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Nome Shared Beringian Heritage Program Report

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The Nome Community Center, in cooperation with the National Park Service and Park Beringia in Provideniya, provided a seven day international experience for twelve students and five adults (including translator) during the summer of 2010. Between July 5 and July 12, youth ages 14 years to 18 years, visited Provideniya and New Chaplino for a cultural exchange with peers, leaders, and distant relatives. The insights gained and experiences shared have greatly impacted the participants beyond the visit and across all borders.

This exchange between the Nome Community Center in Nome, Alaska, and Park Beringia fostered interest in, knowledge of, and respect for shared international cultural and subsistence practices; improved communication between the youth of both regions; and integrated traditional and modern concepts of cultural awareness. Students performed valuable work throughout this project, creating documentaries and crafts they shared with their Russian peers and host families. Observing and working within each culture, the youth learned and were able to practice skills they continue to use for the benefit of themselves, their families, and their communities.



Figure 1 Students and new friends in front of New Chaplino sign

In 2009, twelve students and three adult chaperones from New Chaplino and Provedeniya were hosted by the Nome Community Center for a week of cultural, subsistence, and environmental education. This important exchange resulted in the sharing of ideas and traditions that were then presented at a public forum for all of Nome. This event provided local Nome citizenry with the opportunity to learn about the Chukotka Region and participate in meals and dancing. Upon return to Provedeniya and New Chaplino, the students presented their new experiences in Nome to their schools.

The continuation of this exchange in July 2010 allowed the students from Nome and St. Lawrence Island to share the experiences the group in 2009 had and to offer a community-wide program showing those who had not been to Nome and the surrounding area, how similar and different lifestyles could be.

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Importantly, students who came from Russia to Nome in 2009 were able to renew friendships they had made while visiting Alaska.

In preparation for this experience, students who were accepted to the program (through an application and reference process) began meeting every Thursday starting in February to learn about Provideniya and New Chaplino; hear from guest speakers who had ancestral roots in Russia; script and produce a documentary to share with their hosts; and practice speaking Russian. The students' buy-in was impressive, and their hard work was evident when we interacted in Russia. Nataliya Kalyuzhina, our Park Berinigia contact and coordinator, was a true asset throughout the paperwork process as was a local resident, Sue Steinacher, who was preparing for her own trip to Provideniya that same summer. Waiting for the propusk to be approved was nail-biting, but working through Red Star for the invitation and other paperwork was without issue. The local office of the Postal Service gave us excellent assistance with securing passports (one postal worker flew out to St. Lawrence Island to get photos and signatures for passports in a three hour marathon of travel – above and beyond all expectations). Bering Air provided excellent support, and the National Park Service, particularly Ms. Janis Kozlowski, helped us work through a last minute funding issue that would have halted the trip as planned. Overall, the entire preparation process was without major issue.

Upon arrival in Provideniya, the students and chaperones were surprised by the border patrol presence at the airport and the entire length of the customs process; however, after those first two hours, the welcoming party greeting the students outside lifted any unease. After a day in Provideniya, students were very pleased to arrive in New Chaplino, an area that felt more comfortable and like a village around Nome. Students were placed with different host families, a plan that came together at the last minute because the government decided our group could not stay in or eat meals at the school. While some students had some hesitation with this arrangement at first, these circumstances turned-out to be the best thing that could have happened. (And several students were pleased to share a common language in Siberian Yu'pik.) The youth were made to feel so welcome and were assimilated into the households with such warmth they often did not join our entire group for meals, instead choosing to partake in host family dinners.



Figure 2 Alaskan youth drumming with the Provideniya Dancers

Our schedule in the village was busy and productive. From climbing a mountain and leaving a time capsule, to having basketball tournaments, to rowing whaling vessels, to participating in traditional dances, to exploring the Park Berinigia, the group had a host of experiences and activities. On the sixth day, the group from Nome presented an audio/visual presentation they had worked diligently on in Nome. This program gave our hosts the opportunity to learn about day-to-day life and traditions in Nome and on the Island, and allowed them to see how youth see their own culture. The students did an excellent job and left a good impression on our hosts.

The seven days went by entirely too quickly. Most of the village came out to see our group off, and because our plane did not have landing permissions from Moscow, many of our host families stayed with the group for three hours at the airport while the proper paperwork was submitted. New friends were

certainly made and regular communication between many of the host families and students continue to this day.

The positive impacts on both groups, young and old, are many; however, one of the most impressive experiences we witnessed as Nome Community Center staff members is the number of shy and removed students who traveled with our group who flourished in their temporary environment. Students who lack self-esteem and rarely offer



opinions became confident and vocal; one student – the only non-Native student – who had so much trepidation about her background was recognized as the best rower among our group; and one young man, troubled and in and out of Juvenile Detention (this author insisted he had this experience) in Nome – was adored by his host family, came out of his shell, and experienced a positive home environment for possibly the first time. He insisted New Chaplino was now his new home. He had a chance to start over...if only for a week.

Figure 3 Students rowing whaling vessel together

We thank the National Park Service and everyone involved with this project for making it possible. I know we will never be able to fully share through words how positive this experience was for all of us.