Russian camps have strong art programs and a flair for making the most of resources, says Gwynn Powell. This doll, a gift she received from Russian campers, is made from cardboard tubes, hose and papier mâché and has a hand-sewn costume.

Gwynn Powell is a summer camp veteran. Starting at the age of 7, she progressed from camper to counselor to lifeguard to administrator of youth camps. But in the summer of 2005, something was different. Powell had to rely on her campers to help her figure out the most basic parts of camp life because for the first time, she was at a camp in Russia.

“They would come get me if they thought I was missing something fun,” says Powell, an assistant professor in the College of Education’s department of counseling and human development services. “They would come to my door and say ‘Poshli,’ which I later learned means ‘Come with me.’”

Powell, along with four students in recreation and leisure studies, pioneered UGA’s first study-abroad program in Russia by spending a month working as counselors at Camp Forest Fairytale and Camp Cooperator in the Mari El Republic. Though the language barrier was a challenge at first the Americans soon adapted, communicating with hand gestures and then comparing notes with each other.

“It was a strong bonding experience because we had to work together to figure things out,” says Ashley Jackson, a senior majoring in recreation and leisure studies. “It enhanced the experience.”

The language barrier wasn’t the only issue the Americans faced. Even before they endured the 11-hour flight to Moscow and the 16-hour train ride to the town of Yoshkar-Ola, they found that misperceptions are common.

“A lot of people believe that Russia is all ice and snow all the time, and bears wander the streets. It’s not like that at all,” says John Paul McNeal (MEd ’05), who postponed his graduation to participate in the program. “It’s a lot like Maine.”

Jackson’s mother at first urged her to go somewhere safer—London, for example. But Jackson, who wants to be a recreation therapist, was convinced that the opportunity to work with kids in another country was a perfect fit.

“The ability to do what you love on a study abroad trip is really a draw,” she says.

“Where we were in Russia, it couldn’t have been safer.”

And after the London bombings in summer 2005, her mother revised her opinion; earlier this year, she wrote a
Faculty member Gwynn Powell creates UGA’s first study abroad program in Russia and with a grant from UGA’s Office of Public Service and Outreach.

“I understand that their fear is real—it’s heartening to me that students are willing to go,” she says. “The effects of Cold War propaganda seem to lessen with each generation.”

That was the case with the Russian campers, aged 6 to 17, most of whom had never met an American. Instead of suspicion, Powell and her students were greeted with enthusiasm.

“The kids wanted to know everything about us,” says McNeal, who still gets emails and sometimes phone calls from Russia. “I felt a little like a rock star.”

The Americans shared games, using Twister and Uno to teach English vocabulary, as well as campfire cuisine— toasted marshmallows were a big hit. And they learned a lot from their Russian counterparts, whose lengthy tradition of summer camp includes a strong sense of community. McNeal experienced this first-hand when he overpacked for a hike.

When the campers realized that he was lagging behind, one by one they came and took items from his backpack. By the time they reached their destination, McNeal was carrying nothing.

“When you meet people face to face, you realize we’re all just people,” says Powell, who was recognized in February with the National Honor Award from the American Camp Association.

McNeal, who is now camp program manager at Camp Toccoa, agrees.

“Especially in a camp setting, kids are kids. They want to laugh and play,” he says. “That is universal.”

*For more information, please visit [www.uga.edu/russiacamps](http://www.uga.edu/russiacamps).*

Powell joins Russian campers for a game of Pioneer Ball, known at American camps as Newcombe. The game is similar to volleyball, but players catch and throw the ball instead of hitting it.

(left to right) Jenna Sutheimer, Ashley Jackson, Vanessa Grace and Gwynn Powell attended an orientation session in Moscow—where they visited St. Basil’s Cathedral—before heading to Camp Forest Fairytale and Camp Cooperator.