Camp Russia

Ashley Jackson’s mother calls her “Trailblazer Ashley” and that’s an apt description. Last summer, for example, she and three other students pioneered UGA’s first study-abroad program in Russia.

“I’d never been anywhere before,” Jackson said. “Apparently it is really strange to go to Russia for a first time abroad. It was a really big leap.”

Jackson, Jenna Sutheimer, Vanessa Grace, and John Paul McNeal — UGA students in recreation and leisure studies — spent a month as camp counselors in Russia’s Mari-El Republic. The experience was part of a course called “Field Studies in Recreation and Tourism” taught by Gwynn Powell, an assistant professor in education, and Nancy Bryant, former camp director. Powell developed the course so students could learn about camp tradition and youth development practices in Russia.

Armed with electronic translators, marshmallows, Laffy Taffy, and games like Uno, Twister and jacks, the students and their instructors flew to New York and then to Moscow for a few days of orientation and exposure to Russian culture. Next they took a 16-hour train ride to the city of Yoshkar-Ola, which is near the two summer camps where they worked.

“Initially, I thought we’d be helping with staff training,” Powell said. “What we discovered is that the Russians had a lot to teach us about staff training.”

Summer camp is a Russian tradition. During Soviet times nearly 95 percent of children went to camp. Nowadays, about half of all Russian children go to summer camp, compared to 12 percent of Americans.

The UGA students discovered that the Russian camps focused on nature and offered children more free time than American camps. They also had a chance to share American culture through games, sports, marshmallow roasts and even a Fourth of July celebration.

“Service learning allows me to help students really make connections between what they learn in the classroom and the real world,” Powell said.

Jackson and Sutheimer said that the language barrier was frustrating at times so they now are more sympathetic to non-English speakers. When it came time to head home, Jackson said they hated getting on that train. “We were tourists again,” she said.

“There are so many other places I want to see,” Sutheimer said. “But Russia is such a part of my heart now, I can’t imagine never going back.”

The course was a collaboration with Camp Counselors USA and Camp Counselors Russia and was supported in part by an IDEAS grant from the Office of the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach.

— Kathleen Cason

MORE INFO

about the 2006 program,
- www.uga.edu/russiacamps

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