

Russia Outreach Spreads God's Love on Two Wheels

A few months ago, Sasha, an Operation Mobilization Russia team member, was walking home when he saw two teenage boys rummaging through rubbish skips. He approached and introduced himself.

At first they were suspicious, thinking he was a plain-clothes policeman. But Sasha offered them food and told them he was available to help if they needed it.

The next day, the boys visited Sasha's flat and brought with them their pet cat and puppy. Sasha noticed that even though these boys, Vanya and Bulat, lived on the streets, they proudly looked after the two pets.

After getting to know each other over the course of a week, Sasha asked the boys to show him where they lived. They referred to their place as their "hovel" and warned him it was untidy.

They led Sasha past garages and through the woods, along an abandoned railway to a deserted factory. The three ducked through a hole in a concrete boundary fence. On the other side, Sasha found himself looking at a sheet of polythene stretched between two fences, under which a few blankets and rags were laid out upon concrete blocks. The sun didn't shine into their "hovel" and Sasha remembers it smelling damp, like a swamp. This was their home.

"After spending a bit of time with them, I said goodbye and walked home praying and crying," remembers Sasha. "I said to God that I could never be involved in this kind of ministry—it was too hard to think that I was walking back to my comfortable flat, leaving them behind, living in a damp squat between a concrete and iron fence."

That night it rained heavily and Sasha couldn't sleep: "I couldn't get these boys and their 'hovel' out of my mind."

Building trust and new friendships

The next day the boys returned to Sasha's flat. "I started to talk to them about God and how I believed He had introduced us to each other," he says. They told Sasha they had run away from their drunken parents, but Sasha realized that something in the story didn't quite ring true.

Over the next few weeks Vanya and Bulat visited Sasha every day. He gave them food and they sat on a bench and chatted about life, their dreams and their problems. "I was astonished that they never complained about the conditions they were living in and they didn't blame anyone for their situation," says Sasha. "They simply lived and looked after their puppy and cat."

During this time, Sasha was organizing a cycling trip for a group of orphaned teenagers. He, another OM missionary and local church workers had spent the year meeting with the group to prepare for the trip and had just bought the necessary food and equipment for the 22 participants.

On the day of the trip, Sasha and the leaders went to the boarding house to collect the teens but soon found out from a very apologetic director that the teens had changed their minds and had decided not to come.

"To say that we were disappointed would be a gross understatement!" exclaims Sasha. "Walking home I asked God what was going on, and what lesson I was supposed to learn from this. And then an idea popped into my head. Everything was ready and everything bought—why not invite my homeless friends instead? Maybe that's what God wanted!"

Sasha phoned his OM colleague, who supported the idea. Now all he had to do was find the boys in time. Sasha knew it would be tough and prayed he would find them.

Just then he turned the corner and saw them going through rubbish bins. "Bulat!" Sasha shouted. The boy turned, embarrassed to be caught in the activity, and Sasha asked if he wanted to come on the trip.

"It was worth all the preparation for the trip just to see the expression on his face!" remembers Sasha.

Within an hour, Bulat, Vanya, three friends and, of course, the puppy and cat were at Sasha's flat. But just as they were about to set off, one of the friends, Andrey, said he didn't actually know how to ride a bike. When Sasha asked him how he expected to take part in the trip, Andrey just shrugged.

"It is not possible to describe how we rode that [first] 60 kilometres together," says Sasha. "We couldn't keep count of the number of times Andrey fell off his bike, came off the road and scratched and scraped himself. But despite all of that, I couldn't help envying his permanent, happy smile!"

Encouragement from God

A few nights into the trip the group sat around the campfire sharing their impressions of the trip. "Bulat said something that I took as a direct encouragement from God," says Sasha: "'Thank you. Never in my life have I met people like you,' said Bulat. 'From now on whenever I see a bicycle I'll remember you and this great time we've had together.'"

Andrey thanked Sasha for teaching him to ride a bike and explained that he had grown up in an orphanage and the other children bullied him and never let him even try to ride a bike. It was then that Sasha realized the boys hadn't run away from their drunken parents but had escaped from an orphanage.

Upon returning, Sasha contacted the director of the orphanage and explained the situation regarding Andrey. "[Andrey] was then accepted temporarily into the church rehab center where, I'm delighted to say, he has become a Christian!" exclaims Sasha.

For the rest of the summer, Sasha has taken Bulat and Vanya with him on other trips. "Every time I look at them, I'm reminded of the greatness of our God," says Sasha.