The 2019-2020 cohort of YEAR Program participants arrived in Washington, DC on July 23rd, 2019 for a five-day arrival orientation in preparation for the year ahead. While in D.C., the students became acquainted with their peers and program coordinators during a week of informational presentations and cultural activities. Sessions during the week familiarized participants with topics such as the U.S. higher education system; American host families; American culture; banking in the U.S.; the J-1 visa program; and setting goals. Participants took part in a community service activity at A Wider Circle, where they helped to receive and sort clothing, furniture, and other donations for new homeowners. Finally, they toured some of D.C.’s national monuments, during which learned a bit about the U.S.’s culture and history. On July 28th, participants departed D.C. for their host communities to begin their YEAR adventures.

The Year of Exchange in America for Russians (YEAR) Program provides outstanding Russian students with the opportunity to study for one year at community colleges and universities throughout the United States. Participants engage with local communities, teach Americans about Russia’s history and culture, and gain new perspectives on American society. Prior to the academic year, all students spend one month living with American host families. Following homestays, they move to on-campus residence halls to begin classes and explore campus life. The YEAR Program is funded by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.
YEAR FAMILIES

Upon completion of their arrival orientation in Washington, D.C., YEAR students scattered across the U.S. to begin their month-long homestays with their 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 prior to the start of the academic year. Upon arriving in their host communities, the participants were welcomed warmly by their new family members and were quickly integrated into their host families’ lives. Students reflected fondly on their host family experiences:

“Probably, the most challenging and intriguing thing about your move to U.S. is that you barely know anyone from your new placement. New country, new experience, new friends, new town... However, you have your host family there, and you don’t have to panic anymore. Surely, their lifestyle could be different from yours, they can be active travelers and sociable or calm and spend most of their time at their house. They could take you to travel to the different state, or just show you only your town... but it doesn’t matter! They will help you with anything you face, show you the right way “to go”, introduce you to lots of new people in your town and most important, acclimate to U.S. culture. Just be open to experience something new and maybe even something different. That’s the reason you’re here, right?”

Arina, YEAR Student from Bugulma
College of Southern Idaho, ID

“Host family is extremely important for learning about the American way of living. And although each family is unique and differs from the others, some families have one thing in common for sure – they are ready to open their hearts and host students from other countries and I really appreciate it.” – Anastasiia, YEAR Student from St. Petersburg, Tennessee Technological University

Anastasiia, YEAR Student from St. Petersburg
Tennessee Technological University, TN

“I literally have no words to describe how thankful I am to have a second family here. How thankful I am to all the words that were said and all the moments that were shared. My host family experience is a dive into a new culture with the best support and love that I could ever have. Host family experience is to open the heart and mind once, and to let in these people forever.”

Daria, YEAR Student from Moscow
SUNY Broome Community College, NY

“The big advantage of the YEAR Program is to get a family on the other side of the globe. As I noticed, family plays the most important role in the life of Americans, though my host family proved it dozens of time and it made me reflect on my family life back home. I’m absolutely sure that the Christmas eve I want to spend with my host family cooking chip chocolate cookies and watching “The Polar Express” together.”

Sofya, YEAR Student from Anzhero-Sudzhensk
Fox Valley Technical College, WI

“Living with a host family gave me a better understanding of why cultural exchange matters. In a few weeks, I made a big leap in understanding American society, mainly through history, traditions, and lifestyle of my family. It was wonderful to see that my host parents were just as excited and curious about Russian culture and to observe how they learn about the Russian perspective of the world. Mandy and Nic became one of my first close friends in the U.S. They engaged me in family life with shopping, cooking, family dinners, and table games that helped me gradually adapt to life in America.”

Aleksandra, YEAR Student from Gatchina
West Virginia University, WV

“All through this month, my host family has been a great source of help for me in many aspects, from adjusting to life in a smaller town, to meeting new people each of whom had a unique and interesting background. At first, when I just arrived, it was a bit uncomfortable to be around my host family, but the fact that we communicated a lot prior to my trip to the USA helped a lot, and soon we started to interact more freely. I became very attached to them simply because they are wonderful people that were ready to open their home and their hearts to a person coming from a different country.”

Tatiana, YEAR Student from Moscow
University of South Dakota, SD

“I am thankful to the YEAR Program, and I am very happy that I had such opportunity and spent time with some of the most wonderful people in my life. Every day with them was amazing. I would never expect in my life that for the period of 3 weeks people can become so united. I am still in very close contact with my host family, we often correspond and call each other, and I am definitely going to visit them again soon.”

Vladislav, YEAR Student from Ulyanovsk
University of Arkansas, AK

”The big advantage of the YEAR Program is to get a family on the other side of the globe. As I noticed, family plays the most important role in the life of Americans, though my host family proved it dozens of time and it made me reflect on my family life back home. I’m absolutely sure that the Christmas eve I want to spend with my host family cooking chip chocolate cookies and watching “The Polar Express” together.”

Sofya, YEAR Student from Anzhero-Sudzhensk
Fox Valley Technical College, WI
THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS

With the start of the school year in sight, YEAR students said “see you later” to their host families and moved into their campus housing to begin the academic year. This year, twenty-eight different universities, private colleges, and community colleges welcomed the YEAR students to their campus communities. With the help of their international student coordinators, peers, and new friends, the YEAR students began to learn about their host institutions and the opportunities available on campus. As they began to acclimate to the campus environment, the YEAR students described their first reactions to life in their new communities:

“Participating in different events, I noticed an interesting detail: all opportunities which are available at the campus are open for everybody. They do not have restriction due to people’s weight, height, race and other features; even all sports teams are glad to see everybody at their membership. All students are not afraid of the new experience, are happy to participate in the numerous events, and are not worrying about being excluded.”

Diana, YEAR Student from Penza
University of South Dakota, SD

“The perks of being a YEAR student is that you can try something new and exciting. That’s why if someone would ask you to look at my schedule and tell what my major is, you would probably be very confused. Senior Management Information Systems course, Elementary Spanish, Choir, Yoga, Ceramics and Native American Studies. Here are my 16 credits (my schedule is pretty intense). But if I won’t try it now, then when?”

Natalia, YEAR Student from Nakhdoka
Montana State University—Billings, MT

“The place where I live – Morgantown, is a student town, so there is always something happening here, and it is easy to find something to do. I fell in love with the sunsets and mountain sceneries. Morgantown is very pleasant: forests, mountains, and a river surround it. There are very beautiful sunsets, nice warm weather, and clear blue sky. The population of the state is 1.8 million people, and about 30 thousand of them live in this town. They are not much, but the number of opportunities, contacts, and experiences in Morgantown is not inferior to Moscow. I try to use everything that fate throws at me, as I believe you can find something interesting everywhere, which I look forward to.”

Denis, YEAR Student from Krasnodar
West Virginia University, WV

“Leaving Moscow was not easy for me at all. I was concerned about new environment, new people, new school and new professors. Will they accept me? Will it be hard for me to study? How will I manage to study and travel at the same time? Will I be disappointed by the level of education in regional university after one of the best Russian university? Of course, I was scared. I could not imagine what to expect but I was thinking about the worst. About all the stereotypes and rumors. By the time I moved to campus, I felt like everything before my departure did not exist. No one knows me and I know no one. But I was surprised how friendly and welcoming are people in my tiny Murray.”

Irina, YEAR Student from Astrakhan
Murray State University, KY

“I like the way [Americans] communicate with people. They are always smiling and friendly. Most of them are always ready to help. Moreover, here on the campus, everyone says hello even if you are not familiar with each other. I was favorably impressed by this fact.”

Anna, YEAR Student from Moscow
Neosho County Community College, KS

“The truth is, people at Alma college are really nice and helpful. I’m talking not only about RAs who are always here for you or Academic advisers who seem to care about your future more than you do, but people in general. Being a shy person, it’s hard for me sometimes to chat with people especially in not my native language. At first, I was [scared] about discussions in class thinking somebody will laugh at me because of my accent or grammar mistakes. But when I started to overcome this fear, I understood that people don’t care where you are from or your native language, they just want to hear your thoughts and also be heard.”

Elizaveta, YEAR Student from Ust-Ilimsk
Alma College, MI

“Montana State University-Billings is not a big university. There are about 4,000 students and just a few campus buildings on a small territory. It may sound frustrating, but in reality, I love this little community, which I became a part of! Here in Billings, my university is like a big family for me: RHAs, staff, professors, students – thankfully to them, I feel so comfortable and safe. The smaller community is, the more attention people pay to each other: I cannot remember how many times I have been asked about how I feel and if anything concerns or upsets me. Just like in a family, we take care of each other in MSUB.”

Zhanna, YEAR Student from Moscow
Montana State University—Billings, MT
CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

The YEAR students arrived in their new communities eager to share their Russian culture and cuisine and found a variety of ways to do so during the fall semester. From casual conversations to formal presentations, the students ensured that many people on campus were able to learn more about their culture and country.

In September, YEAR students at Murray State University Irina and Ekaterina hosted an Intercultural Night at a local restaurant. They cooked borsch and blini in the industrial-sized kitchen and provided direction to the restaurant employees on how to help make their recipes. Afterwards, they went to greet their guests and tell them a bit about Russia. Many of them complimented Irina and Ekaterina on their dishes. “It was very interesting and a responsibility to cook not only for our host family, but for the whole restaurant in the professional kitchen. We really enjoyed it!”

On November 25th, YEAR students at Fox Valley Technical College, Daria, Valentina, and Sofya, dressed in their national costumes to present Russia to a crowd of 50 people as a part of Fox Valley’s “Lunch n’ Learn from around the world” series. At their presentation, the girls shared information about Russian culture and traditions, language, imports, exports, and trade, the educational system, climate, geography, religion, holidays, economy, and history. They focused on comparing and contrasting the cultures and breaking down existing stereotypes about Russia. The students also treated their audience to a few samples of Russian cuisine and wrote the names of everyone who attended in Cyrillic for them to take home. Says their international student coordinator at Fox Valley, “The presentation was fun, with lots of humor, and they really expressed [not only] their love for their country and culture but their appreciation of learning about a new one and meeting people from all over the world. They were very proud to share and answer questions.” At the end of their presentation they received positive feedback from their audience, who expressed that they learned so much, that they loved seeing the traditional clothing and receiving their name written in Russian, and that they realized how little they knew about Russia prior to the presentation. Others said that they left feeling more open-minded and eager to attend more Lunch n’ Learns in the future!

YEAR students at Ohio Northern University Anna L., Anna K., and Elizaveta hosted a Russian cultural event on campus in October. They gathered a group of 90 people with whom they shared their culture through food, music, and dance. They prepared Russian pies and pancakes to serve, performed Russian folk dance, and created fun quiz games to play with their guests. They even brought prizes, such as a ushanka hat. “Our favorite contest was Russian squats to the Kalinka-Malinka song! We have never seen people doing 100 squats to get a can of Russian condensed milk!” says Elizaveta. “The goal we set before the event was to get our American friends acquainted with the reality, show our country as we see it… to give people a chance to find something special for their hearts that they would love and associate with our home country. Looking back, we can say that we achieved our mission!
"Living in the United States really opened my eyes to the power of language," says Asiiat, YEAR student from Izberbash, Dagestan studying at the University of Minnesota. A student majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Asiiat was eager to volunteer her time in a way that would connect to her future career aspirations.

She ended up finding that opportunity with the Hmong American Partnership (HAP), which provides support in cultural adjustment, English language, citizenship, and digital skills. There, Asiiat has been teaching English to students, 40% of which come from Somalia. "I teach general English to a Somali woman," says Asiiat. "English empowers her to live in a new environment like going to the grocery store, communicate with natives, and gives her confidence. I think English allows her to see a new dimension of American culture and it enables her to more easily get around. The basic interpersonal communation skills that she is gaining enable her to get along socially. It would be easier to get a job as well as to take the strain off of her family and friends. Last week I volunteered in the computer lab and helped a student to fill out a job application."

Asiiat has had some experience teaching English in Russia and anticipated that teaching English at the HAP would be similar. However, she soon realized it was much harder due to the lack of an intermediary language.

These experiences have allowed her to reflect on the critical connection between culture and language in a new way. "You can read about different cultures in books, but it's completely different from getting direct experience. Learning about new cultures, new people is always exciting. When you teach English as a second language, you learn about new cultures as well, because language and culture are interconnected with each other." She explains a few examples which illustrated this for her at the HAP, such as the non-verbal communication methods they used with her, or when one of her students called her "mommy" rather than "teacher" or her name and the cultural reasons behind why she would select such a term for her teacher in English.

This experience provided Asiiat not only with valuable professional experience in her field, but also with an important opportunity to contribute to her community. "I feel a huge responsibility for volunteering as an ESL teacher, and I want to give my students as much knowledge as I can to help them achieve their goals and needs. This experience made me realize the power of English and inspired me to encourage my students to become better every day."

Anna, always eager to try something new, decided to see what it was all about. While there, the choreographer approached her and told her that auditions for the upcoming musical "West Side Story" would be held at the end of August. He told her she should definitely give it a try.

When the day of auditions arrived, students were asked to dance and sing a song from the musical. As "West Side Story" was unfamiliar for Anna, she chose to sing the Russian song "The Little Prince" for her audition. At the end, the producer told everyone to watch their email for the final decisions about roles. When Anna received her email that she'd been selected to play one of the jet girls, she was thrilled!

Rehearsals began in September and were held from 6 – 9 p.m., three days per week. They practiced and practiced up until their first performance on November 7th. "I enjoyed every moment of rehearsal and all the shows," says Anna. "I was happy to meet all the people from the cast, they were so nice, kind, and helpful! I have never played in a musical and I was so nervous to perform, but people from the cast supported me, and I have found good friends there. I had a feeling that we were a big family!" Once performances had concluded, Anna gifted each of her new friends a Russian postcard with a note thanking them for their friendship or support. Anna says she was particularly grateful that her host parents and friends from Jamestown Community College came to see the musical.

"I am glad that I had an opportunity to be a part of this!"
SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES

Over the fall semester, the YEAR students each learned about volunteerism in the U.S. by completing their required 20 hours of community service. Their volunteer experiences gave them the opportunity to better understand their communities while also allowing them to meet many new people. Many of the students so greatly enjoyed these experiences that they went far beyond their required 20 hours, with two students completing over 100 hours! Altogether, the students raked in nearly 2,000 hours throughout the semester – an all-time group record.

YEAR students Tatiana and Maria, studying at the University of South Dakota and West Virginia University, respectively, both hit over 110 hours of community service by the end of the fall semester. In doing so, they demonstrated their dedication to their new communities.

YEAR student Maria, native of Tver, divided her time between a variety of organizations in Morgantown, West Virginia. As a Psychology major, she was eager to contribute to organizations which aligned with her future career interests. She thus spent most of her time volunteering with the WVU Collegiate Recovery Program, Serenity Place, WELL WVU Student Wellness Ambassador Team, and others, which supported causes like mental health awareness; health and wellness; drug addiction recovery; sexual assault victims; stress management; grief recovery; and suicide prevention. “My main goal for this “gap year” was to understand whether I want to get a second degree in a helping profession. This is what I’d been doing on an on-and-off basis for a couple of years before getting on the plane to the U.S. Even though I am only halfway through the whole thing, I can definitely say that it is a yes. Being involved with the Collegiate Recovery Program contributed a lot to it. From trying to answer the question of whether I want to do this or not, I came to figure out that this is something I simply cannot help but do.”

YEAR student Tatiana, a student from Moscow, also volunteered her time for a wide variety of activities, including helping to serve a community Thanksgiving meal, volunteering in a local elementary school library, receiving donations at a food pantry, sorting clothing for a domestic violence center, tutoring students in Russia, and helping at the Ronald McDonald House, to name a few! “I think [before this,] I never fully got to comprehend the meaning behind this word, community,” explains Tatiana. “A feeling of fellowship, sharing goals and values with others, being united with people around you, these phrases define community. In the sense of living space, it is hard to get a sense of community if you are living in a large metropolitan area like Moscow. And it is so easy to get this attachment when you are living in a small Midwest town like Vermillion. Community service is a way to improve a place you live in by your own initiative. It is about serving the needs of those who share this living space with you.” Tatiana adds that just because she has more than fulfilled her program requirement, does not mean she plans to stop volunteering during the spring semester.

“100 hours done, 100 more to go!”
SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

Shortly after arriving on campus in August 2019, YEAR student Tatiana from Vologda received an email from her host institution, the University of Minnesota, inviting students to apply to become a Sustainability Advocate. “The email promised a work towards making university campus zero waste,” explained Tatiana. “I decided to try to apply, because I already had some knowledge about recycling and how much impact it can actually have. I was not sure whether the University Sustainability Board would like to see a student who is not here to study for the whole [4 years] and who is new to the university like me, and who is a foreigner. When I was chosen, I was enormously happy.”

“I like the feeling that I’m doing something meaningful to help my campus and my planet, that I make a contribution, rather than just complaining about the existing ecological problems.”

Tatiana enjoys her new role as a Sustainability Advocate for several reasons. Besides the satisfaction of doing something to help the planet, she says: “I have a chance to meet and work with like-minded people. Knowing at least one person in class because we are both Sustainability Advocates helped me to overcome isolation in my classes. Finally, it helps me to improve my organization and leadership skills. While preparing an event, it takes planning, communication with the Residence director and other people involved, and creativity to make a poster for an event. I’m glad that I learn event management in a way, though I don’t take a class about it.”

Finally, Tatiana was grateful for the opportunity to dive even deeper into this topic during the Sustainability Advocates’ visit to the university recycling facility. “It is not a place everyone wants to visit (honestly, garbage is not as pleasant to look at as painting in a fancy art gallery), especially for an international student. But this is why YEAR put me here – so that I can gain experience how everything works, and implement some of the (knowledge), like recycling, at home.”

DANCE TEAM DREAMS

Anna, YEAR student from Moscow, was eager to continue her hobby of dance during her time at her host institution, Neosho County Community College in Kansas. However, before arriving in the U.S., she was worried it might not be possible. “I have been dancing for a long time back home, so dance is an important part of my life,” explains Anna. “I dance when I am happy, when I am sad, or offended. I think I can forget about everything when I am dancing.” Then, she learned that Neosho County Community College had a dance team, and her worries faded away.
Once she arrived at Neosho, she discovered that the dance and cheer teams held an open gym every month, which anyone could attend. Inspired by the American dance TV shows she’d seen, Anna began to take part. Before long, the coach offered Anna a position on the dance team, and she happily accepted!

Anna has greatly enjoyed her time on the dance team. She has made new connections, improved her dancing skills, and has had the opportunity to perform at Neosho sporting events! "Frankly speaking, the way I am dancing here is completely different from the way I am used to dancing back home. I have never tried to perform as a cheerleader on the court, and many other things I did for the first time. It is a great experience that I will never forget. Moreover, this experience made me understand that dance is more than just a hobby for me, so I really want to work hard for my team, for Neosho, and for myself."

"Every time I am sure that my dreams come true just because of the YEAR Program!"

FINDING HER VOICE

When Tatiana, a YEAR student from Rostov-on-Don, signed up for a Forensics class at the University of South Dakota, she never realized just how much the class would push her out of her comfort zone. On the first day of the class, her professor encouraged Tatiana to write a speech about an issue that was important to her. The students were urged to be critical; personal; and share their opinions and beliefs. While intimidating at first to speak so openly in front of an audience, Tatiana now says, "The forensics community gave me the chance to speak up and let the issues that worry me be heard, and I’m thankful for that."

During her time in Forensics, Tatiana learned the ins and outs of addressing a topic through various forms of speech, from poetry to prose, and from drama to informative speech. “Experimenting with different styles of speech allows me to express myself and state my beliefs, whether it’s playing a domestic abuse victim in a duet with a girl from Turkmenistan or attracting attention to the problem of mental health in international students in an after-dinner speech.” However, Tatiana says her favorite form of speech has turned out to be impromptu speech, as it is both challenging and enjoyable. “The ability to talk on the spot for 5 minutes with only 2 minutes of preparation about any topic really enhanced my communication and English skills. I can admit, it’s very satisfying to beat a native speaker in speaking English.”

Tatiana has also tried her hand at debate, which offers its own hurdles. “Not only do you need to be a pretty speaker and show your artistic and analytical skills, but you also need to be persuasive and have a vast knowledge of history and current events. The debates sometimes are very intense. Having 20 or 30 minutes to research a topic about politics or important social issues creates a lot of stress. However, it pays off when you win the argument after a long dispute. The amount of information you learn in a day is proportionate to a month in school, and it really helps you have better arguments in daily life,” Tatiana explains. “The only problem is that sometimes it’s hard not to turn a simple conversation in a debate daily,” she adds jokingly.

“All in all, speech and debate create a platform for all the talented people of the forensics community to flourish and tell their stories to the world. What surprised me the most in forensics was the supportive community: the participants and the judges. The feedback made me cry and smile numerous times, but the ballots where the judges said they enjoyed the topic and supported me outweigh all the bad feedback I got. It was an inspiration for me to continue though I was hesitant at the beginning. In the end, my forensics team who I shared so many good and bad moments with and the inspirational community at the tournaments became the support and a family that I learned so much from.”
IN SEARCH OF A STORY

Although YEAR student Victoria, native of Moscow, came on the YEAR Program as a History major, she secretly had a long-time interest in the art of documentary journalism. “All my life I loved to tell stories!” she says. Thus, when she received notification that she had been placed at the University of Missouri-Columbia, a school with a highly ranked journalism school, she knew this was her opportunity to make that dream a reality.

Upon arrival to her host institution, Victoria immediately requested permission to take a course in the journalism school and was thrilled when she received approval to enroll in Documentary Journalism. “It was one of the best moments so far, and, my documentary adventure started…”

Within the first three weeks of the class, Victoria and her fellow students were assigned to select the topic for their final documentary project. The most challenging part? “…the story had to be new, untold before, which is not the easiest task in a small city with more than 2,500 journalism students live there!” explains Victoria. “I was asking people, talking to all my friends, people I met on the street, my hosts, friends of my host…” She struggled in identifying a new and intriguing theme until the day she met “Z-man” …and instantly she knew she’d found the perfect character for her documentary. “I was having dinner and looked out onto the street and I saw a guy dressed as a super-hero, all in green colors. I went outside to listen to him sing. I asked why he was wearing a green costume and what he was singing about. His response was enough to realize I wanted to tell his story!” As it turned out, Z-man was a local superhero who sought to educate others about the environment, food system, and nutrition, all through song. A vegan and a musician, he also serves as a cook at the campus cafeteria, and on his breaks he grabs his guitar and heads outside to play. Victoria was determined to share his message through her project, and thus her journey began.

To tell Z-man’s story, Victoria spent a great deal of her time capturing Z-man in his natural environment – in the dining hall, playing on the streets in all sorts of weather, at vegan parties, and at the radio station where he first recorded his music. Z-man graciously welcomed Victoria and her camera into all aspects of his daily routine. “Once, I stayed for two hours on the street interviewing local students about Z-man,” recalls Victoria. “And once we made a 1-hour interview with him personally.” With so much material gathered, you can imagine Victoria’s distress when she learned that her final film should be only 4 minutes long!

Victoria found this storytelling experience to be extremely rewarding. “[Now that] my movie is almost ready, I feel that I don’t want to leave this character. Our documentary professor, Stacey, once told us that it might be hard to switch to another story when you made a big work and become friends with the people whose story you shared. I think I know what he was talking about…”

At the end of the course, Victoria and the other students got the chance to share their documentaries with the rest of the class and receive feedback from their professor. She was thrilled to receive one of the highest grades in the class! Victoria plans to submit her film to a few documentary film festivals and looks forward to continuing to learn about documentary journalism in the spring semester.
CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In October, YEAR student Tamara from Moscow volunteered to participate in the Global Minnesota’s Classroom Connections Program. “It is an international organization at the University of Minnesota, which makes many events for international students, scholars and university workers,” describes Tamara. “Within Classroom Connection program, volunteers from all over the world go to schools and tell children about their countries. The lessons should not be just boring going through facts such as population, geography, climate, economics, etc. They should be interactive, so the preparation takes a lot of time! Children are more interested in learning about the real life of your country such as how a day at school there looks like, what animals live there, what food you eat.”

On October 15th, Tamara and five other international students met at 6:15 a.m. on campus to travel to an elementary school in Saint Charles, Minnesota. There, each of the students presented their countries for two classes, with Tamara assigned to a 2nd and a 4th grade class. She began each presentation by introducing herself, talking about her traditional Russian scarf, and speaking about her family and what brought her to Minnesota. “Although kids are super excited to learn something new, they are still kids and can easily get bored, so you should ask them to participate in diverse activities such as coloring pictures, sharing their experiences, and doing little quizzes,” says Tamara. She spoke about topics such as pets, public transportation in Moscow, a typical day at a Russian elementary school, Russian foods and holidays, and the Russian alphabet. She also showed them a map of Russian and the Russian flag, weaving in her activities throughout the presentation. “As you may notice, I did not include anything about history. I wanted to concentrate on the present to give kids the idea of what Russia is today. Moreover, I tried to emphasize similarities more than differences. Our brains work in the way, which always leads to finding differences and separating yourself/your family/your nation from others. Therefore, by highlighting similarities I wanted to show that people in the world are connected. In my opinion, this understanding is extremely crucial for children.”

Tamara was pleasantly surprised at the attention that the kids paid to her presentations. Though each was an hour long, they actively engaged with her and asked lots of questions.

“I am very thankful for an amazing opportunity to be a Classroom Connection program volunteer! I feel that I did something important for those kids, for myself and for the world! The energy the kids gave me is inspiring me to move on and participate in new projects.”

Tamara shows off her traditional Russian scarf in Saint Charles, MN
UP FOR DEBATE

An experienced debater from Saint Petersburg, YEAR student Anna did not hesitate to join the University of Wyoming Debate Union when she arrived on campus in September.

“So far, being involved in debate has been an overly positive experience. I’m very excited about the tournaments next semester!”

Though at first, she was placed on a novice team, she was quickly merged into the main team. Anna was impressed that the team had several coaches and their own debate room which they all had access to. The team had two debates each week, and other occasional workshops as well; it thus did not take long for Anna to gain a deep appreciation for her fellow debaters.

A highlight of the season for Anna was the 2019 Rocky Mountain Championship on the University of Denver campus on October 19th. It was a two-day event of competitive debating, with five rounds on the first day and two more on the second. Anna and her club brought four teams and two coaches to the tournament to engage in debates on topics from foreign military intervention to the use of internet trolling amongst feminists. “Debating 5 rounds in one day was probably the most challenging part of the experience,” says Anna. “Getting feedback on the last round felt amazing and well-deserved, especially upon learning that we placed second in the room. One of our teams broke into the finals, and we were all excited to support that team in their last round.”

Overall, Anna feels that her semester of debate in the U.S. helped her to grow as a speaker and to develop close connections with her teammates, both of which she is grateful for.

CLIMBING FOR A CAUSE

On September 11th, YEAR student Elizaveta took part in an event in honor of those who sacrificed their lives on that very day in 2001.

“A native of St. Petersburg studying at Ohio Northern University (ONU) this year, Elizaveta explains that the event honoring 9/11 was organized by her host mother together with the Ohio Northern Veterans Organization. A prayer was held in the ONU Chapel, donations were collected for troops stationed overseas, and a minute of silence was observed. However, the culmination of the event was the Stair Climb, which challenged participants to climb 110 flights of stairs – the equivalent of what the first responders had to climb on 9/11. “The gist of it was that we had to put ourselves in shoes of those who heroically saved lives on September 11th,” explains Elizaveta. “Over 100 people took part, which included campus students, faculty, and staff as well as disabled army veterans, and local first responders.” Elizaveta eagerly participated, and upon successfully completing all 110 flights she felt not only proud but also united with those around her by their common cause and recognition of something that should not be forgotten. Before she came to the U.S., the events of 9/11 were something she’d only read about in books. “To be honest, then I only memorized that it is something connected with blood, towers, and planes in a way too far away America. I used to have empathy only for those who were connected with me to an extent, dividing people into mine and others. Here I learned to feel sorry for a human as I see, no matter where you come from, our core needs and values are totally the same. Besides, now I know exactly how many flights of stairs those fallen men and women had to travel inside the World Trade Center that day. 110! It is tough even without a full firefighting gear.”

“Everyone was so glad to see me sweating but steadily reaching the distance. Now I more comprehend how it is important to recall those tragedies and people who lay down their lives for us. It is a step towards eradicating something similar in the future around the world.”