



A history class at Step Up

Following last year's ICEF Education Fund visit to Rio de Janeiro, ICEF's Korinne Algie and Sergey Krasnyanskiy visited the Step Up centre for orphans in Moscow, Russia.

Midway through 2012, the ICEF Education Fund selected Step Up in Russia to receive ICEF support. Located in central Moscow, Step Up helps hundreds of orphans who are too old to live in orphanages to better their education, get jobs and receive the necessary support to become a contributing member of society. ICEF's donation of US\$3000 was put towards tuition costs and internet access for students, items which are desperately needed and appreciated.

Step Up was founded almost 10 years ago under the leadership and guidance of Olga Tikhomirova. Located in premises behind an old church, Step Up relies upon the free use of this space to provide classes for the 90 regular students and hundreds of others that frequent the centre.

Contrary to what we were expecting, the first thing we noticed about the centre was the warmth and buzz. The centre itself is simple, however the energy and smiling faces of the students made it easy to forget that we were visiting an organisation that exists on goodwill alone.

Our first stop was the staffroom-come-office-come-student lounge, a space used for everything but classes. We arrived during a break and were immediately able to meet some of the teachers and a large number of students. Once the break time was over and the room quiet, Olga spent time explaining the centre to us. She told us about the centre's origins, its aims and answered our questions. She also explained the challenges that the students at the centre face.

In Russia, children may live in an orphanage until they are 18 years old. During this time they are given a status, which states whether they are competent to live alone and function in society, or must live in an institutionalised environment once they have 'aged out'. Many students are incorrectly labelled 'incompetent'. A large part of what Step Up does is work with these students to help them change their status, enabling them to lead normal lives.



Students at Step Up



While in the orphanage children are required to attend classes. However, Olga estimates that the level of education they receive during their five years of high school is equivalent to, at best, 3 years of regular secondary education. This means that many of the students who attend Step Up need serious help to improve their reading and writing skills.

The Step Up classes are provided free of charge to any former orphan. Almost all of the students at the centre are over 18 and no longer eligible to live in orphanages. Although the programme would like to help younger students, in most cases it is just not possible. Until orphans are 18, the orphanages are legally responsible for their wellbeing. As the Step Up classes are mostly in the evenings and weekends, most orphanages will not allow the students out at these times.

A student receives one-on-one tuition

Given the age of the students, the majority already have jobs, and many have families. This means that most students work all day and then study for 3 – 4 hours in the evenings, often on empty stomachs. The centre does what it can to provide snacks, hot drinks and a warm environment for the students giving them the best opportunity to learn.

Through all their struggles the Step Up students are having tremendous success. Although the students' goals vary from learning to read and write so that they can get a job, to changing their competency status, or further education, every success is celebrated.

Increasingly students who have spent time with the programme are pursuing higher education. Last year the first Step Up student graduated from university – no small feat. Currently a small number of Step Up students are studying at tertiary level.

Our visit to Step Up was very humbling. We met so many incredible people, who believe in and have given everything to provide these orphans with a chance; the various teachers who spend countless hours making sure the students are making progress, and of course the students themselves. The Step Up students are not forced to attend classes, they go purely on their own motivation. Their drive for success and dedication to learning is astounding and should be taken as an example to all.

Step Up continues to need donations. The centre and students are extremely deserving of any help our community can give. For further information about the organisation and how you can make a donation to this worthy cause visit www.icef.com/education-fund or contact Korinne Algie at kalgie@icef.com.



ICEF's Korinne Algie (left) and Sergey Krasnyanskiy (right) with Step Up founder Olga Tikhomirova