

AROUND THE REGION

Good deed in Siberia

Harford Scout helps bring playground to orphanage

By Mary Gail Hare

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I Alex Griffith doesn't remember it, but he lived the first year of his life at a Siberian hospital for abandoned children where the playground consisted of a single metal swing and an unkempt sandbox.

Today, because of the efforts of the North Harford High School sophomore, the play area has slides, a climbing wall and dozens of other pieces, and has become a symbol of friendship and cooperation between two nations separated by an ocean and vastly different ideologies.

Alex lived the first year of his life at a hospital for abandoned children in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk.

He was adopted in 1994 by Dwight and Jenny Griffith of Jarrettsville. As he grew, the Griffiths shared their journal of their trip to Russia with their son, one of their five adopted children.

The photo of the stark playthings gave him the motivation to launch the playground project.

For the past two years, Alex, his family, his Scout Troop 809 and the Bel Air Rotary Club have worked to raise money for the effort.

After collecting \$62,000 from pit beef and candy sales and donations, there was enough to purchase 20 playground pieces and ship them, along with two 8-foot-tall wooden carvings of an eagle and a bear that grace the entrance to playground.

Alex celebrated his 16th birthday this month in the town of his birth, as he and several other volunteers from Harford County completed their work.

"Kids were playing on the pieces the whole time we were building it," said Alex. "At the grand opening, there was a long line for the sliding board."

The project will almost certainly earn Alex his Eagle Scout badge, the highest Boy Scout honor. It has also generated good will, spawned friendships and led to the start of Siberia's first Scout troop.

"People kept telling us over and over that we didn't bring a playground to Krasnoyarsk, we brought a miracle," said Dwight Griffith, who traveled with his son, three other Scouts and their Scoutmaster on the 15-day trip. "Every day, we had people to help us, many with tears in their eyes thanking us."

One young man saw the story on Russian TV and rode his bike to the site. He stayed three days to help. An 18-year-old patient



DWIGHT GRIFFITH/PHOTO FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN
Alex Griffith (second from left) is thanked for his contributions to the playground at the Krasnoyarsk orphanage of his birth.

awaiting surgery spotted the activity from his hospital room and joined them. Doctors delayed the surgery, until the day the Americans left. One morning, when the Americans arrived on the construction site, they saw a Russian worker writing "U.S. + Russia = Friends" in the playground's sandy base.

The Russians would watch the work and pose for pictures by a sign the Americans had posted to describe the project.

"The Russians kept posing by the sign like it was a monument," said Christian Posko, 16, who used money he was saving for a car to help pay for the trip. "I guess they really thought we were building a miracle."

Shane Rymer, 18, a member of the same Scout troop who has joined the U.S. Marines and leaves for boot camp this weekend, said the trip "made me realize how privileged we are here and how much we take for granted."

Rotary International arranged for the Americans to stay with Krasnoyarsk families. The group toured the orphanage, where Alex would have lived, and visited Hospital 20, where he was born.

"It was really cool," Alex said. "Everyone knew why we had come and some even said, 'I know that kid.'"

Volunteer Dave Kraft gave one child a Boy Scout bolo tie at the grand opening ceremony. He spotted the child the next day, wearing the tie and a sash made from the red, white and blue streamers at the ribbon cutting. Several dozen children were playing on the equipment, while their parents watched from benches.

"It was just like any other playground, anywhere else in the world," he said.