Support for army conscripts

No witnesses..?

By Patricia Stewart; information from counsellors and online news coverage in Kazan and Irkutsk

Two counsellors who run an advice service for conscientious objectors, serving conscripts, and their families, recently gave their support to the mother of a young man who had voluntarily enlisted in the army. His name is Artyom; he is 18 years old.

One day his mother, a single mother with two other children, got a visit from some officials. They announced that her son was lying in an army hospital in Chita, more than two thousand miles away from home (and not too far from Mongolia) — and that he had been there for nearly a week. He had a broken leg and ribs, fractured vertebrae and a fractured skull. While he was on his way to his first post, his comrades-in-arms threw him off the train.

The human rights workers helped his mother find money for the trip to Chita. They found her a reliable attorney, who filed subpoenas demanding that the other soldiers in the unit's assigned car be questioned.

Artyom does not remember exactly what happened. Savage bullying is a fact of life in the Russian army; attorneys and rights workers find it hard to pin the army down on the issue. It was the army's contention that, in this case, there were no witnesses and, since there were no witnesses, the boy probably jumped, doubtless to avoid his duties. One officer remarked that Artyom was lucky not to be tried for desertion.

The rights workers secured a referral to a rehabilitation center in Moscow and helped Artyom get demobilized. On his behalf, they pursued claims for insurance compensation and a disability allowance.

It is difficult for disabled Russian veterans to collect disability payments, because the government has outsourced insurance for conscripts. That is, the government is gifting a private company with 140,000 new customers every year. The company requires that a disabled veteran collect his benefit checks at the location where he was posted, which may be even more than two thousand miles away from home.

Artyom's injuries have left him with impaired ability to concentrate and make decisions. It will be hard for him to reapply every year as is also required. Some disabled veterans simply give up their benefits because it is so hard to comply with the insurance company's regulations.

One unexpected outcome of this sad story is that Artyom's mother has been back in touch with the counsellors. She wants to train as a volunteer to help them help other parents and their sons.

It is always of interest to rights workers how a soldier's mother finds them. When they ask, the first response is often “The Lord helped me”; in point of fact, this usually means that He guided her to the internet...

The advice service, located in Tatarstan, is run by volunteers. FHM supports operating costs as needed.
Educating orphans

Emotions and Feelings at the English Club
By Susan Clarkson

The best way to understand the need for and the spirit of our project partners is to visit them. These are my reflections on a couple of hours spent with some young Russians in Moscow.

The English Club is part of a larger project called ‘Big Change’ which works in Moscow to support the educational needs of young people who were or still are in care, either in foster homes or institutions. Institutionalised children receive almost no education, have no state support once they age-out at 16, and do not have the skills to support themselves. Friends House Moscow has partnered with Big Change for 20 years and at present supports the work of the English Club.

Four FHM Board members attended a session of the English Club. These sessions are informal explorations of English vocabulary and usage employing various visual aids and games.

Each session has a theme, and the one this time was ‘Emotions and Feelings’. The students worked together to look at pictures and say which emotions were depicted. They then made up phrases about their own feelings at the time and asked each other questions about how they were feeling. They had different levels of understanding and were of varying ages. However each student was able, with encouragement from Olga the teacher, to build up sentences.

As visitors, we wondered if our presence might be intimidating, but it wasn’t at all. The atmosphere was very relaxed and some of the less shy students began asking us questions about ourselves and how we were feeling. Soon the room was full of excited chatter as the students tried out their English skills. Some of the younger ones were a bit shy but I loved the way most of the young people plunged enthusiastically into trying out their language skills.

Alternatives to Violence Project
New grants for AVP Moscow

After a couple of years with little activity, we are pleased to report that the AVP group in Moscow is back in action.

There are plans to hold a small series one-day workshops, as an opportunity for facilitators to refresh and renew their skills. A grant from FHM will pay for online advertising of these events.

and Ukraine

A grant for AVP work in Ukraine will pay running costs for two series of workshops:
- for young people (soldiers and juvenile delinquents) with up to 100 participants, on how to cope with confrontational situations; and
- workshops for up to 300 social workers, school psychologists, and teachers on the principles of nonviolent relations.

Would you like someone to come and speak about FHM at your Meeting?

In the USA: email fhmsa@friendshousemoscow.org

In the UK and Europe: email fhmbc@friendshousemoscow.org
The internet: risks and opportunities

Keeping kids safe in Dzerzhinsk

A project called “Children and social networks: let's help young people to survive the internet” took place in Dzerzhinsk in spring 2018.

Children and teenagers can be particularly vulnerable when they use the internet. Risks include online bullying and depressive youth movements (sects and "death groups" which encourage suicide). The aim of the project was to share experience and spread systems for preventing harm from social networks.

One planned seminar on teaching methodology for school psychologists and teaching staff, on how to identify crisis situations in teenagers’ lives and how best to respond to them, was extended to a series of four because of the interest shown.

There were also training sessions for young people who volunteered to learn to teach their peers about safe, responsible internet use.

It became an extension of the earlier School Mediation project. Older pupils who had trained as mediators, and become activists and leaders within their schools, seized on the idea of encouraging their peers to use the internet safely. They talk to younger pupils about dangerous websites, protecting their personal data, and how to avoid intrusive or unpleasant online chat.

The project also offered psychological consultations with parents and children, including via the centre's “Telephone Hotline”. Nearly 70 adults made contact (over 7 months) regarding internet addiction and children’s psychological welfare.

Outreach on the internet

Russian speakers can now find out about Quakers in several different ways:
- Our own website quakers.ru carries many short articles as well as our online book library.
- The Russian language version of Wikipedia now has 103 articles about Quakers; 34 of these were translated by FHM.
- More than 30 Friends Journal videos on YouTube have been translated into Russian.
- There are active discussion groups on Facebook and the Russian social network vKontakte

Meet Kolya

Kolya was in a project for kids with special needs. When FHM visited Dzerzhinsk, he remembered one of us from two years ago and stepped right up to say hello and shake hands. His verbal abilities have greatly improved. His mother was very proud; we were very touched.

What does your donation buy?
Examples from recent projects.

$27 (£21) - phone, postage etc. for 6 months (school mediation project)

$450 (£360) - projector (children with special needs project)

$1,220 (£950) - programme coordination for 1 month (refugee school)

$1,370 (£1,050) - Quaker outreach website work for 1 month
The Refugee School in Moscow

"Listen not just to their words, but also to their hearts"

By Julie Harlow

The reasons why refugees flee their homeland are many, but whatever drives them, leaving is better than staying and sometimes it is a matter of life and death. In the new country, they sometimes face “migration jails” or “detention centers”.

The lucky ones find a loving, welcoming space like the Integration Center (the Refugee School) in Moscow: gentle, caring people with professional skills to help them adapt to their new life. Despite very limited resources, the coordinators and volunteers treat everyone with respect, encourage pride in their own identity, and do all they can to make life a bit easier for these newcomers.

Here are just two of the stories of people they help.

Anna, from the Congo, fled the violence of the war in her homeland where she had been raped by soldiers. She did not find out she was pregnant until she got to Moscow. The Center helped her with the paperwork to apply for legal status. This must be done at many different locations: at every office she had to retell the story, holding that child in her arms as she told it. This process goes on for years and the retelling of the story had a profound effect on the boy. Although 6 years old now, he still does not speak.

Several weeks ago, the Center coordinator Marina sat with 20-year-old Sandra from Syria. Through an interpreter, Sandra said, "Maybe I want to be an engineer. I had started studying that before."

However, as the conversation continued it was apparent that she had no real interest in being an engineer; it was simply a job that she could name. The Center staff pointed out that she had skills in the Arabic language and this could get her a very good paying job as a translator. Part of offering this direction was so that she could keep her Syrian identity and be proud of it. “It is important to understand each person so that you can guide them in the path that is right for them. We must listen not just to their words, but also to their hearts.”

FHM supports projects that promote peace and transform lives in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Join us in our work

Please donate to Friends House Moscow

Donate online at www.friendshousemoscow.org or send donations to:
In Europe:
Friends House Moscow
Unit 14451
PO Box 6945
London W1A 6US, U.K.

In North America:
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Donations to the U.S. address or online in US $ are tax-deductible on U.S. tax returns.

Can you volunteer to help?

Could you help publicise our work and raise funds? Email info@friendshousemoscow.org for details

Thank you!