



The Russian Bear and the Eagle Scout

Bridging Cultural Divides with Slides and Swings

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The Eagle Scout Magazine
Spring 2010

Mere numbers don't do justice to the average Eagle Scout service project. But Alex Griffith's project—building a playground last August at the Russian hospital where he'd been adopted—was anything but ordinary. In his case, numbers help tell the story.

Just consider these numbers: Alex's volunteers—all 634 of them—came from 78 cities, 23 states, and 5 countries. They raised \$62,856 and invested at least 1,867 hours in the project on top of the 838 hours Alex spent. Six people, including Alex and his father, spent \$12,000 of their own money to travel from Jarrettsville, Maryland, to Krasnoyarsk, Russia, to assemble the playground's 3,004 individual parts. Since then, at least 120 million people have learned Alex's story through more than 60 newspaper, magazine, and television reports.

Perhaps the story's most important number, however, is 20—as in Children's Hospital #20, where Alex spent most of his first year. Born prematurely, Alex was living there in 1994, malnourished and dealing with rickets and mild cerebral palsy when Dwight and Jenny Griffith first encountered him. (He would eventually overcome those health problems, but he still struggles with attention deficit disorder and impulse control.)

The genesis of a project

Alex's project began with a photo album. Looking at photos of his early life, he could see that the hospital's playground consisted of a single swing and a mud-filled sand pit—hardly adequate for a facility serving more than 400 children. So he decided to

refurbish the playground as his Eagle project and set about figuring out how to make that happen.

Some adults doubted whether Alex could pull off the project, but Scoutmaster Dave Kraft was not among them. “From the moment the idea was conceived, I told him if he went to Russia for an Eagle project then I would be right with him,” Kraft said.

After unsuccessfully emailing various schools, churches, and other organizations in Krasnoyarsk, Alex contacted Linda Perilstein, the executive director of his adoption agency, the Cradle of Hope Adoption Center in Silver Spring, Md. She put him in touch with a group called Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoptions, which in turn connected him with OrphanAct, a Rotary International program that supports orphanages, children’s shelters, and related facilities around the world. Through OrphanAct, Alex found Tatiana Khegay, president of the Krasnoyarsk-Yenisei Rotary Club, who would become his eyes, ears, hands, and feet on the ground in Russia for the next two years.

Bigger and better

When Alex had talked with Linda Perilstein, she’d made a key suggestion: Instead of refurbishing the old playground, why not build a new one from scratch? Alex thought that made sense, so he set about identifying a vendor for the sort of colorful modern play system found in many suburban schoolyards and parks.

He found a vendor, but there was just one problem: Khegay told him the company would probably have trouble clearing Russian customs—an issue few Eagle Scout candidates have to worry about. He eventually went with another vendor, Playworld Systems in Lewisburg, Pa. Committed to the project from the start, Playworld gave Alex a discount and maintained it through two companywide price increases.

Playworld builds custom-designed playground systems, so Alex had complete artistic license. “I got to pick out every component, the coloring, and the custom graphic panels, which were a bear and eagle,” he said.

The Russian bear and American eagle would symbolize international friendship, as would the playground’s colors—red, white, and blue being the colors of both the U.S. and Russian flags.

That wasn’t the only symbolism Alex would incorporate in the project. All the photos of Russian playgrounds he’d seen showed carvings of animals or folklore characters, so Alex decided to add totem poles of a bear and an eagle at his playground’s entrance.

Remembering some totem poles he’d seen at a county fair, Alex tracked down the carver, Randy Boni from Parrottsville, Tenn. Boni quickly signed on to the project—and recruited his friend, Rick Pratt from Corfu, N.Y., to help. In September 2008, the two artists converged in Maryland to carve Alex’s totem poles from a 20-foot Alaskan cedar log that had arrived via Canada.

Divide and conquer

Of course, Alex had to do a lot more than design a playground and recruit a couple of carvers. He also had to raise money to pay for the playground, learn how to assemble it, and figure out how to transport it halfway around the world.

Much of the money for the project was raised by the members of Alex's troop, Troop 809, who sold thousands of candy bars and hundreds of pounds of pit beef, ham, and turkey at local festivals. Several Rotary Clubs also pitched in, most notably the Bel Air and Townsontowne clubs from Maryland. Neil Young from the Townsontowne group even secured a matching grant from the Rotary Foundation.

For all the other tasks, Alex recruited crews that focused on specific aspects of the project. They included the quality check and pre-assembly crew, the shipping and crating crew, the safety and security crew, and the installation crew—the four Scouts and two Scouters who would eventually travel to Russia. Other volunteers handled photography, publicity, and the project's website.

Alex overcame his last big planning hurdle when David Rice, CEO of Baltimore-based Dartrains Inc. signed on to coordinate the logistics of shipping the playground, totem poles, and other materials to Russia. Rice spent five months on the project and didn't charge a dime for his services. He even showed up to help load the shipping container.

On to Russia

The playground components, tools, and other supplies arrived in Krasnoyarsk on July 17, 2009. Twelve days later, Alex and his father left for Russia, along with Scoutmaster Dave Kraft—just as he'd promised—and Scouts Zach Kraft, Christian Posko, and Shane Rymer. After touring Moscow, the group traveled to Krasnoyarsk, where they would be staying with host Rotary families.

On August 3, construction began, with the American Scouts working side by side with Russian volunteers, many of them members of Rotaract, Rotary's young-adult arm. Like most Eagle Scout projects, things didn't go exactly as planned. The crew was expecting to have a grader to prepare the site and an auger to dig holes, but neither was available. They couldn't get the lumber they'd expected to use for borders, and many of their hand tools had mysteriously disappeared during transport.

But for every problem, they encountered a matching blessing. The first day, for example, a teenager named Victor, who was awaiting major surgery in the hospital, saw what was happening, came outside, picked up a shovel, and worked the rest of the day. His doctor agreed to postpone his surgery until the day the Americans went home.

And then there was the language barrier. Although the Americans had translators to work with, they still faced challenges at the worksite, at the hardware store, and at their host homes. "I was stuck at home with the dad who didn't speak a word of English," Alex said. "Somehow we were able to have a conversation. It was awesome."

The grandest of openings

As quickly as the Scouts installed components of the playground, neighborhood children started playing on them. It wasn't until August 11, however, that the playground was finished. The next day—Alex's 16th birthday—would be the grand opening.

CNN and nine Russian television stations were on hand for the occasion, along with dozens of volunteers and hundreds of neighbors. A children's choir sang, church bells rang, and there were speeches by Khegay, the deputy mayor, the hospital administrator, and Alex.

In a blog entry, Dwight Griffith described what happened next: "This was followed by the crowd singing 'Happy Birthday' to Alex, the cutting of the ribbon, and tons of kids rushing the playground while the choir sang the Beatles song 'Yesterday.'" It was mayhem. The children were screaming and shouting with delight running from one component to another. We ran around taking pictures and trying to record the sounds of the children playing—sounds we will never forget."

Two days later, the travel crew began their long journey home. Somewhere over Siberia, Alex had his Scoutmaster conference for the Eagle Scout Award. A few days later, he returned to North Hartford High School to begin the 10th grade.

Building Bridges (sidebar)

Alex set out to build a playground, but he ended up building bridges of friendship between Russia and America. Russians often approached the Americans, sometimes with tears in their eyes to thank them. Leftover money from Alex's project will help fund two additional playgrounds in Russia, one at a tuberculosis hospital and one at a hospital for the mentally ill. On the day of the grand opening, Christian Posko and Zach Kraft promised to return to Krasnoyarsk as adults to refurbish the children's hospital.

When they arrive, they may have Russian Scouts to help them. A year ago, no one in Krasnoyarsk knew what Scouting was; now, everyone does. Khegay's son, Max, even pledged to start a Cub Scout pack when his son gets old enough in a few years.

And then there are the emails Alex has gotten from around the world. "I have received letters and emails from Scouts who now are planning bigger and more meaningful projects and from adopted kids who now want to go back and do something for their communities," Alex said.

Perhaps the most touching message, however, had nothing to do with Scouting or playgrounds or adoption. It came from a father who'd been struggling with his son's recent ADHD diagnosis. "Reading that you also have ADHD and what you were able to do made something in me shift from despair to hope just now," the man wrote. "Tears are running down my face as I write this; thank you for what you did. You not only helped those children but gave me a glimmer of the possibilities of my son's future. Thank you and God bless you."

It's safe to say that He already has.

Setting the Bar High (sidebar)

It probably goes without saying that Alex set a high standard for future Eagle projects in Troop 809. While other Scouts haven't (yet) planned such elaborate projects, Scoutmaster Dave Kraft has seen a difference. "Our Life Scouts are starting to look more at schools and churches and organizations that help children, and we are concentrating in these areas," he said.

Of course, Alex's project also demonstrated just how big an impact a single Scout can have, according to Kraft. "Not only has he affected the lives of us, living in Jarrettsville, but he has also affected the lives of so many around the world with his Eagle project," Kraft said. "Alex has proven himself a true representative of the values instilled by the Boy Scouts of America and has passed those qualities on to others around the world."