

Anya Smagina's Story

Modeling Servant Leadership as a Teacher at the Kazakh-American Free University

"I'm a lucky person." Looking back on the years since she was born on September 12, 1990, that is the way Anya thinks of herself. Given the trials and obstacles she has endured, her positive outlook on life is remarkable.

On the day she was born in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan, there was a big explosion at one of the city's mining processing plants. A huge cloud drifted over the city and the air was so polluted people could not see more than ten meters. The smell of chemicals was terrible. Doctors were so concerned that they refused to release baby Anya with her mother. Even transferring to the village where her grandparents lived was not an option. "I was a very weak baby; my skin was thin and blue," Anya was told years later. After a week in hospital, her father took her quickly to the village so that she could finally breath fresh air. Her doctors and parents assumed that she would always be sickly. Indeed, she remembers being very sick as a child.

Anya is profoundly grateful that she was able to grow up partially in a village. Today, as a twenty-six year old young woman, she has only positive thoughts about memories of village life. At the edge of the village there was a river and a forest. That is where her granddad took her to learn about survival. "If there is an apocalypse of any kind, stick to me because I know how to survive. I know what mushrooms to eat. I know the berries that are edible. I can make a fire without matches. I can catch fish; I can hunt." Her experiences as a child made her strong, she says.

Her grandfather was her role model as a child. He taught Anya survival skills. Early in life she took the mushrooms she picked in the forest and sold them at her roadside stand along the village road, thus providing her own money to spend. The family had a garden where they raised vegetables as well as strawberries and raspberries. The family had no animals, but they traded what they raised for meat and eggs with the neighbors.

The decade of the nineties was a difficult time in Kazakhstan. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the economy went into a tailspin. The family had little money. Her mom earned a meager salary as a history teacher in the school in Ust-Kamenogorsk. Her father lost his job, Anya did not know why. He did not have a diploma from school, but he was a master repairman, fixing devices



Anya.



Anya with some of her students at KAFU.



Anya (second from left) participates in Co-Serve's Servant Leadership Academy in Oregon in July, 2015.

such as radios, televisions and appliances for people in the city. Her grandmother, Anya's father's mother, died when she was just ten years old.

Anya was the only child in her family. Being poor was etched in her memory. However, in those times even having money was no guarantee that one could buy things. Store shelves were often barren. Trading service for milk or fruit for handmade clothes was the way of life in the city. More important than having money, she remembers how neighbors cared for one another. For example, she recalls that her father caught lots of fish in the nearby river in the village. The family had not enough space in the refrigerator to preserve the fish, so her father asked her if she thought they should give some of their fish to the ladies in the village who had no husband. "I said okay, and we did it all of the time," Anya remembers. "That is when the concept of leading by serving started for me." Her father became her role model in caring for others.

Even as a child Anya noticed the attitudes and behavior of neighbors in the village and in the city. Everyone knew everyone. Sometime, especially during hard times, people became suspicious about the reason for the help her father offered. They wondered whether there was a hidden motive, whether her family knew something about others and whether their acts of kindness were merely a way to pry into their personal lives. What was expected in return. She noticed that negative attitudes prevailed, even in the face of charity and kindness. Doing things that were intended to help others without a direct benefit to their own family often created a sense of expectation by those who received assistance. "Sometimes I still see this attitude in people," she notes. Recognizing needs and serving people was not a simple matter, Anya discovered. Nevertheless, "my family always trusted others," she remembers.

Hard times for people in the village, including Anya's large extended family, fostered values that prevail to this day. For example, people did not throw away any food. There was never enough food. Anya remembers her grandmother's stories about village life when she was a child. One time, when one of her grandmother's sisters came home from her job in Ust-Kamenogorsk to the village, she brought a bag of apples for the family. There were so many cousins that everyone received only half an apple.

Her grandmother worked in a chemical plant in the city. Exposure to chemicals was the probable cause of her cancer. Nevertheless, her grandmother sent some of the money she earned to help the family in the village. Anya remembers that "in those days we did not talk about servant leadership. We just did it. We never talked about it. We knew it was the right thing to do." This attitude continued following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and during the 1990s. This woman became the strongest role model in Anya's life.

Anya also remembers troubles in school. By the time she was 10 or 12 years old she was already tall and thin. Other children teased her, calling her ugly. Some said she looked more like a boy than a girl. "Some children laughed at me," she recalls. Once she got into a fight with another girl. They tried anything, saying she looked like a crocodile, just to make her cry. Once she did cry and children saw her weakness. She decided she would never do that again. She would be strong.

As a kind of escape mechanism, Anya had a crush on Michael Jackson. His music and personality charmed her and she hoped that one day they would be married. Even though her mother taught at the same school, unkind remarks by other children continued into her teen years. Because her mother taught at that school, some students just feared making unkind remarks about Anya. She had some friends in school, friends who remain close to this day. She found safety in being more like an adult than a school girl. She liked talking about the things that interested adults, including politics and language study.

This difficult time of life ended when she was fifteen years old. When her grandfather became gravely ill, her parents realized that they must sell their house in the village. Anya begged them not to sell it. Everything about her life revolved around that house and people in the village. She still misses that house in the village. Even today, village life is her ideal.

Looking back upon her childhood we see the foundation blocks that were forming her values as a future servant leader. As a child her health was precarious; loving parents cared for her. She lived in poverty, but she learned the value of caring for neighbors. She faced the nasty teasing of school children, but she did not succumb to bitterness and grudges. The toxic notions of loneliness and isolation did not become the substance of her relationships. She learned to trust people because she could trust friends and family. She learned the value of healthy relationships. And she was beginning to see that a good life is built upon people and relationships in authentic community. Given her circumstances, these early lessons were remarkable.

After finishing school in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Anya entered East Kazakhstan State University. EKSU was a natural choice because one of her friends studied there. She decided to study in the translation department. English and German became her specialties.

When she was in her second year at EKSU, she met her future husband. He was a musician playing in a rock band. However, music was more like his hobby; the rock band never generated enough money to live on. He had to take work as a sales manager in a local company. He was eight years older than Anya. The year was 2009 when he asked her to marry him; he gave her a ring. She imagined that marriage was the answer to finding her way in life. She enjoyed going to rock concerts, but Anya could not find her place in that society. Many young people at these concerts drank and got drunk. Anya could enjoy a glass of beer, but never got drunk. Lots of young girls were “crazy” about the musicians. Loud music and getting drunk helped some kids forget about their problems and the strain of their studies at the university.

Anya, just eighteen years old, and her future husband lived together for three years before they married. Even before they were married, when they were with friends he would call her his wife. They tried to save money so that they could remodel their apartment. His problems with alcohol made the goal of saving money difficult and became an early sign of trouble in their marriage. Nevertheless, they worked on the apartment. Leaking plumbing, cockroaches everywhere, and structural problems meant that the remodeling project lasted four or five years.

Her husband was kind; he did not beat her or yell at her. But he was often away on weekends—away with his gang. After one overnight episode with his friends, he returned drunk and they got into an argument. He told her that she should go away. “I don’t want to see you here,” he told her. They separated for a couple of months, then tried to get together again. Anya started to realize that her life was too shallow. She wanted something more serious. Wisely, she understood that in this situation having a baby was not a good idea.

After completing her undergraduate degree, she wanted to earn her master’s degree. Some of her teachers encouraged her. As excellent role models, they inspired her to continue her studies. She was not sure what field to pursue in graduate school, but she was determined to follow through in pursuit of her academic and professional goals. One obstacle to enrollment in a graduate program was the requirement of a medical examination. She needed a paper stating that she did not have a viral disease. Her exam revealed two spots on her scan. She was infected with tuberculosis. All other tests were perfect. Aside from TB, she was in good health. Fortunately, Anya believed, they caught her infection at an early stage.

This was a strange time in her life. She and her future husband were back together. She was ready to pursue a graduate degree and delay starting a family. She was happy. That is when the doctor told her she needed treatment. Despite assurances from the doctor that she would be fine, her parents were frightened. The doctor placed her in a hospital for TB patients. Anya was just twenty-one years old when her mother and father went with her to the hospital where she had to wear braces and a standard green hospital gown. My parents did not want to let me go, Anya remembers.

Being with patients in a TB ward was unlike any previous experience in her life. Many of the patients came from bad neighborhoods. One girl in particular acted like the boss of the ward. She was street tough. When she opened her mouth, only two teeth showed. This girl had a sidekick. The two of them were like Batman and Robin in the TB ward. As Anya was unpacking the things she brought to the hospital, these two came up to her and demanded to see what she had, taking what they wanted. Anya soon learned that these girls were not her main problem in the hospital.

There was virtually no privacy and no security in the hospital. There were three floors. Anya’s floor was for a mix of rooms for males and females. Men who were in the hospital for months on end wandered from room to room, entering her room without knocking on the door. Her room was next to the bathroom and opposite the cafeteria. Before women were placed in that room, it was where men played cards. Anya remembers seeing a man in her room, watching her. He approached her and tried to touch her. “It was creepy,” she recalls. It happened more than once. As a woman, she knew that she was vulnerable. When a man came in the room, she hurried to the hot tea water. Her defense was the threat of splashing hot water on any man who approached her in the room. Staying for nine months in this hospital was like a bad adventure. She felt like she was trapped in a psychiatric hospital.

Every morning she was on a regimen of pills. Each time she had to sign a statement that she had taken the pills. Some of the patients drank alcohol and were on drugs. Anya saw many awful things in the ward. One time, for example, she saw a man who had been placed in a small room, like a box. He was

withdrawing from drugs. As she passed by, she noticed his blood spattered everywhere—“he was like red meat.” The man was crying, asking for help. Anya was horrified; she screamed. She later realized he was asking for drugs. Another time she saw a patient who had died. Most of all she remembers her awareness in the hospital that many of the patients were like wild animals. If the environment had been more appropriate, with a family-like atmosphere, things would have been much better, she believes.

The doctor who treated patients in the TB ward was very kind. He provided some relief from the madness all around. She could talk to him about the misbehavior she witnessed. She could tell him about her fear when she left her room. The doctor talked to some of the men who were aggressive, even violent towards women. His intervention often helped.

Anya always maintained perspective, remembering the respect that her mother, father, grandmother and grandfather and teachers had for others. The bad behavior and brutality she saw in the hospital did not supplant the nurturing values she learned during her childhood and adolescence. As she thinks back, she realizes that the values we talk about in the Co-Serve leadership program are like the values she grew up believing—treating people with respect and building their self-esteem. “We didn’t talk about leadership when I was a child, but we lived by these values,” she said. The concepts of servant leadership actually resemble the behavior of those who modeled the way for her.

As a university student, Anya realized that she must think about earning money to supplement what her husband was able to provide. She also wanted to buy for herself the things she needed in life. She knew that she could teach English. She started by tutoring her aunt, without charging for her lessons.

Looking back, Anya thinks about her geography teacher in school as a mentor. This teacher taught about life as well as about the world. This teacher had persuaded the school director to purchase a BBC series of films that related the needs of human beings to the geography in different countries around the world. As the teacher helped her students think about different nationalities, she taught her students to concentrate on their accomplishments and avoid creating stereotypes and judging others. The teacher wanted her students to understand that every single nationality is valuable. Anya recalls her teacher’s emphasis upon the value and the potential of every person.

After graduation from her university, the rector of the Kazakh-American Free University invited her to teach and become a part of the staff in the International Department. During the interview she noticed that he talked with her about what he could do for her, professionally speaking. He called attention to the skills I could bring to KAFU and its students as well as what KAFU could do to help develop her career. This approach made her feel good. The rector hired her.

Soon after coming to KAFU, Anya learned about a leadership program for students, teachers and staff. Someone told her that the program was about helping people. Her response: “Well, that’s kind of obvious.” Wouldn’t it be a waste of time to learn what she had already learned in her childhood. When Anya told her grandmother about the leadership course, even she wondered whether Anya would be wasting her time. Nevertheless, she decided to check out the International Servant Leadership program offered by Co-Serve International, the American partner with her university. Dan Ballast, the leader for her group of university teachers, explained that the two-year program involved four steps: 1) the study

of 20 key principles of servant leadership; 2) personalized communication about servant leadership principles with a mentor; 3) participating in an Academy in the USA to see and experience servant leadership in action; and, 4) demonstrating servant leadership in her own community, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan.

Anya decided to stay in the program because, for some reason, it sounded interesting. It was also a good way to meet people she would be working with at the university. In the very first class Dan asked everyone to sit in a circle and he said “these are the people you need to trust.” Participants would be sharing about their personal lives, their “secrets,” and everything said in this circle must remain confidential. If anyone could not agree not to share personal secrets outside of the circle, they should leave. Everyone stayed.

“In the program we started talking about leadership qualities which were, of course, obvious. I was a bit arrogant.” Anya remembers that she and another person she met in the class had their own thoughts and sometimes laughed about the whole program. “We were horrible students,” she admits. However, as participants shared their life stories the nice atmosphere in the group appealed to her. Discussing personal thoughts and values in such an open community was new. As she and others talked about their inner thoughts, about values and about their behaviors, Anya appreciated the freedom she felt in this group. The idea that each person acted upon the basis of core values and that their actions influenced others affirmed what she had experienced as a child in the village. She also started to reflect on times when her own actions were at odds with her core values. Her core values were love, honesty, generosity, trust and acceptance. Given the challenging experiences she had faced in life, Anya understood that trust was a big issue.

A primary principle of the servant leadership program stated that people and relationships are the most important things we value in the world. This concept is hard; it means forgiving people who have not earned or deserve our trust. It means respecting people who are selfish and sometimes unkind. Confronting these issues creates an internal struggle. Anya realized, however, that respecting people means that we need to believe that they can change.

Anya sees herself as an analytical person. Knowing her core values creates a kind of code by which she analyzes people and situations. She constantly asks, “can I trust someone or something in this particular situation?” She admits that this way of looking at people and life is like her religion. She notes that religion limits the behavior of people but also gives them freedom. Servant leadership helped Anya think deeply about her values, her actions, and her purpose in life. One outcome of the course was that she now wants to help others to realize their purpose and to be accepted in their own community.

After being released from the hospital Anya had what she calls “a blurry vision about her purpose in life.” She decided to tutor her aunt in English; she realized that she wanted to be a teacher; she wanted to teach at a university. The servant leadership course helped her think about what it means to live in community. “We are not alone; we are social beings and I have people on my side and they want the same things that I desire. This understanding was crucial for me,” she says. The process of discovery about community also helped her accept what she has to offer. “I am not afraid to be myself,” she says.

Her analytical nature helps Anya understand that people are different. In the life of authentic community, we must accept one another. “And sometimes they do not accept me, which is fine, because I accept them.”

Anya continued her studies, earning her Master’s degree at KAFU. She loves teaching because it opens the door to helping her students. “I learned that one of the main things we need to teach our students is to first find their own way of learning. By the time they graduate they should be on their path to self-actualization. They need to be sure of what they are going to do with their lives. They need to believe in themselves. And they need to implement their knowledge and have the ability to pursue a career that enables them to grow.”

Thinking back on her International Servant Leadership Program experience, she has connected the dots between the program and teaching at the university. She wants to be part of the process of creating a culture of servant leadership at KAFU, and thus modeling the way of leading by serving students. In her actions she becomes a model for students. “I give them my mood; I can share a smile; I can share my time with them.” Being a teacher who serves students means, for Anya, “giving yourself.” She models servant leadership as a teacher.

Modeling servant leadership sometimes requires the art and skill of being a peace-maker. Anya recalls a time when two of her students got into a big argument and would not talk with each other. Their anger threatened the team unity of the classroom and even the atmosphere of the university. Anya talked with each one separately, spending her time sorting out what prompted their outburst. Finally, she got them to talk with each other, thus resolving their feud and restoring the learning team. In helping them resolve their differences and even seeing them smile with one another, Anya feels both satisfaction and mission fulfillment. Her mission is to mentor students and help them accept themselves and one another.

Leading by serving often involves deep commitment. When Anya noticed that one of her best students was missing classes and other teachers also noted that this student had not been seen at the university, Anya tried to connect by calling and sending text messages. No reply. This student had graduated with honors from her school, then completed a cosmetics school course before entering the university. She came from a close family, including her younger sister, mom, and grandmother. She was fluent in three languages, and was at the top of her class in English. She was even aware of how other students in the class were doing, helping them with group papers. Obviously, her absence was felt by all.

This student suddenly appeared again and attended her classes, but she had changed. She argued with others, with students as well as teachers. When Anya tried to find out what was happening, all she would say was that she was having problems with her family. The student was cautious, reserved and reluctant to share with Anya. “You need to talk with someone,” Anya told her. She knew that it was important for this girl to trust someone who would not betray her confidence. Patience and kindness finally paid off. The students started to cry as they sat down together to talk.

The student revealed that her mother was addicted to drugs and alcohol. When things got real bad at home and she was not able to sleep, the girl went to live with her grandmother. Her grandmother had a

daughter who had a mild mental disturbance, maybe autism. Her mother begged her to come home again. Because of love for her mother and concern for her younger sister's welfare, she agreed. However, her mother's addictions continued to create stress for her and her sister.

Learning about this student's situation touched Anya's heart. She told the girl that she lived nearby and that she could use her spare room whenever she needed to get away and be in a safe place. This was merely a temporary solution, but it was a step in the right direction. The girl returned to live temporarily with her grandmother. Anya also offered to help her get counseling from someone in the university's psychology department. The girl wanted to escape, find another place to study, but Anya persuaded her to stay and continue her study at the university because "we care about you."

"I love working with students," Anya says. That is the reason her university asked her to add to her responsibilities by working in the Student Development Center. Within that department she found a staff riddled with conflict based in selfish interests and misunderstanding. There she recognizes that her role is to create a team based upon trust. "Our team must start by discovering their core values," she says with persuasion in her voice. She knows that members of the Center must find their purpose in serving students, not in putting their personal interests ahead of their collective mission. Solutions do not come easily. Everyone is busy; there is little time for team building. Team building is like putting the pieces of a puzzle in their proper place, then seeing and acting on the common purpose of the whole community.

As she creates learning communities in her classes, as she meets the needs of individual students, as she works in the International office and in the Student Development Center, Anya is a team builder. She seeks creative solutions. She asks students to face the weaknesses they find in one another, and seek common solutions. She tries to make team building fun for everyone. And she invites people to talk openly about their core values.

Her childhood experiences, her analytical nature, her recognition of the importance of teams, and her care for each person are Anya's strength as a model of servant leadership. She is fulfilling her mission by helping each student discover who they are. Sometimes her wit and her bluntness are disarming. Anya reminisces about a self-conscious student who was shy and lacked confidence in her ability as a language student. She often broke down in tears, causing further embarrassment to herself in class. "I'm going to teach you a new word," Anya said. Crybaby. As the girl grasped the meaning of this word, she smiled, then laughed. Soon everyone in the class was laughing with her—not at her. Humor is often a wonderful tool a teacher can use in the classroom. During the following year the same student entered a language competition involving lots of university students. It was a "Jeopardy-like" contest. She took second place in the contest. Best of all, she demonstrated that she had conquered her shyness.

Creating a congenial learning environment is one of Anya's special gifts. Her desire is to draw out views and opinions of every student because each person is important. She breaks down barriers and will do what might seem foolish if that's what it takes. "We sing songs together; we don't always just sit down at our desks, we sometimes stand up. We dance. We laugh." When her colleagues say "you're wasting

time,” Anya responds by saying “No, we are building community. When you are in a community you are in a safe environment and you can learn.”

Servant leadership for Anya is practicing “mutuality.” “It is putting our core values into action. It is doing little things that are enjoyable--like smiling, helping people, taking pictures of student activities, creating the feeling of safety in the classroom.” As Anya Smagina does these little things, she is modeling the way of the servant leader and demonstrating that these are principles that work in real life.

As Anya moves forward in life, she will carry with her the valuable lessons she learned from her family as a child in the village. She will remember the lessons of the struggles she has faced. She will build upon the principles and practices of modeling servant leadership in the classroom.

Her vision and goals for the future are large. “I’m just getting started,” she says. Helping students discover and practice their core values in the Student Development Center is her immediate goal. She plans to take small steps that demonstrate to students that core values influence others--they spread throughout the community. Those little things are enjoyable and they create the sense that our Center is a safe place.

That safe place at KAFU will grow larger as KAFU grows. In Anya’s vision she sees a large campus on the other side of the Irtysh River. That campus will have many beautiful buildings, including a large library and an attractive cafeteria, all surrounded by a white fence. People will be drawn inside that fence. They will want to know what is happening there. The atmosphere of this university will reflect a culture of servant leadership. Students and all who come to this campus will know that everyone is ready to help them.

Anya does not know how she can create such a campus, but she knows that her role as a servant leader is an important ingredient that will make it happen. Skepticism—that is the biggest obstacle. She has seen the dark side of the human experience. She knows that only as people unite in purpose driven community can they triumph over the dark side. “Solutions,” she says, “come from the heart, the soul and the mind.” Just as she learned in the International Servant Leadership Program, Anya knows healthy communities are places where discussion is open, where people trust one another, and where each individual is valued.

In this kind of community, Anya aspires to grow and fulfill her calling. She knows that helping students find their focus and fulfill their potential gives her the greatest personal and professional satisfaction.

Sometimes, when students write notes or letters to Anya, she sees that she has a positive influence and her life as a teacher has meaning. One of her students wrote:

Ms. Smagina is a “great teacher who always encourages us to do something new. All the time she is full of creative ideas and positive energy. If you are in trouble she will be glad to help you. Her lessons

make us communicate with each other and we spend our time with fun and benefit. She is an awesome teacher.”

Interestingly, other comments by students indicate that Anya, as a model of servant leadership, offers something special. She is pouring herself into the life of each student.

One student wrote, “I really love your teaching method. In your lessons, I feel free and comfortable. . . . I have become more confident, thanks to you, due to your admonition and encouragement to me.”

Every student seems to experience acceptance and personal growth in her classes. “I’ve learned to accept myself and be as I am through this semester. . . . If I have any drawbacks, it’s only my fears. I like our lessons! Thank you very much.”

“It becomes easier to work when someone really believes in you. I finally decided to be an interpreter.”

“I am a reclusive and closed person; I preferred to stay at home before. But now I feel alive. I am really happy.”

Comments like these from her students demonstrate that Anya is pursuing her passion, is living by her core values, and she is helping each of her students discover his or her purpose in life as they grow and strive for self-actualization.

That is the reason Anya Smagina can say, “I’m a lucky person.”