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DECEMBER, 2008: The majority of 2008 was fairly quiet for the Sister City Committee. Aside from keeping in touch with our friends in Suzdal by phone and email there was no exchange until the week of December 26, 2008 to January 4, 2009. At that time, John Breda and Barbara Coish traveled to Suzdal. During the visit, monetary donations from the Town of Windham (\$500.) and the Windham Presbyterian Church (\$1000.) were delivered to the orphanages #3 and #5. Upon arrival in Suzdal, it was discovered that the children in the two orphanages had been combined into one building. At this time Orphanage #5 is being remodeled and in the future that building will be again utilized for the children.

A similar decision as last year was made in regard to our monetary donations. The money available was divided and half donated to the hospital in order to continue renovations there. We were able to see the room, which had been remodeled last year with our donation dollars. A newborn baby girl and mother were there in that room when I visited. A sign was on the wall that states the room was remodeled with donations from Windham, New Hampshire.

This was the first time that any visitors from Windham were in Suzdal to celebrate the arrival of the New Year. It was very interesting to share the celebration with friends. The evening began with a family meal around 10PM followed by a televised announcement of the New Year arrival by the Russian President. After midnight the sky was filled with the light of fireworks and the sounds resounded for hours. Gifts such as we might share on Christmas were given after midnight. There was basically one gift for each personally presented by the giver, who expressed good wishes while directly addressing the recipient of the gift. It was a wonderful evening of New Year excitement and gift giving rolled into one. Even Ded Moroz and the Snow Maiden made a visit to the home where our celebration was happening. The religious holiday of Christmas is celebrated on January 6.

A highlight of our visit was an afternoon meeting and meal with the majority of the students who visited Windham in November 2007. It was wonderful to see them again, to see their growth and to share memories with them. They were all anxious, to hear about their Windham host families and expressed the wish for their hosts to visit them in Suzdal.

Once again we carried a duffel full of fabric and quilting supplies to the quilters of the Suzdal Swatch. The women shared about the exhibitions in which they had won many medals for their work. All of the women had made a lunch from their favorite recipes, which we enjoyed together.

A holiday concert for children was presented in the Cultural Center and we enjoyed the singing and dancing as much as the children in the audience. The talent displayed by the youth of Suzdal is amazing and much of the concert represented Russian traditions, which are being expressed beautifully by the young singers and dancers.

As always the political meetings occurred with the Administration of Suzdal and the Administration of the Suzdal Region (Ryon). Gifts were shared with each and news of the recent events under each town's responsibility were discussed. Several books in English were delivered to the library there and we learned that many of the books we donate are always in circulation with the local readers. A letter, which follows this report, was sent to Town Administrator David Sullivan with greetings and an invitation for additional Windham residents to visit Suzdal in the future.

Suzdal is a museum town and is a vacation destination for many Russians, as well as many visitors from around the world. Economic development has happened in Suzdal, evidenced by the number of hotels that have been built in the past five years. Now there are 47 hotels (not counting bed and breakfast places) and 30 churches in the town; compared to the one tourist center and 30 churches that were present when we first began our visits in the early 90's. Our hope is that this expansion can be fully utilized and the town will continue to flourish economically.

John and I plan to make one or two more visits to Suzdal in 2009. We encourage anyone who wishes to travel there with us to seriously consider doing so. It is important to remember however, that it takes time for invitations to be received and for visas to be issued. Traveling to Russia is wonderful but it takes serious planning ahead.

Barbara Coish, Chairman