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Forsyth Tech teacher is key to deal to train Russians in business management

By Laura Giovanelli
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Shane Gourley (right) engages in role playing as a FedEx executive during Stafford's course in Principles of Management at Forsyth Tech. (Journal Photo by Bruce Chapman)

When Forsyth Technical Community College announced several weeks ago that it had struck a deal with Russia energy giant Gazprom, Gary Green, Forsyth Tech's president, found himself fielding questions from a curious interviewer at the British Broadcasting Company.

How did an average-size community college, in an average-size American city in the middle of North Carolina land the job of giving middle managers of the largest natural-gas provider in the world crash-courses in Western-style management?

The better question is: Who made it happen?

The answer lives in Colfax, not far from the tobacco farm where she grew up. She is a small, energetic woman who teaches business-management classes with the idealistic admonishment to students that "this is your time in history."

Suzanne Stafford, 58, will oversee groups of Gazprom managers once they start coming in February.

For two years, she nudged along a process that resulted in a five-year contract between Forsyth Tech and Gazprom, which employs more than 300,000 people.

Her roots are far from big-city.

Born in Winston-Salem in 1947, Stafford lived on her grandparents' tobacco farm until her mother remarried and moved the family to Norfolk, Va.

War haunted a lot of the adult men she knew. Her fighter-pilot father spent his life as a veteran in the hospital. Her stepfather was a member of a clean-up crew in bombed Japan. Her uncle wandered a South Pacific island for days, alone, after a mortar blew him into a swamp.

When she got to college at Old Dominion University, as post-World War II relations around the world dived into the Cold War, she studied Russian.

In graduate school, at the University of California at Berkeley, she leaned toward business - not an occupation she dreamed about as a child, but one she chose because it meant she could practice a sort of international relations.

"Business to me was a tool," Stafford said. "If two people are going to make a deal about anything, they have to be able to sit down and talk about the details."

She moved back to North Carolina after her first marriage broke up, in the 1980s, in time for former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika.

In 1985, she established a consulting firm, Stafford Holdings Co.

She acted as a liaison between American companies and people in the Soviet Union who controlled the red tape preventing them from setting up shop in the Soviet Union.

Stafford counted 49 companies among its clients, including Carolina Pride, a poultry company.

"There wasn't any turkey in the country," she said. "Anyone who wanted a turkey for an American had to bring it out of Helsinki."

Her Russian contacts spread. Those who have gone on trips to Russia with her know: Stafford is all about relationships, large and small.

Among them were community leaders of small and mid-size Russian cities, down to the driver Stafford always used when she visited, said Mike Hazen, a professor of communication at Wake Forest University.

"She is an extremely gifted person who has a flair for getting to people with influence," said Larry Brown, a former mayor of Kernersville who has gone to Russia on trips as part of a goodwill program.

Brown now represents the 73rd district in the General Assembly.

Those people of influence eventually included a woman named Lydmila Vorobieva, the director of the economy faculty of Gazprom's College of Oil and Gas. Stafford stayed in touch with Vorobieva even after a 2000 car accident put a end to her frequent international trips.

The accident was severe, and it put the kibosh on her business as she underwent operations to repair injuries to her face and neck.

At the same time, Gazprom started expanding into Western markets, eventually looking at ways to buy into the liquefied natural-gas market here.

As part of the expansion, Gazprom wanted their managers to learn more about American business ways.

When Vorobieva asked Stafford two years ago if she knew of an American college that could provide that training, Stafford said she did.

She could have suggested her alma mater, UC-Berkeley. But she had Forsyth Tech in mind.

Of course, Stafford came to Forsyth Tech through a relationship - a friendship with Brown. At Forsyth Tech, Stafford helped oversee a U.S. State Department grant for an exchange between the former Soviet Union and the United States.

The program brought professionals from Moldova, a former Soviet state, to Winston-Salem to learn about the American economy.

When it ended, Stafford signed on to teach business courses at Forsyth Tech.

"Principles of Management" sounds as though it may be dull stuff, unless you are a student in Stafford's class. There you are likely to be pulled out of your classroom seat during a role-playing exercise and anointed Prince Charles trying to persuade American corporate leaders to donate money to environmental causes.

Or you're suddenly made the chief executive of Hewlett Packard, explaining to a classroom of students doubling as employees why the computer company has been bought out by Dell.

Students recently finished a project designing video games whose objective is to create world peace, not blow up an enemy.

Ah, you think, a child of the 1960s.

The truth is, Stafford says, the video makes a good group project. She says that it teaches students how to work together in teams, and it's what American companies look for.

Some of that is what she thinks Russians working in the United States need to learn.

"The current style of management in the U.S. is coaching," Stafford said. "That just historically hasn't been the style of Russia."

Stafford and Green are still working out the financial details of the contract and were not yet able to release how much Forsyth Tech will charge each student.

The contract, though, means that small groups of Russians will begin coming over in February, about 10-15 for classes and job shadowing.

And she says she thinks that the opportunity is good for Triad businesses to begin to make contacts, too: She wants Gazprom to meet with Federal Express and Dell.

After all, there are plenty of people who have heard of Gazprom. And there are people who have never heard of Forsyth Tech. Then, once upon a time, there were people in Russia who had never heard of Colfax.

It didn't matter - during business meals, Colfax was quickly lumped with the great cities of America, Stafford remembered.

"To New York! To San Francisco! To Colfax!" the Russians would say, raising vodka (or wine or champagne) in a toast.

"Colfax!" Stafford says. "We still don't have a spotlight."

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