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Diema's Dream

An orphan is not someone who is poor, but someone whom no one wants

London hosts a plethora of events: nearly every day there are concerts and exhibitions, related to Russia in some way. This is evidence not just of the activity of the Russian community in the UK, but also of the British people's interest in Russia and its culture. That is why we were not surprised when our paper was invited to attend a charity auction.

But what happened on May 10 at the Landmark Hotel was not only surprising but also admirable.

This annual charity auction is organized by Diema's Dream Foundation and its founder, an American woman Mary Dudley. The invited guests included international businessmen and bankers, art connoisseurs and artists, who are united in their desire to help disabled orphans in Russia.

The best exemplars of Russian national creations and products from Palekh, Gzhel, Khokhloma; the crockery from the Lomonosov factory; paintings by Russian artists; fabulously beautiful Matryusha and unique Easter eggs, were presented at the auction. Everything was chosen with love and knowledge of the Russian culture, and all the items were purchased at impressive prices.

From 1994 to 1997 Mary Dudley lived in Moscow and worked extensively for charities. In one of the children's homes she met a two-year old paralyzed boy – an orphan, Diema. When Diema was 5, he was transferred to the children's home for invalids, and Mary lost him in the labyrinth of the bureaucratic system. After a few months she found him in the children's home in the experimental group, headed by Leonid and Galina Mogilevsky, who dedicate their lives to helping the disabled orphans.

We asked Leonid Mogilevsky to tell us about their work.

“In the homes for children with severe mental and physical disabilities there are sections for the so-called “recumbent” children, who are not entitled to anything but the sanitary care and basic medical attention in accordance with the existing norms”, - says Leonid, – “In such wards there would be 1 caregiver per 30-35 children.

We tried to create an atmosphere as close as possible to a natural home environment for these children. A child would be picked up, held and cuddled, talked to and called by his name – many children did not know their names. Many could not chew and took food from the bottle.

Gradually the semi-empty rooms (there were only beds and an empty cot) started to fill with toys, bright pictures and religious icons on the walls. A tape-recorder was bought for each ward, and music (children's, classical and church) was played for the children.

These children were branded by the terms “recumbent”, “uneducable”. But even a healthy person “chained” to his bed forever and deprived of any communication, would start deteriorating.

At the end of 1996, fate brought us an amazing meeting with a person who became our helper, a like-minded friend, and finally our sponsor. She came to our children's home searching for a boy, whom she looked after in the baby home. The boy was in our care and the person we met was Mary Dudley. Mary started her Foundation in honour of that boy, whose name was Diema Martynov.

Spring 1997 brought a truly revolutionary event into the lives of the children. Mary Dudley brought to the children's home prams and wheel-chairs, clothes, foot wear and pampers - and we had an opportunity to take the children out to the hall in turn, and then to the outside world. The wheelchairs opened a possibility to take children on excursions. The zoo, dolphinarium, excursions in the city, the puppet theatre – this way the world started to open up for these children.

In parallel to the program of providing care and development of the children, the medical work was progressing positively. We invited a psychiatrist and a pediatrician who carried out thorough examination and vaccination of the children. They started to be treated according to the doctor's prescription and not by the standard scheme. This resulted in the decrease and in some cases complete cessation of the use of psycho-sedative medicines.

We needed the sponsors. We wrote to Mary, and as usual she eagerly responded to our appeal.

Mary and her sister Debra Cockrell undertook heroic efforts to support our work. In autumn of 1999 Mary and Debra came to Moscow, and we discussed our plan for cooperation. They started organizing the auctions to raise funds to support our program and to find more supporters. They have involved practically the whole family – two other sisters and their husbands.

Thanks to their selfless work and support – financial as well as moral – thanks to their tireless care and readiness to help us, we are able to continue our work.

One of the most important aspects of our work was the children's integration into society. We thought of a concept “family-friend”, the essence of which is as follows. Every child needs close people – grown-ups, who could visit the child, take him to their home for weekends, people who could at least partially replace the family. At 18, all the children are transferred to a home for

adults, and they must have close people who care about their lives and who could look after their rights.

There is a prejudiced opinion that the children with severe mental and physical disabilities don't need love, kindness or care. There is a view that such children would not understand anything and therefore do not need specialists who can work with such children.

Our experience, however, shows that it is the indifference and cruelty of people around the children and the obsolete norms, which still exist in the children's homes, that made most of these children "incumbent" and "uneducable".

A child may have non-expensive clothes and not many toys, but if he is loved and cared for, his life ceases to be an orphan's life. Because an orphan is not the one who is poor, but the one whom no one wants."

If you are touched by this information, and you would like to help please visit Diema's Dream website at www.diemasdream.com.

Elena Ragozhina