exchange,” explains Latessa. “Iowa is very internationally oriented in general. Partly for agricultural reasons, and partly because we have a population here that has always had an international outlook.” This is reflected in the fact that cities in Iowa currently have 33 Sister City partnerships with their counterparts in such diverse countries as Brazil, Norway, China, Algeria, Japan, Korea, and Honduras. Iowa also maintains eight Sister State relationships with countries from Ukraine to Malaysia. None, however, are as deeply rooted as the Stavropol relationship, the first Sister State partnership with any Russian region.

In 1989, a Sister State agreement formalizing an Iowa/Stavropol relationship was signed by the governors of the respective states, initializing a torrent of formal exchange programs and international development initiatives. “The Stavropol Sister State relationship has had a variety of exchanges over the years,” says Latessa. “They have been primarily educational—involving faculty as well as students—but they have also been cultural, with musicians and various types of artists going back and forth. Businesspeople, politicians, and police officials have also taken part in development programs. In addition, our National Guard and their emergency response services did some recent exchanges on natural disaster planning and response in Stavropol.”

In 1993, AIHA formalized an Iowa/Stavropol partnership between IHERF and the Association of Iowa Hospitals and Health Systems and the Stavropol Regional Ministry of Health; Stavropol Regional Hospital (SRH); Stavropol City Hospital No. 2; the Stavropol Krai Oncology Center; and the Women’s Health Center in Essentuki. By this time, a network of relationships was al-

ready in place to facilitate the partnership's healthcare goals. "The very rich history of our Sister State relationship at both the local and regional levels of Stavropol's government made IHERF very comfortable with proceeding with the AIHA proposal," says Latesa. Iowa's many other Sister City relationships also played an important role in facilitating the work of the AIHA Iowa/Stavropol partnership. "Our partnership drew upon resources from across the whole state," explains Latesa. "We worked through a lot of Iowa Sister City relationships that were in place, particularly when it came to disseminating information and teaching techniques from the city of Stavropol to surrounding rural towns. We used frameworks already implemented in other regions for the basis of that development. It made getting projects started much easier than would have been the case otherwise."

Individual contacts made through previous Sister State exchanges with Stavropol also proved helpful in meeting AIHA goals, sometimes in unexpected ways. In addition to many physicians and researchers who had already visited Stavropol being able to provide useful background information, professionals in other fields were also able to help. "One of the people who was involved in an early education project with Stavropol is a math and physics instructor at a local Iowa community college," says Latesa. "He is also a computer and e-mail expert. He helped set up our initial Learning Resource Center in Stavropol, and has been involved in related activities since then. His participation is a result of tapping into the network of relationships that already existed in Iowa, and using them to help support AIHA activities."

In 1999, an AIHA continuation grant was awarded to further the work of the Iowa/Stavropol partnership, this time in community-based primary care. Unfortunately, the recent eruption of violence in the Russian province of Chechnya, which shares its border with Stavropol Krai, has restricted travel, temporarily limiting physical exchanges. Faced with such

limitations, Iowa selected an additional partner city, Samara, located northeast of Stavropol. Within its new partnership with Samara, IHERF will attempt to continue to build on the successes achieved in Stavropol in the areas of infection control, nursing education, women's health, and biomedical engineering.

### AIHA Sister Cities Partnerships

- Appleton and Fox Cities, Wisconsin/Kurgan, Russia
- Atlanta, Georgia/Tbilisi, Georgia
- Boulder, Colorado/Dushanbe, Tajikistan
- Cleveland, Ohio/Bratislava, Slovakia
- State of Iowa/Stavropol Krai, Russia (Sister States)
- Jacksonville, Florida/Murmansk, Russia
- La Crosse, Wisconsin/Dubna, Russia
- Los Alamos, New Mexico/Sarov, Russia
- Tucson, Arizona/Almaty, Kazakhstan

Table 1. AIHA partners who are also Sister Cities/States.



Presentations of TB cases are heard by attendees of a Russian-American Conference held in Volgograd, Russia in 1998.

Photo courtesy of James Wohlleb.

### Little Rock/Volgograd—Expanding Beyond Medical Exchange

The story of another international relationship with a history that pre-dates AIHA involvement begins with an attorney from El Dorado, Arkansas representing a chemical company. On a business trip to Volgograd, Russia six years ago, the attorney met Dr. Vladimir Petrov, rector of the Volgograd Medical Academy (VMA), who, in a brief discussion, mentioned his desire to begin a training program for family doctors in Volgograd. The attorney referred Dr. Petrov to a doctor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) located in Little Rock. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Petrov met with the Chancellor of UAMS, Harry Ward. Within a year, the two academic medical institutions affiliated, and a faculty exchange program began in July 1994 when three doctors from VMA arrived in Arkansas for training in UAMS's respected family medicine curriculum.

The VMA/UAMS affiliation, administered by the Area Health Education Center (AHEC) at UAMS, has broadened far beyond the expectations generated by that first Volgograd exchange. AHEC, a program established as a part of the American grassroots movement in the 1970s that saw the birth of the Peace Corps and VISTA programs, was established with the intent of providing primary healthcare to lesser-served US areas. Through their affiliation with VMA, the AHEC at UAMS has become international in scope. Because Volgograd's goal of instituting a primary healthcare training program was so close to its own mission, AHEC welcomed the relationship. "We realize the importance of life outside of the academy, and have always wanted to do things in a larger way," says James C. Wohlleb, assistant director of the AHEC program at UAMS.

## Building International Bridges With SCI

Since its inception by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, SCI has provided support for various US communities to form links with other communities worldwide. SCI currently represents a total of 1,200 US cities, counties, and states as well as their 2,100 partners in 125 countries. Still true to Eisenhower's original intent in the aftermath of World War II, SCI's affiliations promote citizen diplomacy in the hope that such relationships will lessen the chance of future global conflicts. SCI helps support programs that fall under eight principal areas of development

- arts, education, and cultural exchange;
- economic and business development;
- youth leadership;
- the environment;
- health;
- independent press;
- municipal training and community problem-solving; and
- technology.

Official SCI status is conferred only when the endorsement of local authorities who support the volunteer efforts behind the affiliation is obtained. Sister City agreements must then be signed by the mayors and city councils—or their equivalents—of each participating community. SCI's mission statement reflects its community-centered approach toward achieving positive relationships among diverse areas of the world.

- To develop community partnerships between US cities, counties, states, and similar jurisdictions in other nations;
- To create opportunities for city officials and citizens to experience and explore other cultures through long-term community partnerships;
- To create an atmosphere in which economic and community development will be implemented and strengthened;
- To stimulate environments through which communities will creatively learn, work, and solve problems together through reciprocal cultural, educational, municipal, business, professional, and technical exchanges and projects; and
- To collaborate with organizations in the US and other countries that have similar goals.

For more information, visit SCI's Web site at [www.sister-cities.org](http://www.sister-cities.org).

Since 1994, over 18 tons of medical equipment have been donated to VMA by Arkansas hospitals, and the two US and Russian medical universities have taken part in a dozen faculty exchanges. By 1997, the successful institutional relationship was inspiring partners to discuss ways of expanding their affiliation into non-medical areas. Volgograd and Little Rock had begun to perceive ways in which the two cities could benefit from a mutual, cross-sectoral civic relationship. In 1997 Volgograd Mayor Yuri Chekhov visited Arkansas to discuss the future of the UAMS/VMA affiliation and to meet with city representatives in Little Rock to explore other areas of partnership. "City offi-

cial in Volgograd have always viewed VMA as an important institution," says Wohlleb, "so they've been very supportive of the affiliation the academy has with UAMS. Discussion soon began to go in the direction of developing economic, social, and cultural relations between the two cities. That's when the idea of a Sister City relationship came up."

The work of Sister Cities International was already well known in Little Rock. Arkansas has eight Sister Cities worldwide, five of them based in Little Rock. Little Rock sustains relationships with China, South Korea, Italy, and most recently, Belgium. UAMS has supported the Sister Cities relationship with Kaohsiung, Taiwan, since 1983 and another one with Changchun, China since 1994. Like Volgograd, the Sister Cities relationship between Little Rock and Kaohsiung also began as an affiliation between two medical universities—this time between UAMS and the Kaohsiung Medical College—before evolving into an official Sister Cities relationship. According to Wohlleb, UAMS's relationship with Kaohsiung has served as a model for their newer Volgograd relationship.

However, since Volgograd already has a formal Sister Cities relationship with Cleveland, Ohio and SCI does not allow foreign cities to maintain more than one such sanctioned relationship, UAMS has begun discussions to develop an unofficial "friendship" relationship between Little Rock and Volgograd under the auspices of SCI. These discussions are currently ongoing. Nevertheless, Volgograd representatives and UAMS officials representing Little Rock continue their plans to expand the affiliation between their cities to incorporate economic, artistic, and cultural exchanges. They most recently discussed these topics at the Sister Cities Annual Convention in Little Rock, Arkansas, at which AIHA hosted two panel discussions that included both Volgograd/Little Rock and Iowa/Stavropol partners.

## AIHA—Enabling Partnerships That Work

The AIHA partnership between VMA and UAMS was established in 1998. By this time, the informal, privately funded, and volunteer-driven affiliation between the two medical schools had been in place for four years. Faculty members of the two institutions had developed individual relationships built through numerous exchanges and the establishment in 1995 at VMA of a Department of Family Practice and residency program modeled on UAMS practices.

By 1997, VMA had also identified another major area of concern in Volgograd—and the entire Russian Federation—tuberculosis (TB). The disease has in recent years become epidemic in regions of Russia and other Eastern European countries as new drug-resistant forms of the virus evolve in patients who do

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not have access to the costly drugs that can treat their infections. In the summer of 1997, faculty and administrators from VMA visited the TB laboratory of Dr. Joseph Bates, professor of medicine at UAMS and director of medical services at the VA Medical Center in Little Rock. Dr. Bates' lab has done groundbreaking research within the last decade that helped pioneer the DNA "fingerprinting" of TB (see "Summer Internship With AIHA Little Rock Partners: Learning the Structure of a TB Control Program," page 50). The Volgograd doctors, impressed with what they saw, expressed much interest in importing Dr. Bates' methods to their own TB labs. Thus the ground was laid for a specific project-centered AIHA partnership between Volgograd and Little Rock that complemented larger USAID and other donor initiatives in the Russian Federation that are funding TB control programs. In 1998, AIHA funding for UAMS-led improvements in the treatment and control of TB in Volgograd began.

Wohlleb emphasizes the importance of the pre-existing structural framework and relationships that facilitated UAMS's AIHA partnership: "It's been enormously helpful to have in place a structure, and more critically, a trust between individuals and among groups," he says. "That can take years to build. If you already have that, you can really go to work." Wohlleb adds that cultural differences can often lead to communication difficulties among people unfamiliar with one another. "We find that US and Russian citizens don't think the same, so we often make assumptions that turn out to be wrong, or behavior occurs that is totally unexpected. Those things can set you back sometimes. That's why it helps to have a Sister Cities or any relationship in place beforehand—having spent hours, days, months, years together, learning about one another and establishing that trust. Then you can have a range of expectations that usually will be met."

Wohlleb explains that SCI's policy of requiring sanction from local officials in each involved city or state before formalizing international relationships helps assure cooperation and assistance from important government officials. "With official sanction, more resources are at your disposal," he says. "For example, when we go to Volgograd, we are provided with a vehicle and driver.

Latessa agrees. "Working through officially sanctioned organizations and institutions is extremely important in Russia. Establishing relationships with them takes time. Because of previous work done by our Sister City and Sister State people, it made it much easier to build on relationships with top officials like Nikolai Shibkov, minister of health of Stavropol Krai and head of the Stavropol Krai Healthcare Department, as well as with the political administration. Those relationships came about as quickly as they did because of what had been in place already."

SCI's official affiliation process also helps democratize participation in partnerships by involving local governments—entities close to ordinary citizens—and the media, voluntary, and educational institutions that operate on local levels. Support from SCI includes technical assistance, cross-cultural exchange expertise, fundraising assistance, access to leading organizations that also support international exchange and development, and grant eligibility.

AIHA's nine partnerships with Sister City/State status have helped facilitate and enhance partnerships by providing a foundation of trust and a history of international experience and support on which to build. Their work through SCI has in many ways paved the road to the successes they have realized with the help of AIHA funding and support. "You can never build too many bridges," comments Latessa. "When you're doing this type of work, any opportunity to make connections and share experiences can help further your mission."

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