

Across continents, a connection



Roger Reinert

This past June, I had the opportunity to visit our Sister City in Petrozavodsk, Russia. I served as the official delegate for the city of Duluth and soon will be presenting Mayor Don Ness with the official gifts and greetings from the mayor of Petrozavodsk. It was an honor to represent our community.

And yes, I paid for my ticket. I've been disappointed in recent months and years that the Sister Cities program has become a controversial topic. But since it has, let me tell you about what I did while I was on my trip and why I went.

The Sister Cities program was begun by President Eisenhower after World War II to draw people closer together from around the world. He believed if we understood each other better we'd be less likely to blow each other up. From my experience, Duluth's relation-

ship with Petrozavodsk is fully meeting President Eisenhower's intent.

I grew up taught that the Soviet Union was our hated enemy. "Red Dawn" was a favorite movie. Then the wall fell while I was in college. So the opportunity to go, and perhaps even build friendships with people I had been taught as a child to dislike, was life-changing.

To be clear, my time in Petrozavodsk was not a vacation. Our agenda was packed from one end of the day to the other with meetings, introductions, activities and formalities. I met with the owner of a construction company hoping to learn from research at the University of Minnesota Duluth and its Natural Resources Research Institute to make high-quality and more-affordable homes from his region's abundant wood products. We also worked on strengthening the partnership between the College of St. Scholastica and the university in Petrozavodsk. The ongoing exchange of students and faculty is substantial. Lastly, we are likely to bring a talented watercolor painter from Petrozavodsk to Duluth for an exhibition at the Tweed. His works are from northern

Karelia, an area that is so like the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness it's uncanny.

The highlight of the official portion of the trip was certainly the formal "Day of the City" ceremonies — very much their equivalent of the Fourth of July. It was an honor to lay flowers at the memorial on behalf of all Duluthians. It was also truly an education to learn about the complicated history among Sweden, Finland and Russia in that part of the world — and the role of Minnesota's Finns before, during and after World War II.

The Sister Cities program should be separate from City Hall, and I strongly support its efforts to obtain 100 percent funding from sources other than tourism taxes. But I also encourage Duluthians who have concerns to educate themselves about the program and its value.

Duluth is a world port and ought to have a world presence. The Duluth Sister Cities program helps accomplish that mission.

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