

INTERVIEW - DR. NINA KUZNETSOVA

INTERVIEWER: TERI HUFF

NARRATOR: DR. NINA KUZNETSOVA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT RUSSIA

DATE OF INTERVIEW: NOT GIVEN

HUFF: For the purposes of this taping session, what is your name and how and when did you first become involved with Junior Achievement?

KUZNETSOVA: My name is Nina Kuznetsova. I joined Junior Achievement Russia in March 1998. I learned about Junior Achievement when I was invited to the student company trade fair, *JA Company Program*. The student company movement is one of the most popular JA programs in Russia. And no wonder. Business and entrepreneurship are rather new to the New Russia. When we ask our students—many are involved in student company—whether their parents or their families are involved in business, they say “no.” They are the first generation of business people in their community, in their closed circles, and in their families. And they learn much about it. When you see these kids, who are learning about business, about market economy, and about free enterprise, they really get involved. I believe it happened in the spring of 1997, the year I was approached with the suggestion and the offer to join Junior Achievement as Executive Director. I didn’t think for a long time (chuckles), because I was really, really impressed. I think that JA is needed for Russia. For kids for sure, but also through kids. Junior Achievement’s ideas, concepts, and mission are getting to their parents who didn’t get the chance to be taught the things their kids are taught right now. I think it is very important. I really enjoy Junior Achievement in Russia and what I am doing.

HUFF: Good. Tell me a little bit about your first impression when you went to the trade fair.

KUZNETSOVA: It was my first experience seeing kids so motivated and able to talk about themselves. Talk about their business. Their business ideas. Their projects. They were really,

really dreaming with their activities. When I talked with them, I realized that they know why they were doing that. It is very important because I am an educator and I believe that education in Russia is of high standards. Really high standards. Maybe one of the highest in the entire world. But, being an educator, I realized then and I realize now, that what we lack, and what our education system lacks very much is motivation—the ability to motivate kids to find information. We stuff them with information. Sometimes it is a bit too much to use this information that they gained from learning, from education. We are not teaching them how to use it, how to apply it in their life. I thought, okay, these are kids that know why they are learning, they enjoy the information, it is fun, and very important for the education system and for character development. You know, people are thinking for ages, what is Russian character? I thought, wow, that is a good answer because kids can use all the vast teachers of education and the national character and apply it and use it for their benefit, and for the benefit of those who surround them. Of course, certainly I was impressed by the student company products. Certainly, I was impressed by how much the kids knew. But what inspired me, a what impressed me most of all, was their spirit. The spirit of free enterprise, actually.

HUFF: Who brought JA to your attention? Who invited you to the fair?

KUZNETSOVA: Members of the board of directors, whom I happened to know. The board in Junior Achievement Russia is of a great importance as a synergy organization. I was very happy to know some members of the board. They invited me to just learn what they are doing because that was their business. Naturally, Junior Achievement was introduced to Russia by corporate people, who knew about Junior Achievement from their jobs, from their corporations, and sometimes from their own experience. Some of them had been involved in Junior Achievement when they were kids. They believed that Junior Achievement played a wonderful and a great role in their own careers and in their own lives. These were the top people of international companies, and huge corporations. When they entered the Russian market, being good corporate citizens, they wanted to contribute to the new society. They thought that because there was no JA in Russia, it was a good idea.

Also, it was a very happy coincidence that about the same time our actual founder, and the chair of the board Dr. Yevgeny Velikhov was there. He is a prominent Russian academician, and a wonderful, honored person whose opinion is valued by many different communities and all levels, starting with government. He also is interested in school education, in bringing up a new generation of lucky Russians, successful Russians, educated Russians. We always have all been very educated people. We are very well known by that. He traveled in America for some other business and learned about Junior Achievement. He came back and said, okay, it was obvious there was a need for economic business education in school during that time in the early 90's. Kids wanted it. Teachers wanted it. And parents wanted it. There was some attempt to introduce economics in school but naturally, people who introduced economics in school were university or college professors. When they entered the classrooms, you can imagine what happened. Kids didn't understand them at all. The professors were hurt, really, so Dr. Yevgeny Velikhov started the introduction to Junior Achievement. Business people of multinational corporations met the suggestion with delight. So, there was a happy kind of needs and wants. That's how it started. Officially, Junior Achievement in Russia was started December 5th, 1991. We celebrated our 10th anniversary in December 2001. It was a big and very nice event. We received an address from President Putin, stating his encouragement of our movement and appreciation of what we are doing, and to those who are involved with Junior Achievement, starting with kids, for sure, because they are the target. They are our hope (chuckles). They are the group, the focus of our efforts.

HUFF: What type of program did you start with in Russia?

KUZNETSOVA: I wasn't the person who started JA. The first program was *Applied Economics*. About the same time, *Management Economics Assimilation Exercise* started, given the interest and talents of our kids and our teachers in math and computer literacy. Although there were not so many computers at schools or at homes, Russian kids demonstrated fantastic results. You certainly know about the Hewlett Packard Global Business Challenge, and in mid- '90s, Russian teams, were just fantastic. They got first place. Second place. Third Place in the company program. Actually, we facilitated three programs until 1998. By that time, teachers and parents knew about us because they had

access to the internet and the JA International website. They learned more about JA and knew that there were other programs, such as elementary school programs and middle grade programs. They really wanted JA very much because the earlier the kids start, the better they are prepared for starting the *JA Company Program* or *JA Applied Economics* or *JA Economics*. It's obvious. JA was the first to introduce new JA programs for Russia.

We managed to do this and the results are great. The small kids who are learning about economics start to distinguish, their families. You know, their parents that they love and know would do anything for them their entire lives. Also, they teach their parents sometimes. I know a lady who wanted very much JA for her son. He was nine years old or something like that. She was very motivated and learned more about JA. She said, wow, I want this program for my son. It will be in our school. (chuckles) She persuaded the director, although she's a parent. The teachers were trained and they started JA programs. When her boy was taught personal economics, she came to us said, "Well, I am of course happy. Of course, certainly. My son's such a nice guy, but I've started hating shopping because he is coming with me and he says "no, no, Mom, think twice. Remember our family budget. We really don't need it." Well, he spoils my shopping. (laughter). In a way, it's a very usual story for Russia. Through kids, parents learn how to manage their own life, their home, their personal or family budget and, after all, they become better workers and better entrepreneurs, etc.

HUFF: So, basically, you started with three programs. Now you have...?

KUZNETSOVA: We have nonstop curriculum right now. We started with kindergarten or first grade, and we followed nonstop through 11th grade. Some economic students in colleges or first-year in the university also use our programs, such as *Management Economic Assimilation Exercise* or *JA Economics*. Those kids who have graduated from schools with an experience in *JA Applied Economics* or *JA Economics*, share with us after the first year of their studies. They say they can do approximately nothing with their economic classes because they know even more than they are being taught.

HUFF: That's interesting. How are your programs delivered? I think different countries have different models sometimes. They use consultants. Others have found that not to work for them. Did you train the teachers? Is it a teacher-type of program or do you use consultants in the classroom?

KUZNETSOVA: Primarily teachers are trained when JA is taught in Russia. It is an in-school program. I'd like to say a few words about JA in Russia and how it matches with our educational system. We have a federal system of education, and the federal minister of education is responsible for 70 percent of all education content. Such subjects like Russian, mathematics, and foreign language—we do not have sciences, like chemistry, physics, and whatever (chuckles). Twenty 20 percent of education is in charge of regional ministries or departments of education. Russia consists of 89 regions. So, they are responsible ministries if it's a republic, or department of education if it is another region. They are responsible for this 20 percent and economics is actually in this percent. In Russian school education—well, let's say, it's not a very good word in this situation, but I cannot find another—compulsory subjects are Russian and math and foreign language. There are some extra, or additional, subjects like economics or ecology or the history of the native land. In Moscow, students learn about Moscow. For instance, how it started and developed and, you know, czars and whatever. Economics is in school but an extra curriculum subject. Those in charge of the educational system local authorities decide if it will be economics or ecology. They have a choice between these extra subjects. Our target group is actually these local educators. We also have volunteers. Not so many, I should say, for obvious reasons. We don't have many business people still. But more and more students are involved with JA because they really enjoy coming to class. And they started to realize the major idea of Junior Achievement. They come into the class, sponsoring some school or some class and they are preparing their future. Students gain from that and schools gain from that. But students gain as well because they are work-force ready. That is what they get in a few years and they started to realize it. Families are very much involved, of course. Parents are involved in economics and business. From any sphere of life, they come to the classrooms and it works. Of course, we have a long way ahead of us with volunteer network. Generally, JA Russia works through the regional

network because it is a huge territory in a huge country. We would not be able to work successfully as we are doing if just sitting in Moscow and training teachers.

HUFF: Explain a little bit about — you said there are 89 regions, is that correct?

KUZNETSOVA: Yes.

HUFF: Where is JA in those 89 regions?

KUZNETSOVA: In 42 regions.

HUFF: Forty-two regions?

KUZNETSOVA: Forty-two regions. Thirty-two regions have registered for their own JA offices. They are independent, legal borders of Junior Achievement. For instance, in Sakhalin in the Far East, or in south Russia, or Tula, which is middle Russia. They are all independent JA organizations. They belong to the regional network of JA Russia. So, we have 32 registered legal borders that are governed by their own boards. They have their own executives, offices, directors, and staffs. They train teachers and deliver materials, etc. We have 10 centers, from 42, which are not legal borders. They are not registered. That's their preference. That's easier for them. In Russia, according to the Russian law and the Russian legislation, none of the international or non-government organizations can work both through registration or without registration. It is up to them. So, 10 of our regional centers chose to not be registered, but they working very well. Just fine. Also, in 80 regions of the Russia Federation, we have coordinators. They are not actually offices, but there are several schools in each region. Sometimes it is tens of schools; sometimes it's hundreds of schools, depending on the territory. We have a couple of coordinators who are working with them. We certainly would love to have very strong independent offices in all regions. I hope it would happen in some time. We need more resources for that. The only barrier is that although we are very generously supported, but Russia is such a big country. We certainly should work more on getting support at the start of each and every regional center. It is a

question of time. You know, 10 years —it's 12 actually now— it is a long time in one person's history and story, but not so long in JA, and not so long for a country like Russia.

HUFF: So, you are kind of the national office?

KUZNETSOVA: Yes.

HUFF: And then ...

KUZNETSOVA: Central and national office. We coordinate all the activities of all our regional networks. Although they are independent, they belong to JA Russia.

HUFF: Right. Okay.

KUZNETSOVA: We facilitate their needs. We try to gain and to raise some support for them. Also, we are responsible for the national level of our events and competitions because we have lots of annual events. The biggest is the student company trade fair annually in December. And the student company competition in May. It is a huge event and they are really very nice.

HUFF: So, do you bring all those kids...

KUZNETSOVA: Well, not all of them. First, they have the regional level of competition and winners of the regional competition come to Moscow for the national competition. Then they compete. Their efforts, their knowledge, and their skills are evaluated by professional managers who represent their supporter. Real business organizations, and winners are selected. Depending on the program, the national winner sometimes, if it's available, participates and represents Junior Achievement Russia at the international level, such as the student company. Regional winners compete at the national level and national winners participate in the international event being a part of JA, for example, Junior Achievement Young Enterprise Europe. Sometimes they win at this level as well. We do not have exams in

our programs. It is, I suppose, practiced worldwide with JA. But we have lots of competitions—*Banks in Action* and the *Management Economics Simulation Exercise*. We started new programs, such as *Laws of Life*. It's a national contest founded by the Sir John Templeton Foundation. We were very honored in 1999 when we were approached by Templeton Foundation with this request to start a *Laws of Life* contest. It is really successful. It was launched in a very exciting way because Sir John came himself for the first awards ceremony and everyone remembers it as if it were yesterday. The awards ceremony was located at the American ambassador's residence in the Moscow sponsor's House. It was just wonderful. We have wonderful partnership with Americans who live and work in Moscow and in Russia. It is always very exciting.

HUFF: Have you ever been involved with JA or JA International events and activities? Do you travel to the United States a lot?

KUZNETSOVA: The first time I attended a JA International event in America was April 2001. I was invited to make a presentation of Junior Achievement Russia at a JA International Board of Directors meeting. I was certainly very honored to do this., It was a huge honor and huge delight. I remember it well and the presentation was very kindly accepted. (chuckles) People were interested. I think it was really good because, since that time, the JA International board members who happen to travel to Moscow visit the JA Russia office. Recently, we had honored guests Mr. Thomas Barter and Mrs. Barter, who happened to be in Moscow. They came to the JA Russia office and we had a very nice meeting with JA Russia students who represented several different student companies. It seemed to me that Mr. and Mrs. Barter enjoyed how students presented their projects and how they talked about themselves. I know for sure the kids were so delighted to see them, to listen to them, to see people who represent success and successful business. Mr. Barter shared his own life story with them. They were just shaking with delight, and they remember it very well. It is very important for our kids— meetings like that, and experiences like that— because we do not have many role models because Russian business is very young. Of course, we had wonderful examples before the revolution and well-known entrepreneurs. But now it starts and Russian business people are really busy right now. Sometimes, many times, they do not

understand the importance of sharing their knowledge. I think that Russian business is too young for that. We need some time. Maybe 10 years, maybe a bit more when JA Russia graduates will become top managers and top people of their own companies, or who will be employed at other companies. There would be no need to explain what is Junior Achievement and what business means for Junior Achievement. I hope so. (chuckles)

HUFF: What type of challenges have you had?

KUZNETSOVA: Oh, lots of them.

HUFF: What disappointments or successes?

KUZNETSOVA: Lots of them. Successes. Our kids, of course. They are wonderful. They are clever. They are successful. They are motivated. We can be proud of our graduates. It's our biggest success. Our success is also certainly that in 12 years, well actually, in 10 years already, we managed during this period of time to become the second largest organization in the world. Second after the United States. I think this is a big success. (laughter) After we introduced elementary and middle-grade programs, we have an explosive growth of students in annual numbers. Before 1998 we had, well, 150,000 students, sometimes 200,000. Now our numbers are 350,000, 378,000 last year, and 415,000 this academic year. Hopefully, next year it will not be less, at least. (chuckles) We have every reason to be proud of our participants and a bit of ourselves, of course. The challenge is financial support. I think it is not a unique situation. Every JA or YE organization would need and would like to have more financial support. As I mentioned already, we lack volunteers. We also have great progress in that area but, of course, we should work much more to get people more involved. Also, to be patient and realize and understand that we need time for the society to accept the idea. Not of JA. People like JA. They appreciate JA. But not the concept of being involved in the community, in the civic problems. For 70 years, we dropped this habit, because we were very well taught not to be involved. (chuckles)

HUFF: If you had to do it all over again with your experience with JA, would you do anything differently?

KUZNETSOVA: Hmm. Well, in some details maybe, but not in the major trend. I told you that I joined the organization in March 1998 and, as you probably remember, in August 1998 we had this terrible financial crisis. I wouldn't say that I would prefer it wouldn't happen (chuckles), strange enough. But it was a challenge that maybe I am still with JA because it was so challenging. (chuckles) It was the question of "to be or not to be," even for our supporters. For generous people in the company, it was also a question of "to be or not to be" in Russia. The real fact that we survived, and that we got so many wonderful people who supported us at that terribly difficult time, including that our bank account was frozen. We approached Citibank in Moscow, which just started operations, and didn't know about us or who we are. Corporate top leaders were standing in lines and we are clients of Citibank. Even for our board, it was a big surprise because we became clients of Citibank before them. Because so many wonderful people supported us at that time and continue to do this that you really feel responsible. In some details, maybe it would be different. But not in the major things, in the really important things.

HUFF: What challenges do you think Junior Achievement is going to face in the near and distance future?

KUZNETSOVA: The challenge of growth because we are growing fast. Growth is wonderful but it is also a challenging process. Also, we have reached a certain balance. We have good relationships with the minister of education. We have letters of endorsement from the minister of education out. In my bravest dreams, I will dream about five years ago and we are very well accepted by the business community, by the society. We reached a certain level, a certain balance. Balance is not forever, so we need to grow and need to invent new ideas and new programs. It's challenging, but it is also exciting and wonderful.

HUFF: Now, do you have people on staff that are helping you develop programs?

KUZNETSOVA: Not to develop programs. No, we are administrators administrating the programs. Our programs are Junior Achievement programs and we work with consultants. We work with publishing houses, with interpreters who translate JA programs, who adapt them to the Russian school system, to some Russian reality. One of the greatest benefits and strongest features of Junior Achievement programs is that they are easily accepted by kids although the concepts are very complicated. One of the secrets is that this complicated concept is referred through very simple things. Recognizable things. Things that everybody knows. While sometimes in JA programs these very simple examples are simple for American kids, it means next to nothing for a Russian kid. In these cases, we need to change something to make it smooth for the process of education. We need a reference to a thing, to a person, to a concept, which every Russian kid knows.

HUFF: Okay.

KUZNETSOVA: But not in the staff. Not in the staff. Well, we have no chance to do it. Probably we would enjoy doing it, but we have a lot in our hands. As I mentioned, 450 in this year only.

HUFF: That's amazing.

KUZNETSOVA: We have lots of events and fundraising activities. That's our priority and our jobs. Of course, we like our programs. Of course, we enjoy them. We know them very well. We, again, our central staff is not training. We have trainers. But we know our programs.

HUFF: What do you think your most rewarding accomplishment was?

KUZNETSOVA: I don't know. I think it is in the future.

HUFF: Okay. How would you describe the impact that Junior Achievement has had on people's lives? Talk a little bit about the students. You know, you've given me a couple of examples. What about—you said you use limited volunteers, but you do have some.

KUZNETSOVA: Yes.

HUFF: What do you think the impact has been on volunteers?

KUZNETSOVA: On volunteers? Well, they certainly realize more about their jobs, and about themselves. They certainly started thinking more strategically. I mentioned that those who are involved in JA, visiting classrooms and being with kids, they started realizing that the future of their companies depends on these kids. And that creates their strategic thinking. Also, they enjoy it, really. It is a wonderful pleasure for them as personalities and it also develops their personal skills. I know some people who really wanted to come, but they said, "I am afraid. I have one kid and sometimes it is so difficult." They shared after volunteering that even with their own kids, their relationship has become better, more creative, and easier. It is a huge impact for volunteers to act as business people, as strategic thinkers and decision makers, and also as personalities—husbands and fathers and mothers and wives and whatever. (chuckles)

HUFF: What about teachers? What impact has it had on the teachers?

KUZNETSOVA: Wonderful. We have wonderful teachers in our educational system, but the tradition is that the absolute majority of teachers are rather authoritative. Not because they want to be. They were trained like that because they are the source. They were trained within the concept that they are the only source of information for these poor kids. Not for the modern kids, of course. Sometimes they have a conflict with kids right now because kids know more. It's a real blessing for many good teachers who can accept the concept of JA because it is not only about economics and business. It's also a wonderful system of methodology that good teachers really enjoy.

HUFF: What would you like to be remembered for?

KUZNETSOVA: Myself. (chuckles) For many things, Junior Achievement as well. Junior Achievement is a very important part of my life, of course, but you know, professionally, I'm not only Junior Achievement. I would like to be remembered by Junior Achievement because I really like it. I really appreciate the impact on my life, and on the lives of all these kids who are involved, on the teachers, on the parents, on Russia. JA is a wonderful system, and I hope it will be growing and developing and succeed.

HUFF: Is there any other additional information that you would like to tell me about the programs or what you are doing in Russia?

KUZNETSOVA: Actually, you have very good questions so that I think we covered all the major things. I have to limit myself because, frankly speaking, I could talk about Junior Achievement for hours. (chuckles)

HUFF: Well, I appreciate your time.

KUZNETSOVA: Thank you very much.

HUFF: Thank you.

KUZNETSOVA: Thank you.

MALE VOICE: Did you tell her that you are the most successful junior executive of JA International?

KUZNETSOVA: No. I don't know about it. (laughter)

HUFF: Yes, she did. She did.

KUZNETSOVA: I said about the students, of course. But it's also, you know, depends on the students. (laughter) Not only myself.

HUFF: Okay, thank you very much.

KUZNETSOVA: Thank you.

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