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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*Hometown*

Student takes upclose look at Russian health care

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Khrushchev, nuclear weapons and the KGB—all are shady elements of a fallen Cold War empire steeped in mystery. But after the breakup of the Soviet Union, another mystery has unfolded. What is life like in Russia?

Sarah Wilson, a senior nursing student at Illinois Wesleyan University, got some answers when she spent last summer studying in St. Petersburg and later stayed with a family in Vladimir, Russia.

"There is a huge political vacuum there now, and everyone wonders who will take power," said Wilson, a native of Armington, Ill.

In Vladimir, Wilson had a chance to examine the country's health care system by observing the city's Red Cross Hospital.

"Russia's about 20 or 30 years behind in medicine," said Wilson, who observed in several areas of the hospital with the help of Dr. Michael Rosenbloom, one of the hospital's neurosurgeons. Wilson stayed with the Rosenbloom family in Vladimir.

Wilson cited poor financial resources, outdated medical equipment and lack of government interest in health care as reasons for medicine's dismal state in Russia.

At one point, Wilson said, the Russian government spent about 5 percent of its Gross National Product on medicine. That number has dwindled to 2.5 percent.

"The hospitals don't get anything from the government," she said. "They do what they can with what they have."

To the hospital workers' credit, Wilson said, they have developed other methods to deal with problems that would not be apparent to Americans, who have greater access to more advanced technology.

Most hospital workers Wilson spoke to thought the situation will get worse, since doctors and nurses are paid so little and often choose to leave the country for higher wages.

"They have nothing like the American Medical Association in Russia," she said. "There's no organized body of physicians with political clout that can change things."

The treatment of nurses also struck Wilson, who said they are often consigned to menial tasks in the hospital.

"Nurses are low on the totem pole over there. People kept asking me 'Why do you want to be a nurse?'" Wilson said.

The trip made such an impact on Wilson, she decided to return to Vladimir next summer and focus her senior project on some of the conditions there. Wilson is a five-year student at Illinois Wesleyan.

"It will be a qualitative study on women's definition of well-being, and how they promote their own health and sense of well-being," she said.

Wilson plans to conduct personal interviews with Russian women ages 20 to 60, and will again stay with the Rosenblooms, she said.

"If I had stayed with the family the whole summer, I think I would have learned a lot more Russian," Wilson said. "You feel more comfortable trying it [in a home] than on the street."

Wilson's housing arrangements were set up over electronic mail a month before her trip.

"I found out I could stay in Vladimir from a nurse who lives in Bloomington," Wilson said. "[The nurse] called around and contacted the Rosenblooms."

While staying with the Rosenblooms, Wilson sampled small-town life in Vladimir, whose 350,000 population sits in the shadow of St. Petersburg's five million. But Vladimir, which is a sister city of Bloomington's, had more to offer of historical value.

"Vladimir just had its 1,000 anniversary," Wilson said. "St. Petersburg's a baby compared to them."

The Rosenbloom family, which included the mother, father and two sons, gave Wilson a better sampling of contemporary Russian family life—something she couldn't learn in the classroom.

"Family was very important to them, which kind of surprised me," Wilson said. "We stayed in at nights usually, since people our age don't get out as much."

Examining the Stereotypes

Wilson spent the first half of her trip in St. Petersburg, as part of a study abroad program through the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.

During this part, Wilson found that Russians her age were surprisingly open to the Americans and other tourists.

"Russians our age were pretty cool about talking to us. [In St. Petersburg] they wanted to take us out a lot," she said.

American cigarettes were popular, along with fast food places and clothing with "LA" or "Chicago" plastered on them.

As far as Cold War remnants, Wilson said that older Russians didn't trust Americans as easily and the younger Russians.

But the Russian love for political discussion has fizzled since the fall of Communism.

"Everyone talked so much when Communism fell in '92, but now it's a stagnant political scene," Wilson said. "Anyone can form a party over there. They could have one for beer-drinking businessmen if they wanted."

But amid all the confusion, Wilson still enjoyed the small-town life in Vladimir as opposed to her hectic schedule back home.

"I liked the slow pace of life and not struggling from month to month. There was never any pressure to do things you don't want to do," she said. "I can't wait to go back."