

# 14 Year Old Boy Building Playground in Siberia

By: Christian Posko



Alex Griffith

Alex Griffith, of Forest Hill, Maryland is planning to build a playground at Children's Hospital #20 in the city of Krasnoyarsk, a city in remote Siberia region of the Russian Federation where he spent the first year of his life. Alex was adopted when he was 11 months old by his parents, Dwight and Jenny Griffith. Alex is one of 5 children the Griffiths adopted, the only they adopted internationally. The Griffiths worked with the Cradle of Hope Adoption Center to bring Alex home. They saw his picture on a flyer of waiting children with special needs. Alex was being cared for in a hospital where he was born prematurely, weighing less than 2 pounds and was malnourished, had rickets, and was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy. Krasnoyarsk was an "exile city" during the 70-year reign of the Soviet Union - once you went there you didn't come back. Krasnoyarsk was also a major center of the Stalin Gulag system housing several labor camps.

Recently, Alex read a journal that his father had written detailing their experience while traveling to Russia to adopt him in 1994. The journal mentioned a playground at Hospital # 20 in a state of utter disrepair. The playground had one rusty swing with a rotten wooden seat, a sandbox mostly covered in dirt and mud, and a small gazebo with a picnic table. Alex thought the playground was unsafe and decided he wanted to build a new playground so that the children of Krasnoyarsk could have a safe, fun place to play.

At the time Alex was reading this journal he was also brainstorming ideas for his Boy Scout Eagle Project. An Eagle Project is a service project helpful to any religious institution, school or community and Alex decided he wanted to provide service to his birth home in Russia by building a new playground.

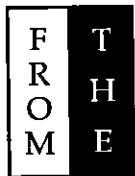
With this idea in his head, Alex contacted Linda Perilstein, the Executive Director of Cradle of Hope Adoption Center. When Alex spoke to Mrs. Perilstein about the project, she was thrilled. Mrs. Perilstein suggested Alex consider building a brightly colored, U.S. style playground equipment that might have more appeal to Krasnoyarsk officials. She then referred Alex to the organization Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoptions (FRUA) since they have had experience doing these type of projects.

Alex then contacted Eileen Delaney, the email coordinator for FRUA-DC who referred Alex to several organizations including Rotary International. Alex contacted Rotary International and a group called OrphanAct that puts projects together by connecting Russian Rotary Clubs with specific project needs with local U.S. sponsoring Rotary clubs. This was a little different, because typically the Russian clubs generate the projects and they are much smaller in nature. This project is a very big project and is being generated by a young boy in the U.S. Mrs. Perilstein said "We're really proud of Alex for taking on this big project in order to help children from his homeland who are in need of loving families. This is the first time an adopted child has planned such an amazing undertaking."

Alex then made contact with Tatiana Khegay, President of the Krasnoyarsk Rotary Club who said she "would be happy to help Alex in realization of his kind idea." Mrs. Khegay became Alex's eyes and ears on the ground, forwarding pictures of the playground, which to Alex's dismay, the condition of the playground has not changed from the time Alex was adopted 14 years ago. She made contact with the Chief of Hospital # 20 who gave his consent for the playground to be built. She also offered to allow Alex and his friends to stay in Rotary Club members homes when Alex travels to install the playground next year.

The idea of the new playground has now been passed along to many different people and organizations around the world. "Without the help, advice and guidance of Mrs. Perilstein from Cradle of Hope, Mrs. Delaney from FRUA and the many people from the Rotary organization this project would just be a nice dream, but with everyone's help it is really going to happen" said Alex. For Alex, the real bulk of the work is still ahead.

News



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With the help of the Playworld Systems playground company, Alex designed a new playground to be used by patients of Hospital #20, their families, and neighborhood children. The playground is designed for children ages 5-12, is ADA accessible, and has 20 components, including a double bay belt swing, a curved rock wall, crazy bone bridge, and multiple climbers and slides. The playground will be red, white and blue - the colors of both the Russian and American flags.

Alex is also planning to create 2 wooden totem poles. All the pictures of playgrounds in Russia he has seen have wood carvings of Russian folklore or animals. One will be of a bear, the unofficial symbol of Russia, and one of an eagle, the official symbol of America. Alex wants the totem poles to show unity between the 2 countries. He has contacted world renowned chain saw artist Randi Boni of Tennessee, to carve the totem poles. They will be using wood shipped in especially for the project from Alaska.

Alex has been promoting the project wherever possible. He set up a table to distribute literature at CHAC's Easter celebration at the Russian Embassy and he gave a presentation to the Bel Air Rotary Club, who have agreed to be the sponsoring club. Jay Van Duesen, a Bel Air remodeler, who was present when Alex gave his presentation to the Bel Air Rotary said, "everyone who saw the presentation was affected. Alex is a young kid who has taken on a large undertaking. I have faith in him." Alex is currently giving presentations to other Rotary clubs, scout groups and other community organizations.

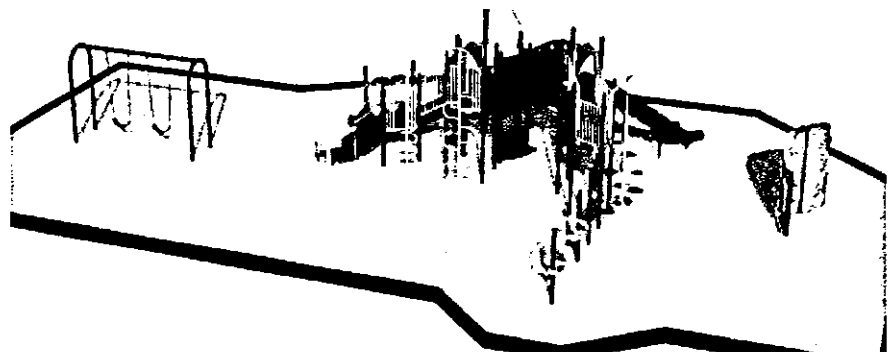
Alex will need to raise \$60,000 to purchase the playground and totem poles and ship them to Russia. Mark Welsh, President of the Bel Air Rotary, said that his organization is accepting donations for the project. This project has become a worldwide effort with Alex communicating and working with people in 13 states and 22 cities throughout America, Russia, Canada, and Brazil and is expanding every day. When the project is completed, Alex projects there will be over 2,200 volunteer hours expended. Alex will travel to Russia to install the playground in July-August 2009. He has, so far, about 10 people traveling with him to Russia to help install the playground.

When discussing this project with others, Alex likes to refer to a quote from Cara Sadoskaza, a coordinator for adoptions in Russia that he thinks best summarizes what he is doing. She said, "Years will pass. Children, that by the will of fate were orphans in Russia and ended up adopted and the citizens of the United States, will grow up. Of course the United States will be their motherland, but maybe their parents and relatives, they themselves, and their friends will feel something that connects them with Russia. Maybe their children's arms, stretched from one country to the other, through all the borders, above the heads of politicians, in spite of the tales and bad will of some people, will be able to tie our people with mutual fate, love and care better and stronger than any official international agreement." Alex believes his commitment to the Russians will forever link Russia, the United States, and the citizens involved in each country. Alex said, "I made a commitment to the Russians to complete this project and I will do it."

For more information on how you can help make this project a success, you can visit [www.krasplayground.org](http://www.krasplayground.org) or e-mail Alex at [alex\\_eagle@hughes.net](mailto:alex_eagle@hughes.net) or you can call his father, Dwight Griffith, at 410-557-8900. Donations can be sent to Bel Air Rotary Foundation, Inc. P.O. Box 53, Bel Air, MD 21014. and those who may contribute are asked to please mark Krasnoyarsk Playground Project on their donation.



**Current Krasnoyarsk Playground**



**Krasnoyarsk Playground Project**