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Living the Language

Alumni trio translates their Russian skills into careers with a global focus.

Story by CANDACE SCHILLING

Marina Balina, professor of Russian at Illinois Wesleyan, doesn't want students to just learn a language. She wants them to live it. Beyond career preparation or resume building, Balina tries to instill in her students the belief that learning a new language can be "a life-changing experience." Knowing only one language limits not just communication but also the ability to fully understand and enjoy other cultures, she believes. "Language is not just a technical tool," Balina says. "Learning another language means becoming a different person."



When teaching any level of language, Balina likes to share details that bring the nation's or region's culture to life. At left, she shares a matryoshka (nesting doll) with her May Term students prior to the group's departure to Russia. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Balina underwent such a transformation herself. A native of Russia who earned her Ph.D. at Leningrad State University (now St. Petersburg), Balina joined IWU's faculty in 1989 and is now a member of the University's Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures. When she first emigrated from Russia to America, Balina had limited knowledge of formal grammar "and my conversational skills were almost nonexistent." She smiles as she recalls that, upon entering a pizza parlor, a host asked her family, "For here or to go?" — and they promptly turned on their heels and walked out of the restaurant.

Such experiences have taught Balina that to grasp the "feel" of a nation's or region's culture one must really master the language that is spoken there. That's one reason Balina relishes teaching Russian 101 and "still can't get over the magic" of helping students to "move beyond their fears of studying an unknown subject." No matter what language you study, Balina believes you will benefit from it. "Language is like a living body," she says. Writing, speaking, or reading — everyone can find an area in which to excel. "It is my

firm belief that no one can fail in a language class. If it's taught correctly, it's enjoyable, a feast, a celebration."

Sometimes her students stop after an introductory course; others go on. Although a major in Russian is no longer available, students can choose an international studies major with a concentration in "Russian and Eastern European studies." A minor in Russian language and literature is also offered at Illinois Wesleyan, as are travel courses to Russia. This spring, Balina guided 18 students on a May Term trip through St. Petersburg, Novgorod, and Moscow, where they examined the impact of those cities' cultural histories during three major periods: the Russian Empire, Soviet Russia, and Post-Soviet society.

While Balina promotes the idea that learning a language can change one's life, several of her students have turned that concept into a daily reality in their careers and lifestyles. She says the three alumni whose profiles follow are just a few of Illinois Wesleyan's many language-study graduates who have shown that "the study of language can take you to so many places."

Small world, big dreams

A decision **John Heisel '02** made as a teenager changed his life.

Heisel knew he wanted to spend his junior year of high school as an exchange student. When representatives for the American Field Service (AFS) program brought their catalog to his home in Rockford, Ill., he selected Russia "because I thought it would be 180 degrees different than suburban America."

Heisel says he did not speak a word of Russian when he moved to Tver, a city at the confluence of the Volga and Tvertsa rivers, in August 1996. Although his language teacher in Rockford offered classes in Russian and Spanish, he had chosen to study the latter. One wall of his Spanish classroom carried a poster which read, "Learning a foreign language makes the world smaller."

Heisel remembers scoffing at that message — until he lived abroad. "Living in another country helps you break down stereotypes," he says. Exchange students learn about more than just their host country, according to Heisel, who met international students from Thailand, Brazil, New Zealand, and other countries during his first trip to Russia. "We were all having the same 'fish out of water' experience."

As he lived with his host family for 10 months, he picked up a nice Russian vocabulary — and a passion for the language. After returning to Rockford for his senior year of high school, he continued his study of Russian at a local college.

When Heisel arrived at Illinois Wesleyan, he chose Russian language as his major because "I knew it, I was good at it, and I wanted to continue studying the language." Even so, his personal assessment is that he was a "pretty poor student." Balina recalls, "John was a challenge. He is incredibly gifted and smart, but he never goes a straight path. ... He came [to IWU] with an advanced level of Russian, but he also mixed Russian and English." Heisel admits he initially preferred "developing my lexicon — increasing the number of words I knew" to learning the

complexities of Russian grammar because, although his grammar was poor during his initial stint in Russia, he was understood. However, as the growth of his lexicon plateaued, he began to pick up Russian grammar as well.

Studying the language was not enough to satisfy Heisel's interest in Russia, and in the fall of his junior year, he arrived in Moscow as part of a program run by the University of Arizona for students from multiple universities. He interned for an English-language, alternative newspaper called the *eXile*. By the following summer, he was ready to return to Russia. "I turned 21 in the spring, and I had a little money saved," he says. He contacted the *eXile* independently, asking the staff how much they could pay if he worked that summer. He accepted their offer of \$300 a week — just enough to cover the rent on his Russian apartment.

Though he officially belongs to the Class of 2002, Heisel completed his IWU studies in the fall of 2001. By February 2002, he was living full-time in Russia.

After changing jobs a few times over the course of nine or 10 months in the country, he became the research editor for a bank in Moscow. Once again, Heisel was in a position to learn something new. The role of research editor taught him more about the world of finance — something he did not study in college as a Russian major with a minor in philosophy. He hoped to progress to a new position within the bank, but when such a job was not available he made a move to Sovlink, a Russian brokerage firm, in November 2005. Heisel spends his working hours selling stock to fund managers; most of his clients are based in Europe. All of his co-workers are Russian, so Heisel continues to use both English and Russian daily.

When dealing with American clients on the West Coast, he relies heavily on e-mail to overcome the difficulties presented by a time differences. "The Internet makes everything so much easier," he says. E-mail also serves as a link to friends and family in the U.S., since he returns only once or twice each year.

Heisel continues to enjoy life as an "expatriate," living legally in Russia as an American citizen and paying the flat 13-percent tax rate there.



Heisel (above) lives and works in Moscow, which he describes as "truly a world-capital city. ... Anything you want to do, you can."

Russia is not the drab, gray country a younger Heisel once expected to find. “I had heard people were ‘poor,’ and yet there were more Mercedes here than I had seen anywhere.”

Heisel was glad his interview with IWU Magazine was concluding on schedule, since he planned to watch a live broadcast of the Chicago Cubs game, starting at 11:35 a.m. Chicago time, 8:35 p.m. in Moscow. “Moscow is truly a world-capital city, 24 hours a day ... with color and personality,” Heisel says. And after the workday ends, “anything you want to do, you can do.”

A love affair with language

After **Meghan Murphy-Lee '93** arrived at IWU in the fall of 1989, the economics major attended the first Russian class offered by the University, taught by Professor Marina Balina. Murphy-Lee discovered more than a passion for the Russian language and culture in her IWU classroom — she found a foundation for her future.

Balina says Murphy-Lee loved the language so much, she did everything possible to become fluent. “She was very serious about it from the beginning — hardworking, dedicated, goal-oriented, and self-motivated.”

After a few semesters of Russian classes, Murphy-Lee says she wanted to change her major. With no Russian major available at that time, she chose a “contract major” in Russian by working with an advisor to select classes. Balina helped her choose a college in St. Petersburg so she could spend a year studying in Russia to collect enough class credits.

Today, Murphy-Lee has a master’s degree in Russian and Slavic languages from the University of Arizona and a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas. Since 2003, she has been a visiting assistant professor of Russian and Slavic studies at the University of Arizona.

Generating more student interest in Russian is a part of her job, she says, and students tend to be pragmatic, asking about the practical uses for the language. “I think right now, Russian is the third-most-spoken language in the world,” she says. “There are lots of ways to use a Russian degree — you don’t have to teach ... or have a master’s degree or Ph.D.” For example, Murphy-Lee mentions that Jewish community centers in Tucson hire Russian speakers to work with émigrés. Other career options could take people to Washington, D.C. Adding Russian to a major, such as business, journalism or science, can make graduates more marketable.

“I also tell [students], if you’re really interested in something, and you love it, it makes work so much easier,” she says. “Even though you have to work hard, your job is a joy, and if you love what you do, things seem to fall into place.”



Visits to Russia as a student influenced Murphy-Lee's decision to teach the language.

for freshmen. "It's not a language class; it's more of a preparatory course, a culture course like non-Western civilization." Although her classroom holds 300 students, she sometimes has to turn students away. "This semester, we had 100 people on a waiting list."

Also popular is her folklore course, Slavic Folklore in our World: Vampires and Werewolves. When talking about history or folklore, the use of Russian terms is essential, she says, "and this gets them interested" in learning more.

She loves working with students and talking with them. "I try to be very approachable. Professor Balina was always like that. ... You almost feel like you're a part of her family after taking Russian from her."

Technology enables Murphy-Lee to keep even the largest class interactive. "Responder units" equip students to answer her questions and quizzes, and she can also check answers individually to see if a student needs help based on correct and incorrect selections.

While things have fallen into place for Murphy-Lee in terms of her career, she says her initial decision to study Russian "wasn't pragmatic at all." She fell in love with the language and later discovered that she adored the culture even more. "I didn't think about finding a job ... The classical music, the literature drew me to Russia — such an exotic place, a mix of East and West. The history is almost like a soap opera."

Murphy-Lee took history courses at Illinois Wesleyan as a part of her major, and the students watched history in the making as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Berlin Wall was torn down. "When we were studying communism, the Soviet Union was falling apart. We talked about it in class as it happened." As she spent a year in Russia (1992-93), she watched "the beginning of the transition into democracy."

Classes with Balina stirred an interest in teaching, and Murphy-Lee now incorporates what she experienced into her own teaching style. "(Balina) was an inspiration," she says. "I wanted to be like that."

Murphy-Lee teaches a general education course

Another enjoyable aspect of her role as a professor is the autonomy. “I can create my own rules. When you teach, you can teach the way you want.” Teaching is a 12-month job, she says, and the work does not stop at 5 p.m. or when classes end for the summer. She spent the past summer in Moscow participating in a professional development program with other teachers of Russian.

Murphy-Lee has noticed that even though she is not instructing a Russian language course this semester, she finds plenty of opportunities to exercise her skills with former students who come to her with questions. “And sometimes, Russian émigrés come to our department for help,” she says.

While she enjoys her students at Arizona, Murphy-Lee says her preference would be to teach in a more intimate setting. “My goal has always been to teach at a small liberal arts school like IWU, where I could have more interaction with my students. You might have to teach more classes, but with only 20-25 students.

“That’s where you have the most impact.”

Found in translation

In the fall of 1990, **Laurel Nolen** was just another IWU first-year student with an undecided major. With one year of Russian language in her high school transcripts, she signed up for Russian 101.

At the time, she did not see a master’s degree and a translation-based career in her future, but Nolen did notice a pattern: Russian was the first class she chose during each enrollment period. Like Murphy-Lee, Nolen decided to earn a “contract major” in Russian.

Balina says Nolen “was a brilliant student from the very beginning. She was trying everything, but she just loved the language — she loved speaking the language.”

Even while studying in Russia her junior year, Nolen — whose parents, Richard and Linda Roper Nolen, are both Class of ’67 IWU alumni — says a career was not on her mind. “I was taking it one day at a time, learning about the culture and learning as much of the language as I could.”

She jokes that after she returned to the States, “Professor Balina said, ‘Go to the Monterey Institute [for graduate school],’ and I said, ‘Yes, Professor Balina.’ When she told me there was a program there for interpretation and translation, it just clicked.” Nolen would go to the Monterey Institute of International Studies, earning a master’s degree in Russian translation and interpretation in 1996. (Translators such as Nolen work with the written word; interpreters work with spoken language.)

Balina’s previous life in the Soviet Union gives her a unique perspective as an educator, according to Nolen. “Imagine living under a totalitarian regime, then coming to the freest country in the world where people have the right to think for themselves, but some don’t want to

or like to.” Balina does demand that her students work as independent thinkers, “and that’s a good thing,” Nolen says.

After completing her studies at the Monterey Institute, Nolen remained in California to work at the institute’s Center for Nonproliferation Studies as a research associate/staff translator. “We would read Russian newspapers, trade journals, and other ‘open sources.’ From that, we could understand what was going on at various nuclear sites.” Nolen did some translation work, but spent most of her time supervising graduate students who were reading articles and writing abstracts. Keeping policymakers informed, so they could set good policy, was the goal.

When she heard from a friend who had gotten a job at TechTrans International (TTI), her interest was piqued; by September 2002, Nolen moved to Houston for a job with the company.

NASA is TechTrans’ original client, and Russian was the original language offered, both for translation/interpretation services and language instruction. Getting Russian and American scientists and astronauts on the same linguistic page was vital due to cooperative ventures such as the International Space Station. Today, TTI offers several languages besides Russian and has branched out to work with multiple clients such as the Department of Energy, the oil and gas industry, and other commercial businesses.

As a translator/editor for TechTrans, Nolen uses her Russian language skills daily during assignments as well as discussions with coworkers. “More than half of the people in the translation department are native Russian-speaking, and everyone knows both languages. Sometimes we’re speaking in English, and the next time I have a question we might have a conversation in Russian.”

Learning another language provides a taste of literature and culture, not just vocabulary. “When you study a language, you’re not just reading dictionaries, you’re studying the literature. I read *Crime and Punishment* in high school. After reading it in Russian, I’m amazed at how much more depth it has.”

Even today, she alternates her “pleasure reading” between books in English and books in Russian. Her continued exploration of Russian literature proved particularly useful during a



Nolen (above) helps facilitate understanding between Russians and Americans working on the International Space Station.

recent editing assignment. Boris Chertok, a founding figure of the Soviet space program, wrote a series of books in Russian that are “half-memoirs and half-histories of the Soviet space station.” In those books, Chertok frequently quotes lines from poems or books. As she edited a freelancer’s translation of Chertok’s prose, Nolen recognized one of the scenes he was quoting from a Russian novel she was reading. “Just like we quote Twain, Shakespeare, and Hemingway,” Russian authors use such quoted material in their works. “They just have a different collection that they pepper their writing with, and they may not mention the name of the original author.”

Nolen’s assignments at TTI vary, and she likes it that way. “Every day, I’m learning about different fields.” Whether translating a blueprint, a life support system, a food menu for the space station, or the experiments performed there, even one client such as NASA offers plenty of opportunities for variety.

Nolen prefers translation to interpretation, and she says many people find they are better at one of those two categories than the other. Translators are usually perfectionists who like to tweak material so that the translation accurately reflects both the message and the original style. “A good translator makes a text sound like it was written in this language.” Interpreters, on the other hand, think well on their feet and are good at improvising.

Although she says some people seem confused about what they might do after majoring in Russian, Nolen says finding a career should not be a problem. “Given the globalization of the world, companies are very interested in candidates who majored in language, even if the job opportunities are not in translation.”