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How to Bake in a Ukrainian Kitchen

The Adventures of a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine

I love to bake - bread, cookies, muffins, coffee cake; there is nothing I won't try when it comes to baking something sweet and tasty. Unfortunately, baking in a Ukrainian kitchen can be a bit of a challenge. There are countless ingredients that are just not available, like brown sugar and flavored extracts. Although I've figured out how to make my own extracts, the brown sugar continues to elude me. For me, the conveniences I miss the most are a food processor and an electric mixer, and of course, the most treasured item; the oversized muffin tin. Muffins in my kitchen are turned into bread, but there is just something about a muffin in the morning...

Despite these challenges I do the best I can and am surprisingly very successful. The first and foremost thing we are taught in the Peace Corps is to be flexible; and flexible, I surely have become. In fact, here in Ukraine most people "make do." I think the reason for this is because independent Ukraine is still a very young country, as this year it will be only 21 years old. The older generation just accepts the "status quo" and gets by because many of them are resistant to change. There is a lot of apathy caused by feelings of helplessness because the shadow of communism still looms.

If we have a day or more without water or electricity, it's considered "normalna" (Russian for "fine"). It is virtually impossible to get details about what caused a particular situation. If I ask my neighbors what the problem is or how long we will have to do without, the response is always "Oye! Normalna"! So, have I learned to be flexible? Absolutely. No sense stressing out about something I can do nothing about. Or can I?

I am trying to do my part here. I may not be able to get the utilities back on, but I am trying to affect change in other ways. I am the only person among thousands in my town that has that optimistic "can do" attitude that is so characteristic of Americans. I believe in change and I talk about it everyday to everyone I can in my very poor Russian. The people here understand me well enough, but most do not believe change is possible.

At the other end of the generational spectrum there are the younger people who are impatient for change. They hunger for it. They want a good life for themselves and their families but they are not quite sure how to go about it. I tell these young people that anything is possible if you want it bad enough, but in order for things to change, they

have to be willing to work hard to achieve what they want and also must understand that no one is going to hand it to them.

Since Ukraine has become independent and part of the United Nations, it has established new relations with many English-speaking countries throughout the world. It also participates in many international organizations and being able to speak a common language like English has no doubt helped Ukraine integrate into the global community.

The youth here understand that being able to improve their skills in the English language beyond what is taught in the classroom is integral to their leading successful lives in the international community. They are told that English can take them anywhere in the world, and that no borders exist for a person who can communicate in an international language.

To this end, I have formed two English clubs in my community as well as a new youth literature club. We meet at the local youth library every week and we communicate in English on a variety of topics. The new literature club will focus on reading and writing in English. The plan is to write and print a bi-lingual newsletter about the clubs that will be distributed within the community and in the schools.

The youth library has become a second home for me. I spend a lot of time there planning our next project with the wonderful librarians who work there. We have already received a large grant in the form of 12 computers, scanners, printers and webcams from a Ukrainian organization called Bibliomist. Our town will be the first in our region to receive this equipment and to offer free internet and computer training. As well we have been the recipients of a small shipment of English books from an organization in America called The International Book Project.

Our new goal is to expand the collection of English books for the youth library. Learning the English Language is an essential part of the Ukrainian educational system. Many students would like to read more than the text books they are issued from the schools and unfortunately, there were no English language literature books available to them anywhere until the first donation arrived last month. We are in the process of raising money for English books and it is our hope that by the end of the summer we can fill our shelves with new books. The youth here deserve a chance to grow and expand their knowledge of English and of the world.

And as for the old timers? Will these wonderful people ever believe in change? When I first arrived here last summer, I had many ideas about what I would like to do and my neighbors thought I was crazy. They all said nothing would ever change. They didn't think it was such a great idea to paint a mural on the building that houses the electrical in our yard, but after it was finished they were proud and pleased to have such a beautiful mural when no one else did. They didn't believe that I could get our community free

computers and internet access, but it happened, and they took notice. In fact, since my ideas became reality, I have become somewhat of a minor celebrity. People are talking: if an outsider like me can effect change on a small level, what might they do for themselves? I believe that real power is the belief that you can make a difference, and I am trying to show this one small step at a time.