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in Berdychiv

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a shop

Not afraid ANYMORE



Make a difference: 30 children came to the camp from all over Ukraine

THE CAMPERS
ATTENDED
LESSONS ABOUT
HEALTHY LIVING,
SELF-ESTEEM,
PEER PRESSURE,
COUNTER-
HUMAN
TRAFFICKING,
HIV/AIDS,
LEADERSHIP,
AND PEER
EDUCATION

“ **N**ow I know that it is okay to stand in the same room with someone who is HIV-positive...We must do something to make a difference...It isn't fair that these people must live like this...We have made a project for our town to teach people not to be afraid. ”

Such phrases were heard during one of the last sessions at Camp HEAL this past August where campers shared what they had learned during their time at the week-long camp devoted to teaching Ukrainian children to become peer educators in their communities.

The camp was the idea of four volunteers, Kristen Schaefer, Julianne Dunn, Teresa Olson, and Shelley Swendiman, who last autumn attended the Peace Corps-sponsored PEPFAR conference together with their Ukrainian counterparts. After learning about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ukraine and the lack of knowledge amongst youth, the volunteers decided that training kids to educate their peers was the best way to get the message out about HIV/AIDS.

Camp HEAL (Human Trafficking, Education, AIDS/HIV, Leadership) was designed and implemented in partnership with the Dzerzhynsk Office of Social Services. Tatiana Semenova, who works for the office and attended the PEPFAR conference, helped to organize the camp. She worked together with her colleagues, Elena Kubisheva and Victoria Syrik, and PCV Kristen Schaefer, to secure town administration support, seek out local partners, find a location for the camp, and collaborate to ensure the success of the camp.

On August 6th, 30 children with their volunteers from all over Ukraine traveled to Svatogorsk, in Eastern Ukraine to attend the camp. The lessons were taught by volunteers and observed by Ukrainian counterparts. At the camp, the campers attended lessons about healthy living, self-esteem, peer pressure, counter-human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, leadership, and peer education.

At the end of the week, together with their volunteers, the campers developed projects to implement in their communities to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and fight discrimination. While everyone was sad when it was finally time to leave, there is hope that these youth who are now trained peer educators will now return home and work within their communities to make a difference and join the fight against HIV/AIDS in Ukraine.

USTA: more than just a shop

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The town of Bakhchisaray, nestled between two plateaus in southwestern Crimea, has always been the heartland of the indigenous Crimean Tatar people. Currently, Bakhchisaray is a thriving tourist destination where both Ukrainian and international travelers flock each summer to wander the hallways of the Khans' Palace and climb through the cave cities of Chufut-Kale. Though it is best known for these two major attractions, this summer saw the opening of a craft store that is working to preserve and promote Bakchisaray's lesser-known heritage as a "city of masters".

For sale: artists now have a craft store to sell their works

USTA, meaning "Master" in the Crimean Tatar language, is the first permanent commercial venue for a cooperative of over 20 independent master artisans. Located within a working craft center that houses embroidery, pottery and jewelry studios, USTA was the brainchild of Ayshe Osmanov, head of a local non-profit organization that works to restore and grow the master crafts, and PCV Anna Frumes. "We had all these artists without a central place to sell their goods, tourists who are willing to spend money, and an NGO that was ready to become self-sustainable," says Frumes. "Starting a social entrepreneurship that sold these handmade crafts to tourists just made sense."

USTA is more than just a shop, however, part of its goal is raising awareness about Crimean Tatar culture and history. To that effect, every visitor to USTA is given a tour of the craft center that includes a discussion of both the history of Crimean Tatars and explanations of the craft-making process.

Opened with SPA granted funds on July 1st, by September 1st USTA has earned over \$3,000 in income, with \$700 being donated to the NGO that works to train apprentices in the traditional crafts. In addition to commercial success, USTA already boasts an impressive guest list that includes Sarah Johnstone - a travel writer from The Lonely Planet series and the current President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko.

"Bakchisaray has always been a city of masters," says Frumes. Now, with the opening of USTA, the master craftsman finally have a home in their heartland.

Added to guest list: President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko



A new STAR in Berdychiv



■ **A common project:** bringing the two communities closer together

The city of Berdychiv in central Ukraine is one rich in culture and diversity. It is especially noted for its strong Jewish history, and was once known as “The Jerusalem of Volyn,” Volyn being a province in the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At the turn of the 20th Century, 80% of the town's residents were Jewish, and Berdychiv was the second largest Jewish community in the Russian Empire. Many famous Jews have called this town home, from Sholem Aleichem (major Yiddish author, his stories provided the basis for “Fiddler on the Roof”), Vladimir Horowitz (famous pianist) and most importantly to religious Jews, Levi Yosef Yitzchok (Jewish “Tzadik” or “saint” of Berdychiv).

The Second World War devastated the Jewry of Berdychiv, but miraculously, to this day, Berdychiv remains a center of Jewish life not only in Ukraine but in Eastern Europe in general. “Ask any orthodox Jewish child to point to Moscow on a map,” said a visiting Rabbi to Berdychiv, “and he or she might have to search for a minute. Ask them where Berdychiv is, and they'll know right away!” Sadly, there remains somewhat of a disconnect between this long-established Jewish community and their Ukrainian co-habitants, not caused by any feelings of explicit ill-will, but simply by a lack of regular contact and common projects and goals.

Peace Corps Volunteer Christopher Wilz felt lucky to live and work in this town. After befriending local Rabbi, Moshe Thaler, the two sought a way to connect the Jewish community with the larger non-Jewish community. They both felt that a common project would bring the two communities closer together and help build strong cross-cultural understanding. Thus, the idea of the “Star Center” was born.

What began as a table conversation between Rabbi Thaler, and PCV Chris Wilz, gradually evolved into a project funded by a Peace Corps grant that would open the first community educational center in Berdychiv. The Star Center, as envisioned by Rabbi Thaler, would be a place, “Where all people (both children and adults, Jew and non-Jew) could come to learn English, computer skills and receive job-hunting, educational and business advice from a staff of local, well-trained teachers and professionals.”

■ **Brand new:** the project was funded by a Peace Corps grant



The center is open to all people, free of charge, but asks that every student “pay” for their classes by participating in their choice of community service projects, ranging from a “big-brother/big-sister” program at the local orphanage to a weekend park clean-up in Berdychiv’s central park. For those who are short on free-time, or not able to participate, donations are accepted in lieu of community service.

The grand opening of the Star Center, on Ukrainian Independence day, brought local educators, students and politicians, and of course, the Rabbi and his associates, together for the first meeting and ribbon-cutting of what will be a truly multi-cultural, community based, educational center. In the words of Vasil Mazur, the mayor of Berdychiv, “The city of Berdychiv became famous largely because of the (historical) Jewish community, and it’s very pleasant that the representatives of the (current) Jewish community have done everything possible to revive the glorious traditions of Berdychiv.”

The building for the Star Center was kindly donated to the community by Rabbi Thaler and the Jewish community at large, and he will continue to pay for the upkeep and utilities of the building. A mixture of fund-raising and donations by students of the center will work to pay teachers’ salaries and to keep the center financially independent and self-sustaining. Finally, the city methodologist of foreign-languages, Olha Hrubenka, has agreed to become the director of the Star Center, and will organize both classes and schedules for the center.

The Star Center has become a true community center, linking together the Jewish community and the larger non-Jewish community of Berdychiv.





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FROM THE **FIELD**
B I M O N T H L Y N E W S L E T T E R



US Peace Corps
in Ukraine