

Sowing the Seeds of Change in Iowa

By Joanne Neuber

Iowa conference site has deep roots in US-Russia cooperation

In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, a family in America's heartland received a visit from the unlikeliest of diplomats - the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev. This cross-cultural meeting at a farm in Coon Rapids, Iowa laid the groundwork for over three decades of cooperation between Russia and Iowa - where AIHA's NIS conference will be held in October.

"Khrushchev was very interested in my father's innovations in seed production," recalls Steve Garst, son of the late Roswell Garst - a native of Coon Rapids, and a producer of the hybrid seed in the 1930s that revolutionized American seed practices and improved crop yields. Khrushchev, a proponent of Soviet agrarian reforms, wanted to produce "an Iowa cornbelt" in the agrarian regions of the Soviet Union to alleviate the numerous and widespread famines that plagued the Soviet Union after World War II.

Just one year after Khrushchev's historic visit to the American heartland, Roswell Garst and John Chrystal, a nephew of Garst, traveled to Moscow and Stavropol, in the North Caucasus region of southwestern Russia, to discuss the possibility for collaboration among the farming communities in Russia and Iowa.

"We gave agricultural machinery, spare parts and corn seed to farmers in Stavropol," recalls Chrystal, who continues to travel to the NIS an average of four times a year to promote advances in agriculture and trade with the United States.

Chrystal's pioneering endeavor, which prompted the exchange of farmers from Des Moines and Stavropol, has planted many seeds between Iowa and Stavropol Krai. One major outgrowth of Chrystal's visit was Iowa Governor Terry Branstad's 1988 signing of America's first sister state relationship with the Soviet Union, which is based on the concept of sister cities.

"These exchanges have been beneficial to both states," Branstad told CommonHealth in 1994. "I look forward to my next trip to Stavropol to see all the changes brought about by the project."

The Stavropol-Iowa Sister State initiative draws on the expertise of hundreds of citizens, governmental and private organizations from across Iowa and Stavropol Krai, promoting cross-cultural exchange programs in agriculture, business, culture, education, media, medicine, law and government.

"Iowans have a strong, family-like feeling for our friends in Stavropol... and that is what makes our volunteer, people-to-people exchange with Stavropol so unique," notes Ann Schodde, executive director of the Iowa Council for International Understanding in Des Moines.

The AIHA hospital partnership initiative began in 1992 between Stavropol Regional Hospital and City Hospital No. 4 and the Iowa Hospital Association. More than 100 medical personnel from Iowa and Stavropol have donated over 23,000 hours of medical training to promote advances in health care throughout the Stavropol region. Additionally, the Des Moines-Stavropol sister cities chapter has offered ongoing assistance to the Stavropol-Iowa hospital partnership in locating Iowan host families to accommodate Stavropol medical teams. Statewide donations of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies are collected by Iowan

volunteers and shipped to partnership and other krai hospitals, including the Budennovsk Hospital, which was badly damaged during Russian-Chechen fighting in 1995.

"It's amazing how much voluntary activity we've received from Iowans," says hospital partner coordinator Phil Latessa, who is also president of the Iowa Research and Education Foundation, part of the Association of Iowa Hospitals and Health Systems. "And that is a new concept which we are trying to introduce to our partners in Stavropol," he adds, noting the potential cost-saving measures that Stavropol hospitals can yield through the creation of various volunteer programs.

The more than 20 Stavropol-Iowa Sister State programs also promote economic gains in each region through in-state spending and visits, according to Sarah Lande, executive director of Iowa Sister States in Des Moines. For example, in 1995, visitor spending in Iowa from the Stavropol project added up to \$250,000. Stavropol reports a 50-fold increase from \$714,000 to \$26 million in trade with the US, thanks in part to the efforts of the Sister States Committee in Iowa.

One of the greatest developments is the increased level of communication and understanding that the program fosters through electronic mail services and the Sister State's World Wide Web site.

"It really revolutionized the way we communicate, and showed people that they can make a difference in their own life and have impact on the governance in their krai"" through increased contact with officials, says Jane VanVoorhis, a volunteer and director of international programs at the University of Iowa.

"From school children to doctors to government people - many more Iowans now have a greater understanding of Stavropol," adds Lande. "And they will probably be more successful in their endeavors with Russia because of this understanding."