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Alex Griffith, 15, has raised \$50,000 of the \$60,000 he needs to buy, ship and assemble a fully equipped playground to the orphanage he lived in. BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO: CHIAKI KAWAJIRI

Helping across borders

Boy Scout works toward giving Russian hospital a playground

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A Harford County boy might earn Scouting's highest honor with a community project thousands of miles from his home in Jarrettsville.

Life Scout Alex Griffith, 15, knows the criteria for the rank of Eagle involve service to the community, a school or church. Alex, adopted in 1994 by Dwight and Jenny Griffith, lived the first year of his life at a hospital for abandoned children in Krasnoyarsk, a city in the Siberian region of Russia. He wants to give the children living at Hospital No. 20 a playground.

The average Boy Scout does a project for his church or school or the firehouse, Alex said, "but I would like to provide service to my birth home."

The North Harford High School student has worked on the project for two years and is well on his way to securing the \$60,000 needed to purchase the equipment, ship it to Russia and set it up on the grounds of the hospital this summer.

"Krasnoyarsk gave me life and a chance to survive," he said. "I would like to give the children of Krasnoyarsk a safe and fun place to play."

Scouts usually choose a project closer to home, Harford County's Eagle Project co-coordinator said.

"Alex is a true idealist," said Mike Balog, who approved Alex's plan. "He broadened 'helpful to your community' to a global context. He has the greatest motives, exceptional fervor and truly wants to give back to an orphanage that can be considered his community."

The journal that his parents kept 14 years ago inspired Alex. The couple detailed their efforts to adopt the frail baby boy, suffering from malnutrition, a hernia and a mild case of cerebral palsy. They traveled to the city of nearly 1 million that sits along the Trans-Siberian Railroad and wrote down their impressions of the hospital.

Their account includes photos of wards filled with children who played games and rode tricycles in the hallways. For outdoor recreation, the orphanage offered only a rundown playground with a single rusted swing and a sandbox filled with mud. Years later, their son's research found little has changed at his birthplace.

Members of his Scout Troop 809 and the Bel Air Rotary Club are assisting Alex. The troop has divided into marketing, sales and installation committees and has helped Alex develop a Web site.

"If he needs help, we are here to help," said Andrew Parker, 15, a troop member.

Alex has spoken about his project to the Harford County Council, community groups and churches. He readily shares the details and likes to juxtapose photos of the playground today and diagrams of what he calls "a fancy, colorful play system."

"This is really his story," said Spencer Herculson, 18, an Eagle Scout who has been a mentor to Alex. "This is an awesome project, something he wants to do in his heart."

After countless speeches, e-mails and phone calls, Alex is nearly there. Working with Playworld Systems, he said he has chosen a fully accessible system with 20 components — in red, white and blue. Russians traditionally decorate recreation areas with folklore figures. Two 8-foot-tall wooden totem poles, carved in Harford County, will grace the entrance to Hospital No. 20. Alex chose an eagle and a bear, the dual symbols of his heritage.

"This is wonderful on so many different levels, and it's driven by children for other children," said Andrea Hartig, whose son is in the troop. "We don't always see that side of kids."

Several volunteers will practice assembling the play system here in the spring. Then they will disassemble and ship the components to Krasnoyarsk, a trip that will take at least 45 days by ship and train. Alex, his father and about 10 other volunteers will fly to Krasnoyarsk next summer and build the playground.

Alex is keeping his own journal now. He has logged more than 400 hours, exchanged more than 300 e-mails to 45 cities in four countries to research and complete this project. The effort will ultimately require 2,000 volunteer hours and about \$60,000, about \$50,000 of which has been raised from contributions, a letter-writing campaign, as well as pit beef and candy sales.

"This project could demonstrate that those of us adopted have not forgotten our birth home and are being raised to be good, responsible people," he said. "This project will forever link the hundreds of people involved, half a world apart, in a good and positive way. I made a commitment to complete this project, and I will do it."