

The Power of Partnership

By Diane Jones, Other Voices

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"Voce Viaggio" of the Children's Chorus of Carroll County is back from a highly successful first trip abroad.

Undoubtedly there will be those who say, "Oh no, not the Chorus again," and that would be understandable since we have recently gotten such great press coverage. Please bear with me briefly so I can report a few of the benefits of our trip and extend a partial thank-you for the ground-swell of support we received.

We traveled to Finland, Sweden and Estonia and enjoyed the sights, the sounds, the foods and all of the sensory experiences of European travel.

However, the heart of our endeavor was the day we spent in a rather small town in Estonia named Paide, Westminster's Partner City. We had been in Helsinki with its Rock Church and Scandinavian intrigues; we had been in Tallinn with its medieval charm; we were in Stockholm with its cultural and architectural sophistication, but Paide captured our hearts and imaginations.

This is where we sang and danced with children who had awaited our visit as much as we looked forward to seeing them. This is where both the Estonian hymn and the Star Spangled Banner were sung and citizens from opposite sides of the world were moved to tears. This is where children from both countries sang in Estonian and English and even incorporated sign language into their presentation.

This is where our children learned Estonian folk dances and the Estonians learned the macarina in an impromptu gathering on the street in front of the town church. This is where e-mail addresses and gifts were exchanged with promises of seeing one another again. This is where friendships and the beginnings of international relations began. And this is where international peace was reinforced through learning to delight in the differences and commonalities of others.

Voce Viaggio has been the beneficiary of a successful series of partnerships that enabled us to make our dream a reality. The Westminster - Paide Partner City Program captured our imagination and provided our goal. Thomas Beyard, Kevin Dayhoff, Audrey Cimino and other Westminster - Paide Committee members supported us by networking within the community to raise funds and give our trip visibility.

Many organizations and individuals partnered with us, sharing our vision and helping make our trip possible. And of course, there are our Estonian friends, our new partners, with whom we have begun friendships with the promise of more personal and cultural exchanges.

This was more than just a trip to Europe with performance opportunities. In Estonia, the struggle between tyranny and freedom is very immediate and tangible; not one of us will be the same after experiencing this post-Soviet culture.

For example, our sense of materialism is put into perspective after being in a place where the standard of living is much simpler, but happiness comes from more fundamental sources, such as friendship and nature. The blessings of the United States are highlighted as we hear first-hand accounts of women and children being deported to Siberia just because they weren't Russian. Our own national anthem takes on greater significance as we meet Estonians who were forbidden to enjoy their national hymn or cultural heritage for 50 years.

The 24 students and the adults who traveled will be forever changed, their knowledge base and sensitivities having been greatly expanded. Sincere thanks to those of you who helped make this possible. It will be exciting to see where our partnerships take us next.

Diane Jones, of Westminster, is director of the Children's Chorus of Carroll County.