

## Features

## 'Peace Child' to experience Soviets' culture first-hand

By Mary E. McCrank

Rick Staropoli hopes to return from his upcoming visit to the Soviet Union with a better understanding of the Soviet culture so he can educate his peers and others about the Soviet way of life.

Staropoli, a sophomore at McQuaid Jesuit High School, began the voyage July 14 with the Rochester Peace Child Chorus, the local chapter of the national Peace Child Foundation, a group dedicated to bringing about peace through the interaction of the world's children.

Staropoli has been intrigued by the Soviet Union ever since he joined Peace Child during its beginnings here in 1985. He hopes that upon his return to Rochester August 24, he will be able to speak about his experiences. He has already been invited to speak at his parish, Corpus Christi, and he hopes to tell his McQuaid classmates about Soviet life.

"I think I'll have a new perspective of what the Soviets are like," the 14-year-old performer predicted. "And I want to tell a lot of people about that, because no one really knows what they're like unless they go over there, experience it or hear first-hand from someone who's been over there."

Staropoli noted that his school friends are really excited about the tour. "They think that it's going to be really cool, and they want to know about it when I come back," he said.

This is the most extensive trip Staropoli has ever taken. Previously he has traveled with Rochester Peace Child Chorus to Flint, Mich.; Beacon, N.Y.; twice to Washington, D.C.; and three times to New York City. All of these trips were made by bus, which Staropoli said is the best part of the road trips.

In a brochure advertising the Peace Child tour, Staropoli wrote: "This dream has been alive in me ever since my elementary-school years when classmates talked about 'those dirty Russians.' I hope to learn a lot about the people of the Soviet Union, and then come home to try to end some of the false ideas that seem to be set in the American mind ... I hope to work to end people's fears of a loving people who some call Commies."

Despite his long anticipation, Staropoli did encounter some problems in getting accepted for the tour. When the date of the Rochester spring auditions conflicted with a trip to Florida, he was forced to audition on videotape, a

measure that made him doubt whether he would be chosen for the touring company.

"It came as a surprise," he said of his acceptance. "It's hard to sing and do a monologue into a videotape."

Given his background, however, that acceptance doesn't seem so surprising. Besides approximately 40 performances with Peace Child since 1985, he played a lead role in the McQuaid production of *Auntie Mame* and also performed in the school's musical *Anything Goes*. In addition, he appeared in the Crossroads production of *Alice in Blunderland*, which focuses on nuclear testing and war. He hopes for a career in either drama or English, but joked that he needs another line of work "to back it up, because drama isn't a steady job."

In all, 30 teenagers — 15 Americans and 15 Soviet youths — will take part in this Peace Child tour, which is the longest of the 11 tours the Peace Child Foundation has planned for this summer.

The tour's itinerary contains a healthy measure of spontaneity, and Staropoli predicted a number of impromptu performances. "It's just really loose and when you go over there, the whole cast gets together and plans what time of day they want their rehearsals and how much free time they think they should have," he explained.

To begin the tour, Staropoli is flying to Washington, D.C. for an orientation. From there, the cast will go to Smolensk, which he described as "an old Russian city with a lot of history." After a one-day visit to Moscow, the troupe will go to a young pioneers' camp on the Black Sea, where approximately 4,000 Soviet children will be vacationing. There, they will spend about a month with their Soviet Peace Child counterparts.

"We'll do a lot of activities at the camp — the regular activities — and we'll also be doing rehearsals. We'll try to put together a play there," Staropoli said.

The teenagers will also take side trips to various cities in that area, including Yalta, and then head back to Moscow to perform from August 19-24.

Although all of their performances will start with the Peace Child script, each one will be different from the rest, Staropoli said, explaining that it is customary for the children to add to the dialogue. "Each one of the kids gets to put in their ideas — their own hopes and fears — and we'll each have a monologue," he said.

"I want to say that we don't only have fears, we also have the hope and the dreams because



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

Rick Staropoli plans to include a thousand stickers and other Rochester memorabilia in the 44 pounds of luggage he is permitted to bring on the Peace Child Chorus' tour of the Soviet Union this summer.

we think (peace is) possible," the young performer remarked. Staropoli disagrees with the view that nuclear weapons have made peace an unobtainable goal. Such a defeatist attitude is crazy, he said, because it is giving up, letting others take control.

"It's not a hopeless case. There definitely is a way, but we have to work and it has to start with the kids because the parents have things set in their minds," he continued. "Peace Child is the only hope; children are the only hope — that is, adults are too grown up."

Staropoli said the two recent summits between the United States and the Soviet Union did not accomplish much in terms of eliminating nuclear weapons. "I definitely believe we need more summits," he said. "That's what will finally work in the end."

"I like what Gorbachev is doing," Staropoli continued, noting that the leader's policy of *glasnost* had furthered Soviet openness toward Peace Child.

Yet, according to Staropoli, the tour isn't all politics and performances. "Rehearsals will just take up part of the day," he noted. "The rest of it's doing activities with the kids at the camp and doing activities within your group," he said, his voice filling with excitement. "I can't wait — just talking about it!"

"Peace Child has a lot of connections over there, and we get much more freedom and help from the governments than the average tourist," he continued. "They'll give us some free time in Moscow to go wherever we want. We're going to the Bolshoi Ballet. It's going to be real nice."

While he's in the U.S.S.R., Staropoli also hopes to visit two Soviet girls who stayed with his family in 1986 when they came to the United States on a Soviet tour of Peace Child. He still writes to the girls and plans to call them when he is in their home city of Moscow.

He said he most looks forward to meeting and getting to know Soviet teenagers. "I'd also like to see the Soviet Union, but it's mainly the people. I want to get to know them, and I think the best part is just going to be right when I get there and get to know the Soviet part of

the cast," he said.

The Soviet Peace Child members will probably come from that nation's middle and upper classes, Staropoli noted. "The artistic people are more accepted and pushed by the government over there," he said. "That's why I'm glad we're going to be at camp to meet the run-of-the-mill people and get to know them, too."

For each of the American participants, the tour costs \$2,500 — more than any other tour in which Staropoli has participated. He's received some financial help from Corpus Christi, which is also assisting five other Rochester teenagers who will be going on different tours.

He said he will miss his family and that the hardest part about the trip is trying to pack 44 pounds into one suitcase. "They're telling me to bring a rubber sink stopper because you have to wash your own clothes," he commented.

Because the weather will be warm — about 75 degrees — in the areas the tour will visit, Staropoli said he was definitely bringing his Epcot Center T-shirt and his Mickey Mouse shorts. "If you bring anything over with Mickey Mouse on it, they'll love you," he said, laughing. "It's fashionable."

Although he is optimistic about the Peace Child movement, Staropoli expresses concerns about a decline in membership in the Rochester chapter. "When I come back, I'm going to try to build it up again," he said. "Right now, it's just getting smaller, and that's sad. But that's just the Rochester part of it. Nationally, it's getting much bigger."

Also upon his return, he plans to run for a seat on the organization's board of directors, following the recent move to allow children to run. He also plans to conduct auditions, while working to incorporate discussion of issues into the group's musical focus.

"It should be more of a Peace Child group — discussion group — have half of it discussion and half of it singing," said Staropoli, who hopes to remain active as an adult, serving as a board member and tour chaperon. "That should get more people into it."

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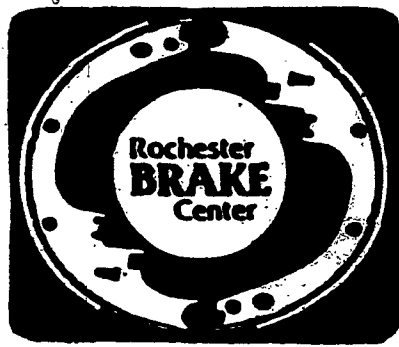
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