On July 23rd, 2018, the 2018-2019 cohort of YEAR Program participants touched down in Washington, D.C. to commence their year in the United States. During their five-day arrival orientation in Washington, participants joined sessions and discussions about topics that would prepare them for the year ahead, including American culture, U.S. student and family life, setting goals, health and safety, and the U.S. higher education system. During the week, participants were introduced to the community service component of the YEAR Program through volunteering with Martha’s Market, a food access program which provides fresh produce at no cost across Washington, D.C. Such cultural activities as contra dancing at Glen Echo Park and touring the capital’s national monuments gave students an active, multifaceted introduction to their host country’s culture and history. Students also formed close bonds, which will allow them to support each other throughout the year ahead.
YEAR FAMILIES

Upon completion of the arrival orientation, YEAR students departed Washington, D.C. to begin a month-long homestay with American host families. This component of the YEAR Program allows students to form close ties with American families while beginning to adapt to the local culture. Upon arrival in their host communities, participants were met by their hosts and quickly began integrating into their host families’ daily lives. Students reflected fondly on their host family experiences:

“Meeting my host family was the scariest thing about the program. I was really worried about how they will accept me. I really wanted to become a part of their family and to create a strong bond that will not break even after I return to Russia. And after the time with them, I just understood that they gave me more that I could ever imagine. My host family and I are really the best match, we even think the same way! They did really become my family here, they are my everything, my friends, my support... I am sure that they have become part of my life forever!”

Irina, YEAR Student from Syktyvkar
College of Southern Idaho, ID

“I never expected I could meet someone so close to me on the other side of the ocean. But I did. I was a little bit scared at first because I had never lived in a host-family before. Now I wish we had more time together than just 3 weeks.”

Kristina, YEAR Student from Dubna
Valencia College, FL

“Two months ago, I didn’t understand the importance of living in a host family. Moreover - I was really nervous. But now I see that I was worried in vain. Thank you to my host parents for being so kind, open-minded and patient. Now I think I would like to host an exchange student too, because it’s a good opportunity for both sides to learn about culture, become more open-minded and make someone a little bit happier.”

Albina, YEAR Student from Nizhnevartovsk
Whatcom Community College, WA

“After] only five weeks, I have lots of experience and impressions thanks to my host family. Because of their care and attention, I love my life here, I love Laramie and even love its chilly and windy weather. With them I went on a road trip, slept in a tent and played golf for the first time, visited the most amazing zoo in Omaha, froze in the caves of South Dakota, felt totally overwhelmed with Mount Rushmore, admired the mountains of Colorado, petted stingrays and watched hummingbirds, and first rode on the carousel. I learned from my hosts that we all are just people... the main core of us is the same. We all are made from hopes and feeling, love and kindness, ideas and desires. My host family gave me an awesome start in my American life.”

Viktoriia, YEAR Student from Balashikha
University of Wyoming, WY

“Every moment I spent with [my host family] was converted into an unforgettable experience. The interesting thing is we have not done anything unusual: we haven’t visited a Broadway show in NYC, we haven’t swum in the ocean, we haven’t even had a trailer trip around the USA; but we have visited our grandparents up north, we had wonderful trips around the Wisconsin area and we had a lot of game nights (the best thing ever). I always remember that this life is not about places you visit, but about people you meet.”

Milena, YEAR Student from Voronezh
Northcentral Technical College, WI

“My experience with the host family is unforgettable and it is not the end. There still will be dinners, communication, jokes, travelling, spending time together, support, and a lot of other things which we will do together. And I am so grateful that I am here exactly with these people, who make my YEAR memorable every day!”

Viktoriya, YEAR Student from Sharypovo
Neosho County Community College, KS

“I knew that there would be some differences between a Russian and American household that I would have to experience. But I never thought that I’ll learn that Russians and Americans are way more similar than they are different. And it’s not always about the way of living as such; it’s mostly about our values, dreams and view upon life, and the things we consider important. It might seem hard to believe, but this time spent with my host family made me realize that it would actually take some time to find points where Russians and Americans differ radically.”

Angelina, YEAR Student from Novosibirsk
University of Minnesota - Minneapolis, MN

“Two months ago, I didn’t understand the importance of living in a host family. Moreover - I was really nervous. But now I see that I was worried in vain. Thank you to my host parents for being so kind, open-minded and patient. Now I think I would like to host an exchange student too, because it’s a good opportunity for both sides to learn about culture, become more open-minded and make someone a little bit happier.”

Albina, YEAR Student from Nizhnevartovsk
Whatcom Community College, WA
YEAR STUDENTS ARRIVE ON CAMPUS

Following the homestay experience, YEAR students arrived at twenty-three different host institutions across the United States. There, they moved into their dormitories with the help of host families and host institution coordinators and were provided with an orientation and welcome activities on campus before the academic year began. As students began acclimating to their new environment, they described their first impressions of their host institutions and communities:

“Northwest is like a small world which lives its own life...there are excellent laboratories for the scientific researches, a professional photo studio, a stage like in the theatre, well-equipped computer classes, a great library database and a lot of other facilities... I have never had so many opportunities for self-development at the same time.”

Maria, YEAR Student from Yekaterinburg
Northwest College, WY

“I like my experience [in Alma] because I grew up in a big city and it’s very unusual for me to live in such a tiny city. But it’s new challenge, that’s why I like it. I wish I will have such great challenges during my whole life.”

Nino, YEAR Student from Moscow
Alma College, MI

“The thing I like about my college is that there is a very close-knit community. Everybody knows each other, and it helped me a lot, especially at the beginning. I just know that if I need something there always will be someone to help me.”

Iuliia, YEAR Student from Saratov
Otero Junior College, CO

“One of my favorite parts of the education is how connected the knowledge in all the subjects I’ve chosen is... and how they complement knowledge which I’ve got in Russia... But it is not only about classes. It is about people who surround me here. People who make me better version of myself. I befriended people from the whole world; we share our view on the world, ideas and plans. We’re spending an amazing time together.”

Evgeniia, YEAR Student from Saratov
Northampton Community College, PA

“If you ask me about my favorite thing in my university, I will definitely say PEOPLE. Classmates, roommate, suitemates, international students, professors and the amazing rowing crew. All of them are open-minded, helpful, active and ambitious, just like me. They are all unique and have different interests but the same values.”

Timur, YEAR Student from Ufa
Murray State University, KY

“There are so many fun meetings which student organizations arrange here at USD, I feel so busy and involved in student life! And I enjoy it so much!”

Anastasiia, YEAR Student from Kumertau
University of South Dakota, SD

“You may wonder - where am I? What should I do? No worries, the faculty of JCC will take care of you. It is unbelievable how many passionate, dedicated and professional people met in one place.... everyone will find his/her place here.”

Ekaterina, YEAR Student from Novosibirsk
Jamestown Community College, NY

“I was surprised by how many out-of-state and international students go to Snow. We have over 150 international students representing forty countries, and it is fascinating to see how we all interact with each other and become friends despite the cultural barriers. We also have a lot of events organized by the international students’ union, and it helps us to learn a lot about each other’s cultures and traditions, to better understand each other and bond.”

Dina, YEAR Student from Kazan
Snow College, UT

“I like that our college is diverse. It’s not only about ethnicity, nationality or how they look. It’s about attitude to life and perception of reality... What impressed me here? Individuals’ willingness to make their own community better, desire to make people around happier. At first glance, it seems like a pretense... just because you’re not used to people being good for no reason... But such people exist. They surround me. I eat with them in the cafeteria, share one desk and just enjoy the moment. It seems that I live here during all my life, that I have always known these people. I like that feeling. I feel that this is the time and place where I should be.”

Karina, YEAR Student from Nizhnekamsk
Northampton Community College, PA
SHARING RUSSIAN CULTURE

YEAR students across the U.S. have found ways to share their culture this semester, fulfilling their role as cultural ambassadors. From formal presentations and Russian dinners to international events and culture fairs, the YEAR students have showcased Russian culture in many ways to friends, family, the campus, and the community this fall.

In September, YEAR students Emma and Zulfiia, from St. Petersburg and Naberzhnye Chelny respectively, presented Russian culture as a part of the “Holcombe Global Series Events” at their host institution, the University of Arkansas. Dressed in their Russian national costumes, Emma and Zulfiia explained the history, holidays, and customs of Russia to their audience of more than 100 people, including students, faculty, and staff. As the two students also wished to break stereotypes about Russia during their presentation, they facilitated discussions on various pre-conceived notions about the country. They also taught the audience a few Russian words before ending their event with Russian music and national dishes they had prepared.

“All of them fell in love with Sharlotka (apple pie) and our pancakes with potatoes and meat,” says Emma. “People had a lot of fun and pleasure attending this presentation, and a lot of people said that we did an amazing job!”

In Vermillion, SD, YEAR students studying at the University of South Dakota (USD) participated in a Russian Tea Party hosted by the university’s Russian professor and YEAR Program host mother, Ilmira. They shared a variety of Russian foods, taught Russian dances, watched Soviet cartoons, and played a Russian version of bingo. They enjoyed the little reminder of home while teaching USD students and staff a bit more about Russia.

“It was a pleasure to meet people who are studying Russian language and interested in our country and share our culture with them,” says USD YEAR student Maria.

The community of Powell, WY got a taste of Russian culture at the Northwest College “Taste the Nations” event in September, where YEAR students Gabriel, Svetlana, and Maria put together a display table and activities that attendees could complete to obtain their “Russian visa.”

“I was inspired by this idea because I really wanted to show people the beauty of Russia,” says Gabriel. They prepared their table with a map of Russia with various facts about the country, Russian language handouts, Russian candies, and Gabriel donned her Russian national costume. She explains that all 50 visitors had to take a photo with them and try a Russian candy to get their “Russian visa” and that everyone was very interested in their display. Gabriel looks forward to participating in more cultural events at which she can represent her culture next semester!
LIZA FOR SENATE

Not long after Elizaveta “Liza”, native of Moscow, arrived on her new campus at the College of Southern Idaho (CSI), a new friend encouraged her to run for the CSI student senate. It seemed to Liza to be an interesting experience, so she decided to give it a try and participate in the election process.

After she applied and met with the senate executives, it was time to prepare her campaign. She created a brochure, bought some candy, and then began getting the word out about who she was and what she hoped to do if elected to the senate. Her campaign kept her very busy. As there were fifteen candidates running for senate, she worked hard to talk to as many people on campus as she could. “Personally, I met a lot of people during this week - this was probably the most interesting part of the campaign,” says Liza. “You meet new people and tell them about what you’re doing and who you are, and that’s how I met new friends. It was amazing!” When the campaign finished, all candidates gave a speech at the main building on campus. “This was scary but at the same time I think that this part helped me the most in winning,” Liza says. At the end of the week, the results were counted, and the candidates all gathered eagerly to see who was elected. “I remember how I was nervous about the outcome and how I was surprised to hear that I got the second most votes among all the candidates!” Liza recalls. And with that, her senate experience began.

As a CSI senator, Liza participates in the weekly meetings and holds her own office hours. She also spends around four hours each week volunteering on campus. In addition, she serves as the liaison for the Program Board, which oversees all programs and events on campus. This also requires her to attend weekly meetings and spend time planning events for the student body. Lastly, at the end of each week, she submits a report describing what she did that week. “I really think that it was a wonderful experience for me, because during this time I met so many people that I could never meet any other way,” says Liza. “Moreover, it really builds your leadership skills and helps you to build speaking and critical thinking skills too. Being a senator is a hard work but it’s definitely a rewarding one, especially if you are the kind of person who likes to be involved and help people. Senate is a wonderful place - you become a real family with other senators and students from your council and you participate in different activities and socials. And that’s what united me and made me very close with a lot of people on campus. That’s what I’m really grateful for!”

A Public Relations Major at her host institution, West Liberty University, Iuliia has gotten to learn a side of PR that she was never exposed to in Russia through coursework and through participating in the West Liberty TV Crew.

As a part of the “crew,” Iuliia has traveled to record four of the West Liberty football games live for television. She says that each time she travels to a game, she tries to do a different job to learn as much as possible. She now has experience working with the cameras, helping to create graphics, and aiding the correspondent on the field. Once, she even got to be the director.

Iuliia has become close to her classmates in the TV crew and in classes such as Television Production, Remote Broadcast Production, and Broadcast News Writing. “I like that all of the broadcasting major students love what they do,” she says. Iuliia adds that her classmates even invited her several times to participate in the West Liberty radio show, on which she has gotten to speak about Russia and her experience in the United States.

“I was able to learn so much and I feel this has helped further my pursuit of being a professional television host in the future. I will definitely implement this experience in Russia. Every day I learn more about TV and sports. So, probably this is a good way to specialize in sport-journalism in the future.”
SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES

During the fall semester, the YEAR students invested their time into their host communities as they completed their 20 required hours of community service. The volunteer opportunities they found brought them new interests, new connections to the community, and new ideas to bring back home with them to Russia. Many students went above and beyond the 20 required hours, and in total, YEAR students completed over 1,500 hours of community service this fall.

Angelina, a YEAR student from Novosibirsk at the University of Minnesota - Minneapolis, dedicated most of her volunteer hours to the Classroom Connections program. The program provides international students with opportunities to present their cultures at local elementary schools in the Minneapolis area. “Before starting my community service, I never thought that I would have a chance to volunteer in something that is directly related to my professional interest - teaching,” says Angelina. “What attracted me most in the program was that it wasn’t simply about giving presentations about Russia and trying to ruin stereotypes, but rather about teaching children the basics of the culture in a real school setting. For me as a future teacher it was a priceless opportunity, and I acknowledged how important my new mission of a cultural ambassador was because I had been told that for most of the children in Classroom Connections, communicating with international students was the only way of getting familiar with other cultures.” Angelina recalls one morning that she got up early to visit a school in Austin, MN, where she gave presentations to eager classrooms of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students. “I remember when the 3rd graders were coming up to me after the class, hugging me and sharing interesting facts about their own cultures and the languages they speak - never in my life had I felt more in the right place,” says Angelina.

In Washington state, YEAR student Adelina became closely connected to her community of Bellingham through volunteering with the program Girls on the Run. “It is an amazing program which pursues the goal to inspire 3rd through 8th grade girls to be healthy and confident by having fun, and it creatively integrates running,” says Adelina, native of Astrakhan and student at Whatcom Community College. “I think it is very important from a very young age to help girls activate their limitless potential, and to let them know that they have power, and they are free to pursue their dreams and MAKE A CHOICE.” Adelina explains that she worked with a group of fifteen girls that met nine times throughout the semester. During the meetings, Adelina says that they girls had a lot of fun and constantly impressed her with their abilities to express their opinions on different topics of conversation. But the highlight of the program was the 5K that she ran with the girls: “All Whatcom Community supported the girls and us (coaches) in this run, and it was a great experience of such a tied connection between people because you felt like they were all your family.” Adelina hopes that she can take what she learned from the Girls on the Run program to create something similar in Russia.

“Community is a very important concept for Americans. Before I came to the U.S. and even during the orientation in D.C., when our coordinators were talking about a community service and a community in common, this word didn’t really make any sense for me,” says Maria, a YEAR student from Tyumen studying at the University of South Dakota (USD). However, three days after arriving to her host family’s home in Vermillion, SD, her host father invited Maria to volunteer with the free English classes that he teaches in the community to non-native speakers. As she’d had some experience tutoring English back home, she was eager to help. “And he really needed my help, because, coincidentally, on my first day at the ESL school, several new Russian students with a very poor level of English came to the class. So, my ability to translate was essentially necessary,” Maria explains. Maria enjoyed helping the students and learning about their different backgrounds and how they came to Vermillion. She was inspired by her host father’s work. “They not only teach [the students] English but, for example, how to fill out tax forms, and they also organize dinners and hangouts. They want to help the new people who come to the community to become a part of it, especially people from the other countries. They want them to be active citizens and active community members. That means they can express their problems and concerns, participate in making common decisions and in community events. That is what community means. That means everybody cares for each other and their town. [They want] to help people not to feel as a stranger but to feel as a part of community.”
A BOND FOR LIFE

From the moment that Sofia, a YEAR student from Yoshkar-Ola, met her host family for the first time in the crowded Atlanta airport, she knew she had found a new home. There were her two host parents and host sister waiting for her, holding a bright yellow sign welcoming her to her new home. All Sofia's prior worries about homesickness or adaptation issues disappeared immediately.

“This period that I spent with an American family has just proven my thoughts that all people are alike. It does not matter in what country you live, what language you speak, and what flag is waving near your house. There are values and ideas that always remain the same: every human being just wants to love, to be loved, and to have a place to call home.”

Sofia says that her month-long experience with her host family, the Harwells, flew by in a blur of new experiences, new places, and new people. They visited forests and parks, hiked up mountains and to waterfalls, went to museums and galleries in Atlanta, watched baseball and football games, and tried various international cuisines in local restaurants. “We spent as much time together as we could,” says Sofia. “My host family did everything possible so that I could feel the culture of the United States and explore this country only from bright and positive sides.”

However, what Sofia cherishes the most from her experience is the extent to which the Harwells made her feel like a part of the family. Throughout their month together, Sofia says that the family bonded over conversations about everything from world politics to their emotions and experiences. She was introduced to her host sister’s friends and her host mom’s extended family. But perhaps the most special experience was when her host father taught her to play the guitar, something she has always wanted to learn. And that wasn’t all: “After that, he gave me a present that I am going to always keep with me - my own guitar. Now every time I feel blue, I can play some music and feel better. I felt like I became a part of this family,” she says.

Though Sofia’s host family lives in Georgia and she now attends American University in Washington, D.C., Sofia explains that the distance never saddened her. Her out-of-state placement in Georgia was, in fact, perfect for her for two reasons: “Since my father was born in the country of Georgia, I was wondering whether these two Georgias could have anything in common. Now I can say for sure, yes, they do. There at least two things that have always reminded me of my father’s home country - endlessly hospitable friendly people and picturesque mountains,” she explains. Now, though living and studying in Washington, D.C. for the year, Sofia’s relationship with her host family has stayed strong. Her host sister now also studies in D.C., so they have continued to see each other, and have enjoyed family gatherings all together again with Sofia’s host parents visited the two girls in D.C.

STUDENT AMBASSADOR

It did not take Ekaterina, a native of Novosibirsk, long to find her place in Jamestown, NY. When she arrived at her host institution, Jamestown Community College (JCC), she was eager to get involved, meet new people, and gain leadership experience. Thus, when she learned of the JCC Ambassadors, student leaders who provide tours of the campus and speak at high schools about opportunities at JCC, Ekaterina immediately applied. Not long after her interview, she learned that she had been accepted to the position, and her work began!
Ekaterina’s first experience as a JCC Ambassador was serving on a panel at Jamestown High School where the ambassadors spoke about the college and their experiences there. "It was so much fun," says Ekaterina. "I was happy to share my story. I told the students to take every opportunity they have and travel as much as they can." Shortly after, they hosted an open house at JCC, where Ekaterina was pleased to see many of the high schoolers who they had invited at the panel. She says that she gave five tours on that day alone and has given eight other tours of the campus throughout the rest of the semester. Ekaterina states that being a JCC Ambassador has helped her to improve her leadership, time management, and public speaking skills, which she says have progressed greatly since this summer.

“The best part about being an ambassador is meeting new people!” says Ekaterina. “I met a lot of great and ambitious students. Every time I give my knowledge to others, I feel so much energy and it makes me truly happy. I am planning on having a great break and then I will be back on track in my ambassador’s shirt!”

DISCOVERING A NEW PASSION

Timur, a long-time athlete and YEAR student from Ufa studying at Murray State University, decided to challenge himself to try a new sport this year in the U.S. “One of my goals in America was to get to know college sports and to become a part of a team,” says Timur. Upon arriving at Murray State, Timur discovered an opportunity to become part of the rowing team, and immediately knew he wanted to try out.

After his acceptance to the team, the three-hour, daily practices began on Kentucky Lake. Timur spoke fondly of practices: “My favorite part of it was the landscape, especially during sunsets. I cannot describe how beautiful and peaceful it is, just pure nature... (and 30 dedicated and wet teammates in the boats...).” After a month of hard work and practice, the competition season began. Timur and his team competed four times throughout the semester in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia. “That was a great opportunity to see other states and make friends from different universities,” he says. At each regatta, Timur participated in two different races in two of three different categories: eight boys; four boys; or a mixed boat of four boys and four girls. He proudly remembers their regatta in Oakridge, Tennessee, where his team received various medals, and he himself received a gold medal in the eight boys division and a bronze medal in the mixed boat division. But one of the primary rewards of being on the team has been the companionship of his teammates. “We are like a big family - we hang out a lot together, help each other, travel, celebrate holidays and even do community service,” Timur says. However, it has other advantages as well for him: “Rowing keeps me busy and helps me to manage my time much better as it takes a lot to practice, so I have to discipline myself. It is a completely new and unique experience for me in terms of doing sport and making new friends. Lastly, it is a good way to improve your skills as a team player. Especially you feel you have to pay attention to it when your boat is about to flip because of your unsynchronized movements!”

Timur couldn’t be more satisfied with his rowing experience; not only did he meet his goal to participate in college sports on the YEAR Program, he gained time management skills, opportunities to travel around the region, and a wealth of new friends on campus as well. “I highly recommend next YEAR winners to get involved in sport since it is very popular in America and at very professional level, so you will gain a lot of knowledge and positive vibes!”
HITTING A HIGH NOTE

YEAR student Maria, an Economics major at the University of South Dakota (USD), has always dedicated herself to her music. In her hometown of Tyumen, Maria has been taking singing lessons since she was five years old. Thus, when she enrolled in classes at USD, she made sure to sign up for Concert Choir as well!

When Maria met her voice instructor at USD in the fall, he told her that they were holding auditions for the opera *Hansel and Gretel*. Maria was immediately interested in auditioning, as solo opera singing has been her focus and passion for most of her life. Auditions were held during the first week of classes. Maria was nervous as she wasn’t a music major at USD and had never held more than a chorus part in previous performances that she had partaken in. When she received the news that she had been cast as the Dew Fairy, she was thrilled, as it was the biggest role she had ever played.

Weekly rehearsals began in September for the opera, which Maria says increased to nearly daily practices as the day of their first performance approached. “We worked just on our music at first and then we started to do staging,” Maria explains. “It seemed hardly possible to do in such small amount of time. But finally, it worked out very well.” At last, the week before Thanksgiving, the group performed *Hansel and Gretel* five times. “I think my favorite part was to meet all the people who came to watch us after performance saying how they enjoyed it and liked our work,” says Maria. But her favorite memory was seeing the members of her host family after the performance, who had been eagerly awaiting Maria’s show since the day she was cast. “I think that was the best reward for all the efforts that we made,” she says.

“This opera] really helped me to improve my singing and acting skills and helped me to feel more confident and comfortable during public performances and presentations. I’m very glad that in USD I have such opportunities to refresh my mind after classes doing my favorite hobby. I am looking forward to some great projects next semester, and the new opera, where I also going to participate.”
A TWO-WAY EXCHANGE

The exchange came full circle for YEAR alumna Diana, native of Kazan, when she had the opportunity to host her YEAR host mother from Michigan at her home in Kazan this summer.

When Diana met her host family, Lynne and Clark, in the summer of 2017, she felt instantly that they had known each other for years. It didn’t take long before they found common interests and had their own inside jokes. Diana was also shocked to learn that her host mother Lynne had a special connection to Russia and had in fact traveled to Diana’s home town of Kazan three times in her life. “Sometimes I had a feeling that she knows about Kazan more than me,” jokes Diana.

In November of 2017, Lynne mentioned to Diana her idea to travel back to Kazan the following summer to visit her. Diana was thrilled by the idea, hoping that Lynne would indeed decide to buy her tickets to come for a visit! And later in the spring, she did.

In May, Diana returned home to Kazan after completing the YEAR Program, saddened to leave those she’d become close to, but knowing it wouldn’t be long until she was reunited with Lynne.

Lynne’s visit this summer lasted one month, one week of which was spent with Diana and her family. “Even though Lynne has been to Kazan before, she didn’t have a chance to explore the city or do any sightseeing,” explained Diana. Thus, Diana made sure that Lynne was able to see everything in and around Kazan and get a true taste of the culture. “I was trying to show her not only Russian culture, but Tatar (the nationality in Kazan) as well. Since she really likes Tatar culture, Lynne and I spent some time with my grandparents, so she could see all the customs and culture.”

Diana reflects that hosting Lynne was a wonderful experience which also created a bond between her host mom and her own parents, who are now talking about a family visit to Michigan. “I am sure this friendship will last for a long time,” says Diana.

UNDEBATABLE SUCCESS

On November 25-30th, YEAR alumnus Dimitri convened the first Debate Academy for Russian Youth in Moscow. Dimitri, a YEAR alumnus from Smolensk who studied at American University in 2016-2017, has been active in debate since his first year of the university in Russia, but was further fueled by his debate experience on the YEAR Program at American University.
As the current president of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) Debate Society, Dimitri took the initiative to apply for an Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) grant in May to organize the Debate Academy for Russian Youth, which aimed to help Russian high school students improve their critical thinking and public speaking skills. This grant allowed him and his team of organizers from MGIMO to gather 130 participants from 28 different regions across Russia for five days of interactive workshops, debate practice sessions, and a final debate tournament. They were able to bring in six debate coaches representing Russia, Serbia, and Germany to assist with the event. Dimitri himself led a workshop on running a debate club, and taught participants about the specifics of debating in Russia. The final tournament allowed students to participate as either speakers, spectators, or judges, and awarded top debaters with trophies and medals. Dimitri says that all participants were incredibly enthusiastic about the event, and many expressed interest in participating in the academy again in the future.

“All the hard work put into this project and the nerves lost during the preparation were worth it. Witnessing how truly life-changing this project was for extremely bright Russian kids and how happy they were to be a part of it was the best reward I could have gotten.”

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE YEARS

Anna, a 2016-2017 YEAR alumna from Elista, is now in Seoul, Korea, where she is completing her undergraduate studies with the Minerva Schools at KGI. During her time in Seoul this fall, Anna has reflected on the past three years and how they have led her to where she is today.

Anna remembers distinctly the fall of 2015, when she was a high school student in Elista. Specifically, she recalls the day that her friend told her about the YEAR Program, and how she immediately went home and applied. “That moment in that classroom changed my life,” she says.

She thinks back fondly on the fall of 2016. During her time as a YEAR student studying at West Liberty University, she lived with “the kindest host mother” who cared for her and taught her so much.

Anna says that it was those moments that brought her to San Francisco in the fall of 2017, where she commenced her studies through the Minerva Schools at KGI, a highly selective and innovative institution that will take her to seven different cities across the globe throughout her degree. “My school lets me take classes in cafes, learn and grow with brilliant people from all over the world (80% international students!), and take advantage of the most effective curriculum based on science of learning,” says Anna. “I am pushed to improve my professional readiness, responsibility, resilience, and global perspective.”

Now, a year later, Anna has just completed a semester in Seoul, her second city. But Anna believes that she would not be where she is today without the YEAR Program: “I am reflecting back to 2015, when YEAR Program became a door-opener,” Anna explains. “My host mother and West Virginia showed me, a kid from a small Russian town, a new world – much bigger and wider than my old one. During the YEAR I grew up, met kind and inspiring people, and started dreaming big. YEAR gave me enough experience and skills to get admitted to a very selective school and be in Seoul right after San Francisco. Surely, even greater things are waiting for me in the future, but my exchange year was the foundation of all that.”
AN INSPIRING TEACHER

Oksana, a 2017-2018 YEAR alumna from Voronezh, has become a source of inspiration for those around her since her return home in May.

“The year in the U.S. gave me an understanding of myself, what I want to do, and what to develop. There is always a space to develop yourself, motivate, be motivated, and inspire yourself and others to do great things.”

After completing her YEAR in the U.S., Oksana was motivated to use the skills she’d learned during her exchange. As a wheelchair user living abroad for a year, she says she became more independent and open-minded through participating in a variety of new activities, in a new culture, all by herself.

Oksana returned to Russia invigorated by that newfound independence and a desire to promote open-mindedness among those around her. She thus began independently partaking in various events in her community in Russia. “I don’t see myself as a person with disabilities as if it is something that can stop me from doing or achieving something,” she says. She believes it is important to demonstrate that people with disabilities can travel and be independent, as well. She recalls that people were often surprised to see her attend events alone: “Where is your helper?” “How is it possible?” Oksana is thrilled that her own sense of independence allows her to open the minds of others at the same time. “I could show at least some people that people with disabilities are absolutely the same,” she says.

Oksana has been inspiring others not only at community events, but in her new role as an English teacher at local center for additional education. She is currently in charge of two groups of students ages 7-10, one of which is a small group of two students with disabilities. “I hope that more kids with and without disabilities will join us and I will try to do my best to teach them all not only language but also the flexibility and open-mindedness that I gained,” she says.

Oksana explains that one of her students, pictured, truly inspires her. She is only seven years old and has a hearing impairment. “She doesn’t even know that people in other countries speak other languages,” Oksana says. “She doesn’t know what English is. But she is so eager to learn. It is just interesting for her to come and play with other kids and meanwhile learn new words. She is very serious and opened to the new world.”

For more information on the YEAR Program, visit www.yearprogram.org.