

Iowa community college observes "Year of Ukraine"

by Linda Hodges

DES MOINES, Iowa - The idea is simple. Choose a single country and focus on learning more about its history, culture, economy and politics during the entire academic year. At Des Moines Area Community College in central Iowa, faculty, administrators, staff and students took a close look at Ukraine during the 2001-2002 academic year. In a state with no historical Ukrainian immigration and where the only thing, if anything, about Ukraine that comes to most people's minds is pysanky, scores of people learned about life and culture in present-day Ukraine.

The "Year of Ukraine" marked the 18th consecutive year the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) observed International Year. Starting in 1985 with a focus on Japan, in recent years the program has recognized Ireland, Italy, and China. Of the college's six campuses, which stretch out approximately 117 miles, five participated in the Year of Ukraine.

"One of the unique qualities of community colleges is our ability to organize interdisciplinary yearlong events such as International Year," said Jim Stick, head of the humanities department on the Ankeny campus. "We have integrated global education into our curricula since 1985, and Ukraine Year has been most rewarding." Prof. Stick's Honors Seminar each spring semester is focused entirely on the country of the year.

"I circulated The Ukrainian Weekly each week to my Honors Seminar, and it was both useful and eye-opening to my students," said Prof. Stick.

"When the seminar began, most students had very little understanding of the richness and complexity of Ukrainian culture. By the time they researched a topic and presented their findings to the class, a transformation had taken place. Not only did the students and the faculty involved gain a considerable amount of knowledge, but they also acquired a growing appreciation for the culture, and most importantly, the people of Ukraine," Prof. Stick explained. "Again and again, students in the seminar admired the resilience and resourcefulness of the Ukrainian people."

A steering committee of some 20 college staff members and a couple of central Iowa residents with close ties to Ukraine met monthly for more than a year to

plan activities. Students in a graphic design class competed to come up with the most pleasing design for posters and T-shirts. After a couple of the final designs were eliminated because the church domes they depicted were Russian, the winning design was that of a simple tryzub against a map of Ukraine.

Book clubs were formed on the different campuses, with participants reading a book each month and meeting to discuss it. Among the books chosen were "Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine" by Anna Reid; "Return to Ukraine" by Ania Savage; "The Sky Unwashed" by Irene Zabytko; and "Dead Souls" by Nikolai Gogol.

Members of the committee put up display cases on several campuses with Ukrainian crafts from their trips to Ukraine. Slava and Lavrentia Gerulak of the Ukrainian Art and Literary Club in New York City supplied photo exhibits of Ukraine, which were rotated among display cases on the various campuses. Photographer Yuri Lev also lent his "Images of Ukraine" exhibition for display.

It wasn't difficult to compile a list of potential speakers who could tell Iowa students about various aspects of Ukraine, from its history to current affairs. Some of the speakers were Iowans who had business or educational contact with Ukraine and others were recent arrivals from Ukraine who were studying or working in Iowa.

For example, the director of the Des Moines Water Works, L.D. McMullen, who had conducted a two-year water project with Cherkasy, Ukraine, spoke of the challenges the country faces in providing clean, safe water.

Mary Rose Anderson, a journalist and volunteer for Iowa Sister States who taught computer office programs at the Cherkasy Women's Center, spoke on women's issues, including trafficking, to classes on two different campuses. Mikhailo Dovgopol from Kharkiv State Polytechnic University, who was visiting DMACC in order to study career services provided to students, spoke to the Honors Seminar on the political situation in Ukraine.

Through existing programs between Iowa and Ukraine, a number of talented Ukrainians were available to the DMACC program. Two Newton, Iowa, high school exchange students from Smila, Newton's sister city in the Cherkasy Oblast, opened the Year of Ukraine on four of the DMACC campuses. In full costume and accompanied by recorded Ukrainian folk songs, they presented bread and salt to college officials.

The official kick-off event on the main campus was a reception for watercolor artist and tapestry weaver Neonila Nedosyeko, who came to Iowa under the sponsorship of Iowa Sister States (whose partner state is the Cherkasy oblast) for a month of exhibitions and workshops.

Through her interpreter, Olha Rakhubovska, also from Cherkasy, Ms. Nedosyeko spoke to two art appreciation classes. Using her "Kupalo Night" tapestry and other of her works as illustrations, she spoke of the rich Ukrainian heritage. The college hosted a luncheon and reception in her honor.

On a several-day visit to Iowa during his American tour, producer and director Oles Yanchuk showed his acclaimed film, "The Undeclared," on two campuses to staff, students and the general public and visited classes on three campuses. Later in the year, members of the sister city organization in Newton showed the classic "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" and the contemporary "Friend of the Deceased" for a contrasting look at how Ukrainians deal with obstacles and loss.

The highlight of Ukraine year was a multi-course dinner of Ukrainian specialties. In conjunction with the Newton sister city organization, the International Year committee invited Cherkasy chefs, Nadiya Kanarova, director of the restaurant in the Palace of Culture, and Valentyna Levvytska, head chef of the restaurant Stare Misto.

Through an interpreter who accompanied them from Cherkasy, the Ukrainian chefs demonstrated typical Ukrainian recipes to the culinary arts students. The future Iowa chefs learned the proper way to seal varenyky; how to make holubtsi of uniform size; and to roast rather than boil beets for borsch.

In question and answer periods during the class demonstrations, the students learned about food and life in Ukraine. They asked where chefs buy their ingredients, and how well-equipped their professional kitchens are. One Iowan observed that Ukrainians really must like beets since they were used in two of the recipes they brought, while he might eat beets "no more often than once every three months."

Unlike some of the college's previous exchange chefs, the Ukrainians were neither fussy nor demanding but very accommodating and fun to work with, said Robert Anderson, the director of DMACC's hospitality career program.

After several days of training, the Iowa students were prepared to cook a four-course meal for some 60 people, who each paid \$75. The dinner started with

several salads: "Cherkasy Salad" was a mixture of beets, walnuts, prunes, and mayonnaise;"Ukrayinskyi Salat" combined fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots and cabbage; and "Khreschatyk Salad" contained tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, ham, cheese and olives dressed in mayonnaise. The "zakusky" (appetizers) were followed by borsch with pampushky, the small garlic rolls served in central and eastern Ukraine, and three entrees: holubtsi; fried white fish with horseradish cream sauce; and pork baked with mushrooms.

Dessert was varenyky with cherries and honey sauce. In addition to the wines usually served at the DMACC gourmet dinners, assorted horilka and port from Crimea were provided for making toasts. The dinner was repeated at a second campus a week later.

Larysa Hontarenko, a violinist of the Chamber Orchestra in Cherkasy, entertained the diners with Ukrainian folk songs and some classical music. The abundant talent of Ukrainians became evident when the 20-year-old Cherkasy music student recruited to interpret for the musicians was put onstage herself after one of the musicians backed out of making the trip to America following the terrorist attacks. Yuliana Matasova, a professional pop singer, won first prize in the 1998 all-Ukrainian singing festival "Rain of Stars" and a special prize in the Third International Festival of modern Ukrainian pop songs. In 2001 Ms. Matasova took third place in the Chervona Ruta competition and later sang at major pop concerts in Kyiv.

At the Ukrainian dinner, Ms. Matasova, clad in red leather, entertained with her own compositions based on a mix of Slavic folk and Western modern music.

Serendipity brought another young Cherkasy student to the "Year of Ukraine." Having participated in a high school exchange with Iowa several years earlier, Natasha Boychenko enrolled at DMACC. She was surprised to learn that the college was honoring her country and participated in a number of activities. Dressed in traditional costume at the gourmet dinner, Ms. Boychenko presented the bread baked by the visiting chefs and salt to the new president of DMACC. She also sang Ukrainian songs at the winter and spring concerts and spoke to classes about Ukraine and its music. In an interview with the student newspaper, The Chronicle, Ms. Boychenko said, "a majority of Ukrainians are very excited about the new governmental election system that is taking place. We believe that these new steps will bring great outcome for our country's future."

Year of Ukraine head Nancy Noth, executive dean of the Newton Campus, said: "I think it was a very successful year. Each campus participated in some of the activities, and the two-week visit with the chefs and musicians was exciting. Friendships were established between our Ukrainian guests and some of our faculty - and they continue to correspond with each other."

And as for pysanky-writing, finding a local resident to demonstrate was not difficult. Sherry Pogranichniy, an Iowa native who married a Ukrainian she met on an agricultural exchange program, conducted pysanky-making workshops on two different campuses.

Linda Hodges is as co-author of "Language and Travel Guide to Ukraine" (Hippocrene Books Inc., third edition, 2000).

Copyright © The Ukrainian Weekly, June 2, 2002, No. 22, Vol. LXX

Source: <http://www.ukrweekly.com/Archive/2002/220221.shtml>