Way to Home: Profile of a Shelter for Children in Crisis

BY SUZANNE E. GRINNAN

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Photo: Suzanne E. Grinnan.

Way to Home shelter offers children who find themselves in crisis a safe place to heal, a place that teaches respect and responsibility.

Standing in a bucolic setting that belies its proximity to a busy Moscow street, the red brick Way to Home shelter is surrounded by well-tended gardens, playground equipment, and trees. Opened in October 1992, this refuge for children in crisis is the city's oldest shelter. Comprised of only 1,000 square meters, the shelter's artwork-lined hallways lead to classrooms, dorms, a dining area, and medical and psychological facilities, not to mention a library, art room, gymnasium, and playroom for young children.

Way to Home houses children aged 2 to 18 for anywhere from a few weeks to five years. Able to accommodate up to 40 children at any given time, 80 children pass through its doors during a one-year period; usually 60 percent of them are boys. The 40-member staff is comprised of 30 full-time and 10 part-time workers, in addition to approximately five volunteers. This cadre of doctors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses—in addition to administrative and support personnel—attend to children who find themselves in crisis in Moscow, although they might be from any former Soviet region. More often than not, they are social orphans, either placed here by parents no longer able to care for them or found by police roaming the streets. While some have run away from dysfunctional living situations, many have lost their home due to alcoholic or incarcerated parent(s)'s actions.

Way to Home's philosophy is found in its name; it's not a permanent place to reside, but a safe and comfortable place to stay on your way home. "We believe that a child needs a home and, whenever possible, should eventually be able to return to that home. Our first goal is to assist families by eliminating the crisis situation that brought their child here," says Sapar Kulianov,

the 49-year-old director and founder of the shelter. To that end, the shelter works with families to facilitate change, by providing medical assistance or helping a parent overcome a drinking problem, for example. As Kulianov explains, "no matter what kind of parent(s) we face, we just see them as the mother and father of the child; we don't judge them. And as long as there are some signs of love between the family members, we try to restore this relationship." When that doesn't work, Way to Home works to find adoptive or foster care settings for the child. In any scenario, rehabilitation is part of the process.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation comes in many forms—medical, psychological, educational, social, and legal. While the first four types concern the child's stay within the shelter, legal rehabilitation is aimed at restoring the external rights of a child, such as providing them with identity papers and residency documents.

When a child is first brought to the shelter, they are quarantined for three weeks in a special ward that accommodates up to seven children. During this time their health is evaluated and they are screened for TB and other infectious diseases. Infected children are hospitalized until they are well; those considered healthy or treatable become a member of the shelter's community and sleep in dorm rooms segregated by gender and age.

School-aged children are then screened to determine educational level. "A child's education occupies a very important place in our program," says Kulianov. "Teachers test each child to determine how many years of schooling he or she has had and, during the first few weeks, instruction is carried out here in our classrooms while competency is ascertained. If it turns out that the child is academically in good standing, he or she attends school in the community. If there are serious academic problems, the child remains here for remedial lessons. For example, we may have a 13-year-old who has never attended school and so our task is to carry out a program that encompasses several grades within one year." In addition to traditional lessons, the shelter also provides for special instruction, such as speech therapy.

Kulianov explains the daily routine of the children: "At 7:00 the children wake up each day, wash their face, clean their teeth, and have breakfast. Older children go to school, while preschoolers go to a play room. All the children have a lunch together, then the older ones fulfill their homework assignments. Afternoons and evenings afford leisure time spent drawing, listening to music, playing sports, and spending time alone or with friends. Depending on their age, the children go to sleep between 21:00 and 23:00. On the weekends, they often go to museums, theaters, Internet cafes, and public performances, so they may actually be exposed to more cultural activities than most Muscovite children." Summer months are spent at a former "Pioneer" camp outside of Moscow while repairs and rehabilitations are made to the shelter.

Photo: Suzanne E. Grinnan.

Shelter Director Sapar Kulianov takes a personal interest in each child. A 1983 graduate of Moscow State University in the name of Lomonosov, the former physicist worked for eight years at the Central Research Institute in Radio Industry while spending time in the summer tutoring children at Pioneer Camps. This experience, which made him realize that he wanted to work with children and help them, ultimately led to his founding Way to Home.

Speaking to the rights of children, Kulianov is passionate and has often placed himself at risk with the law to protect those who find their way to his shelter. He is particularly sensitive to the protection of rights and interests of children who have found themselves without the trusteeship of parents. Kulianov believes it is his duty to look after these children and does not approve of authorities moving a child from one institution to another. In one instance, the authorities decided to remove a child and bring him to another institution, but as Kulianov explains it he "regard[s] the condition of a child higher than the ruling of an agency. We believe they made a wrong decision and that it is senseless to take him from a place he knows and people he trusts only to place him in another institution. It is not right to

Left: For those children who cannot be mainstreamed into a local school, education is provided in colorful classrooms. Right: The blackboard in Sapar Kulianov's office is illustrated in detail with his vision of a flexible, comprehensive social service system.

traumatize a child this way." Readily able to quote Russian laws pertaining to child welfare, Kulianov often finds himself defending the rights of his wards in court.

"Outsiders often regard these children as criminals, but after spending time with them their attitudes change and they come to realize that they are kind, gentle, have feelings, and are sociable. And as human beings, each child has a right to a home," says Kulianov. Under the current system, which is similar to that found during Communist rule, every citizen has the right to a domicile and parents cannot trade or sell that right of their child. Any transaction involving the sale of an apartment or house must be approved by the appropriate body, which is charged with making sure that the sale will not displace a child. In reality, however, many children fall through the cracks and irresponsible parents often sell domicile rights for a drink or drug fix. As Kulianov explains, "In order to restore the right of a child to a domicile, we take the case to court and start the appropriate legal proceedings on behalf of the child and sometimes his or her family. The court most often rules in the child's favor."

According to Kulianov, most of the children who come to the shelter have experienced some form of physical violence and are 'socially retarded.' "About 50 percent of the children speak about their abuse freely and another 30 percent are found to have experienced abuse during psychological evaluations," he says, clarifying that "by violence, we include a broad spectrum of actions." This, along with substandard living conditions often leads to poor socialization skills. "These children have often grown up in homes where their mother, father, and grandparents have led very bad lives in very poor conditions. Alcoholism, criminal deviations, theft, and filth are all part of their environment. And, of course, a child who grows up in theses conditions regards them as normal. While they are with us, we seek to show them another way of life," he explains.

The shelter works to socially rehabilitate the youth by encouraging personal responsibility through a reward and privilege system. When a child first arrives "he or she is unaware of what it means to have a 'normal' life, but, with time, the child starts to understand that the shelter's way of life is much better than what was previously experienced. The child also learns that he or she is entitled to some basic human rights: shelter, food, and respect. At the same time, the child learns that to be a part of the community, he or she must live by our rules, such as no smoking, stealing, using abusive language, or hurting others," says Kulianov.

Each child must accept the rules of the shelter. "They are not forced to accept them," Kulianov explains, "Staying here is free and voluntary. A child is never locked in his or her room." Discipline is carried out judiciously and when a child does something wrong, he or she is given a full explanation as to why an action was inappropriate. Although an infrequent occurrence, children who cannot abide by the rules must leave. "There are cases where the former way of life dominates, and the child smokes, sniffs glue, uses minor narcotics, or runs away from this place. Some come back, some accept our rules, others do not, but ultimately each year only about two or three leave because of noncompliance," says Kulianov.

Children within the shelter work up through three degrees of seniority, a process which gives them respect and builds independence. For a child to occupy a position of seniority, he or she must first have good marks in school. Seniority has privileges,

This is just one of Kulianov's ideas about child welfare reform. His scheme for how the social welfare system should be structured is diagrammed on the large blackboard that occupies one wall of his office. He envisions an integrated, comprehensive system that would provide for familial rehabilitation and the social protection of children, taking into account the different needs of individuals. Kulianov understands that "there are many problems to be addressed, many unique circumstances, families often need long-term help, and some problems cannot be solved in one and the same place." His system includes provisions for those who need medical, psychological, and occupational help, as well as for victims of abuse, single mothers, and the elderly.

Like most social institutions, Way to Home's acute problem is funding, but Kulianov does not seem discouraged by this monetary lack and is establishing two foundations—one in Philadelphia and one in Germany—to pursue grants and other funding opportunities. He also plans to showcase their ideas on the Internet. As he explains, "Fifty percent of our budget is received from the government for food, medication, and wages . . . the rest comes from donations. Clothing, footwear, toys . . . these are all donations." In the short term, Kulianov has mapped out a development project and hopes to raise funds to cover the cost of moving Way to Home to a larger location, one that manifests his vision and will be a model for others to follow. An architect has drawn plans to renovate an old country estate into a multifunctional center that would accommodate the needs of various populations and familial groups.

Included in his vision is a "hotel" for adolescents, where those between the ages of 15 and 23 can live, study, and/or receive occupational training. "By law, the government takes care of a child up to the age of 23, but they don't have facilities dedicated to such services," he explains. "I saw such facilities functioning in Romania and it was remarkable. We have a 19-year-old boy who now lives in our shelter and it's difficult for him because children of this age have different needs than younger ones. We also need shelters for mothers and children, especially those who were abused by the father. In many cases, the mother drops her children off, but adaptation would be much better if the mother and child could work through the crisis together. In the future I'd also like to have a section where we can help disabled adults and old men—maybe a program where the young assist the old." Until that time, Kulianov and his staff will address the needs of one child at a time and help them find their way home. ■

Photos: Suzanne E. Grinnan

The walls of the shelter are lined with paintings done by children.

such as later bed times, but with these privileges comes responsibility. For instance, the older children must always set a good example for the younger ones and they must help clean the shelter and take care of the younger children. That means that if a younger child scrawls on a wall or breaks something, for instance, the senior child must explain why the action is wrong and then help the child correct the mistake. This may entail washing a wall or repairing a broken object. Senior children are also eligible to work for money by cleaning the shelter and its environs. They are paid twice a month for their work. "It's a small amount," Kulianov explains, "but enough to buy candies and other small treats. Also, when something is broken that cannot be repaired, the child can use their savings or collect money from others to replace the object."

Kulianov admits that it is difficult to keep tabs on children after they leave the shelter. The staff is most successful at tracking those children who are eventually adopted into families or placed in foster or group home settings. These children often come back as visitors, telephone the shelter, or keep in touch some other way.

Visions for the Future

Speaking about foster care and adoption, Kulianov says he would like to see a school started for foster parents. The training would include instruction and practical skills-building in child-rearing and family dynamics, as well as time spent working within the shelter to understand the realities of the child and build a trusting relationship prior to cohabitation.

What Dreams May Become: Trafficked Women and Their Resultant Health Issues

BY MARINA PISKLAKOVA AND ANDREI SINELNIKOV

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Today, 10 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians still dream of traveling abroad and seeing the world. This dream emerged in response to the restrictions of Soviet times when only a small faction of the citizenry—and only those who had joined the communist party—had the opportunity to travel outside the country. The lucky few who did brought home fairy-tale-like stories of wealth and plenty that filtered through the iron curtain where Soviet teenagers traded on the black market for American blue jeans—the symbol of a better life. In the 1980s, Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms brought democratic change and an expanded openness, increasing attraction to the previously "forbidden fruits" of the West, while economic collapse put material goods—like washing machines and refrigerators—out of the reach of many families. Still, the dream of the West survives, even as the Soviet Union has collapsed.

In the past decade, the Russian mass media has inundated consumers with Western soap operas and advertisements filled with happy housewives fluttering between luxurious dwellings, glamorous parties, and high-priced beauty salons. The cultural impact of globalization sustains the myth that the West is a sacred land of joy and pleasure, but the iron curtain has been replaced with an economic curtain, one that still excludes many Russians from the West. This article looks at how the economic plight of many girls and women leads them into the dangerous world of trafficking and explores the resultant health consequences. While it focuses on Russia, much of this holds true for any of the Newly Independent States (NIS) or countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Lure of Opportunities Abroad

For a new generation of Russia youth, and particularly for young women, travel abroad remains an unattainable dream. At the same time, economic transition has shattered many women's hopes for gainful and fulfilling employment in contemporary Russia. According to the National Report on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) Implementation, women make up more than 70 percent of the unemployed in Russia.[1] Not surprisingly, parents, hoping that their children will have more chances in a Western country, not only support but encourage them to seek jobs or marriages abroad. For some women—especially those caught in the trap of domestic violence or the economic responsibility of single parenthood—work abroad is a matter of survival. Many of these women believe that a job "overseas" will allow them to remit money home and build a better life for their children. Surveying the grim employment opportunities where they live only makes the lure of work abroad more potent.

Photo: Suzanne E. Grinnan.

While many girls fantasize about being a princess when they grow up—as witnessed in this drawing by a homeless girl at the Way to Home shelter in Moscow—few realize such a dream. Unrealistic ideas about foreign places and possibilities often make young women vulnerable to promises of golden opportunities by traffickers.

Job advertisements in Russian newspapers and magazines that target women and girls read as invitations to a new, bright world. They whisper magic promises like "you can have a well-paid job," "you will see the world," and "maybe you will find a husband." Desperation to find a job and myths about life in other countries, combined with a lack of alternative opportunities, makes it possible for traffickers—those who make a prof-