

# A Funny Story

*The founder of non-profit Maria's Children Arts Center*  
**MARIA ELISEVA on clowns that stay behind**

> Every November I see Sheremetyevo Airport transformed: strange people in bright costumes and funny hats appear, surrounded by clouds of soap bubbles. In their midst a tall oddity sporting a blue mustache stands out. He marches about the airport with his friends, dressed in giant underpants. This is Patch Adams. "What are you celebrating? The circus left town and the clowns stayed behind?" – Such questions are heard everywhere we go in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

> Volunteers from around the world join Doctor Patch Adams in Russia. Together we visit orphanages and hospitals, homeless shelters and old-folks homes; we make house-calls to families caring for sick relatives. We comfort those who are suffering and alone. Every November, for more than 20 years, we go to the Sergiev-Possad home for blind and deaf children, the Republic children's hospital on Leninsky Avenue, and the St. Petersburg Turner Institute, among others.

> We see a smile appear on the face of the mother whose child is seriously ill. And the child himself begins to laugh, as he tries to squeeze the round red nose of the visitor. Another young patient on a bed nearby, who initially regarded the uninvited guest skeptically, also begins to enjoy the moment. Even the most serious doctor breaks down and laughs in the middle of his rounds.

> One of the highlights of the trip is the clown march along Old Arbat pedestrian mall. This is followed by a charity ball during which Patch auctions artwork created by children at my studio. This year the ball will take place on Saturday, 12 November at the Metropol Hotel. The clowns will be there too!

> I met Patch in 1991. Some friends told me of his upcoming visit to Russia, and I decided to invite him to the children's art studio nearby where I was working. With the help of a dictionary I wrote him a letter and sent it to America. Unexpectedly, I got a phone call: "Hello Maria, my name is Patch!" I broke into a cold sweat! I had never spoken a word of English in my life! With great difficulty I was able to repeat the invitation and Patch agreed to come.

> Patch's group consists of 35 to 40 people, aged 10 to 90 years. On a recent visit



- Maria's Children center was created to help orphans and orphanage graduates to become full-fledged members of society by promoting their social, psychological and intellectual rehabilitation through various creative activities.
- Learn more about the Center and find out how you can help on the website [mariaschildren.ru](http://mariaschildren.ru)

This year, Patch Adams comes to Russia for the 32nd time. He has been cooperating with Maria Eliseeva for a quarter of a century. The clown delegation visit will take place November 6–20

A SMILE APPEARS ON THE FACE OF THE MOTHER WHOSE CHILD IS SERIOUSLY ILL. AND THE CHILD BEGINS TO LAUGH, AS HE TRIES TO SQUEEZE THE ROUND NOSE OF THE VISITOR

we counted representatives of 14 different countries.

> Our story began in 1993, when some friends and I got to know the children at one of Moscow's orphanages. We started drawing with them, playing games, and bringing them to exhibitions and concerts. On weekends my husband and I would invite some of them to stay in our home. Eventually several became members of our family. In April 1997 I created Maria's Children Arts Center – one of the first non-profits set-up in Moscow. In the beginning I got financial support from my husband Ilya Segalovich, one of the founders of Yandex Internet company. Then we began to get grants. We also supported the studio by organizing exhibitions of the children's work. The first batch of kids learned a lot and completed their education. Some now work for me at the studio.

> We run a summer camp for the kids in the Moscow suburbs, and on the island of Sardinia. We also take them to the Shakespeare festival in Stratford. We prepare for this by practicing English and studying British history.

> Orphans have a particular problem: they see themselves as fundamentally unfortunate and suffer from a sense of entitlement – they think society owes them something. So it's important that they learn how to feel useful. Then the sense of victimization is replaced by the joy they get from helping others.

> Every year we go to Beslan, in the Caucasus. This is where a terrorist attack killed hundreds at a local school. We paint murals on the walls of the school, conduct workshops for kids, and teach them how to help others – to take care of disabled children. This year the kids themselves organized a visit for us to an orphanage in the mountains.

> I'm often asked why do I do this? I have five daughters of my own and several adopted children, plus a grandchild already – I ought to have enough to keep busy, right? I just think I'm lucky to have found myself, and I enjoy feeling needed. My husband passed away, as have many who helped us in the beginning. But the children are still here, and I am determined to help them grow and share the values I think are important. **A**