

Moldovan baseball team finds bonds with U.S. hosts during stay



http://www.journalnow.com/journal_west/news/article_cf215f80-3b46-11e3-bd78-0019bb30f31a.html

Posted: Tuesday, October 22, 2013 3:45 pm | Updated: 10:41 pm, Tue Oct 22, 2013.

Journal Photo by Lisa O'Donnell

Ken Criss, from left, helps Kosta Porhun of Moldova bait his hook as they fish with Criss's son Tommy at Reynolds Lake in Clemmons.

CLEMMONS — Even if they had done nothing else, the 11 boys from Moldova who have spent the last two weeks in western Forsyth County got a pretty good introduction to American life by playing baseball, perhaps the sport most associated with the United States.

But their American experience extended beyond baseball to include s'mores, campfires, hikes at Pilot Mountain State Park, chicken stew, Uno games and tailgating before a Wake Forest football game.

Seven area families, most of them from Clemmons and Lewisville, played host to the boys, who are here as part of an exchange program involving the Twin City Host Lion Club and the Reynolda Rotary and the Tiraspol Lions Club in Moldova.

Veaceslav Driglov, an MBA candidate at Winston-Salem State University, came up with the idea of bringing over a baseball team from Moldova and contacted Barry Leonard, the president of Southwest Forsyth Little League for help.

Leonard helped arrange the lodging for the boys, who are between 13 and 15 years old.

Denise and Ken Criss of Lewisville, whose son, Tommy, 15, plays on a junior level team at Southwest Forsyth Little League, are playing host to Kosta Porhun.

"We knew next to nothing about Moldova," said Denise Criss. "We had to find it on a map."

The Crisses said they thought it would be a good experience to host a Moldovan.

Though the boys had a busy schedule that has included everything from bowling to visiting the N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, the Crisses have worked in some low-key family activities with Kosta, including watching the Major League Baseball playoff series, sitting around a campfire and fishing at Village Point Lake in Clemmons.

Kosta has enjoyed pizza and the family's hot tub. He did not much care for Buffalo wings from Ronnie's.

"They were too spicy," Denise said.

Michelle Pfungst of Clemmons and her family have taken in two boys and one of the team's coaches.

Pfungst is of Russian heritage and has enjoyed the opportunity to connect with people from her family's homeland. Moldova was part of the Soviet Union and gained its independence in 1992.

"The international effect of it all, for us, has been so rewarding," Pfungst said.

Most of the boys speak little or no English, so families have had to communicate using Google Translate or with hand signals.

"We find ways to communicate," Pfungst said. "On the first night, the video games started and that was our common ground."

Kent and Julie Barney have welcomed three Moldovan boys into their Lewisville home. The Barneys don't have a tie to the Little League but daughters Morgan, 17, and McCall, 15, have been deeply involved in raising awareness about human sex trafficking in Moldova.

The girls, along with a friend, started Save Our Sisters, which is trying to raise money for a safe shelter in southern Moldova.

When the family heard about the opportunity to invite Moldovans into their home, they jumped at the chance.

"They are not real expressive and it takes awhile to warm up, so to get a hug at the end of the day, they have to really trust you," Julie Barney said. "Now, we are seeing their smiles and seeing them show some of that affection. It has been precious."

Morgan Barney has taken them to see the Chick-fil-A where she works, and they've gone with her to cross country practice.

"Honestly, we are from different cultures and families but we're still the same," she said.

In broken English, Dmitry Ozerov, 14, said some of his favorite activities have involved playing baseball on some of the different fields, watching the St. Louis Cardinals and watching TV with his host family, Erik and Holly Vaughan.

Driglov, the WSSU student who helped organize the trip, said the boys will remember this experience for the rest of their lives.

"They've been really shocked by the warm reception," Driglov said. "They didn't expect such a wonderful welcome. They are recognized on the street. Random people come up to them and buy them ice cream and donuts. And they've made lifelong friends among the families."

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