

Taking the Road Less Traveled – Results at the Crossroads

By Jeanette Morris

“Mama, please stop crying. What you are doing is crazy anyway. I’ll pay you the 1000 rubles (\$27) salary you are getting if you will quit teaching this Crossroads thing at the school. The students you have are too far gone.”

Svetlana Barova, a former accountant, was back in the university earning her teaching certificate when she first learned about the Campus Crusade character-building curriculum, “Youth at the Crossroads.” She took the training, and then taught it for the first time to her two teenage sons. The results were positive, not only in her sons, but in herself. “I learned how to be open with my kids, and to bring them truth and warmth,” she said during her final interview for the 2006 Best Crossroads Teacher contest held in Samara, Russia. But when she brought the curriculum into the public school classroom, the reception was less than positive. Her son begged her to quit. So did her husband who was afraid for her personal safety as well as her sanity as she attempted to affect changes in the school’s most violent, disrespectful and foul-mouthed hooligans.

However, Svetlana (her name means “light” in Russian) refused to give up. And over the course of the school year, something extraordinary happened—something that still leaves me wondering if I understood her correctly during her contest interview with me in June.

“At first, my ninth grade students resisted the lessons. They refused to communicate with each other and were very aggressive – even to the point of name-calling and fighting physically. But these lessons and activities were unique – which is why I myself was drawn to the curriculum. There is nothing like it. Soon the principles became clear to the students because the format makes the ideas easy to grasp. Eventually, my students started relating to each other in a positive way, and becoming friends. Gradually they began to trust me too.

“Following the presentation of the Crossroads unit on HIV/AIDs and STDs, the director of our school invited a local representative of AIDs prevention to speak to the upper grade students in an assembly. His goal was to acknowledge the ‘given’ of teen sex and to encourage the use of condoms as the main preventative measure.

“My students went crazy! In the middle of his presentation, they rose from their seats and began yelling, ‘Are you trying to kill us! Don’t you love us? You only want our money for the condoms – you don’t really care if we become infected.’

“The speaker was stunned with this response. As the students continued to rail against him, he stood in silence, then hung his head in shame. Finally when it was silent, he raised his head, asked for their forgiveness, and walked off the platform.”

Yes, I’m sure this is what Svetlana said. She went on to share that the same boys that were fighting and cursing, and previously visiting prostitutes, are now part of the “modesty patrol” - advising their female classmates against wearing improper, scanty and suggestive clothing. This group of kids is eager to work with the younger students in the school as positive role models, as well as with kids in local orphanages, to bring them the benefits of the lessons of good character and moral upbringing that Crossroads offers.

There is a strong faith element to the Crossroads curriculum that is often an obstacle for public school programs. However, Svetlana is undeterred and often uses her own personal life situations as examples when questions arise. Once a student (another former hooligan) asked her what she does when her sons want to do something she disapproves of. Her answer, "I pray for my kids to make the right decision." The student's response: "Your kids are lucky."

Do Svetlana's son and husband still want her to quit? Actually, her son now assists her with the lesson activities in her classroom, and goes with her to the orphanage to teach lessons there. Her husband has told her how much he respects her for "sticking with it."

Svetlana is one of 2000 teachers, social workers, rehab center directors, and church leaders that have been trained to teach "Youth at the Crossroads." Her results are not unique – but remarkable in that they occurred in her first year in the classroom. To paraphrase poet Robert Frost, she journeyed down "the road less traveled" and what a difference it has made!