

- A nonprofit membership organization inspired by the spirit of traditional Kazakh communities
- Dedicated to building a bridge to Kazakhstan
- A Kazakh cultural resource



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# News from the Aul

**Volume 1, Issue 1**

**Summer 2005**

**Welcome to the Kazakh Aul of the US, Association for American & Kazakh Families!**

We at the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., are delighted to be bringing you this, the first issue of our quarterly newsletter. The purpose of the newsletters will be to provide you with Aul news and articles on Kazakh culture. This issue has a focus on the Kazakh New Year—Nauryz—and included are information articles as well as highlights from the Aul's own festival held earlier this year.

Some of you we met in person at our April Nauryz Festival in Massachusetts, and many of you live farther away, in other regions of the United States. Wherever you are, we all have something in common: a love for our children and a desire to learn about traditional Kazakh culture. We are thrilled to be on this journey with you and we are honored to help bring the culture of Kazakhstan to you and your family.

Aul is the Kazakh term for village, and in Kazakhstan the traditional nomadic village has great meaning for native Kazakhs. Auls were/are tight-knit communities in which the inhabitants truly depended on one another for day-to-day living, for survival in hard times, and for general community support and celebration in good times. There is a saying, "It takes a village," and that is nowhere more true perhaps than in a Kazakh Aul.



**Some of our Aul's youngest members celebrating Nauryz in Massachusetts, April, 3, 2003.**

Here at the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., we are inspired by the spirit of the traditional Kazakh community, and it is our sincere hope that together in our own Aul, we can make our American Kazakh village a little smaller, support one another, and above all, provide a cultural resource for all our families. Welcome to the Kazakh Aul of the United States, Association for American & Kazakh Families!

**Summer Weekend Retreat Scheduled for August 5-7, 2005 in Stonington, CT**

The setting will be the wonderful Pine Point School in Stonington, Connecticut and an adjacent nature preserve that is managed by the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center. It is truly a special spot that evokes the Kazakh steppes combined with the modern facilities of a beautiful school. Both organizations have generously donated the use of their spaces, and we feel lucky and tremendously grateful to have found them!

Aul festivities will begin on Friday evening when retreat participants will come together at Pine Point for a welcome pizza dinner, information session, and playtime. The rest of the weekend's activities will be held in the adjacent nature preserve where together we will raise our Kazakh home - our authentic yurt. Once the yurt is raised, Daniyar Baidaralin will continue his lecture series on Kazakh culture in the Yurt that he began at our Nauryz Festival in April. We will play traditional Kazakh games, eat traditional foods and participate in outdoor cooking with Vera Kurmasheva. Also,

*SUMMER RETREAT continued on Page 7*



Susan Saxon and her daughter, Sara Remmler, in front of the Aul's Yurt, Nauryz 2005.

***“Vera had been a ballerina and later a ballet teacher in Almaty, and Zhanat was a ballet master and choreographer who had worked in theater, film, television, the Olympics, and had directed national festivals for the Republic of Kazakhstan.”***



Zhanat Baidaralin & Vera Kurmasheva

## Letter from the Administrative Executive Director

Here in this first newsletter, we thought it would be helpful to give you some background on how our new American Aul came to be. As with many histories, it begins with a birth, and in my case, the birth of my family. Later, as time passed, the Aul was born out of the efforts of several dedicated people.

My husband Norman Remmler and I adopted our wonderful daughter Sara in Almaty in February 2001 and it was quite simply the most wonderful event of our lives. We loved our time in Kazakhstan, really enjoyed Almaty, and to this day, feel immense gratitude to the country for the most precious gift of our daughter. We also feel a strong and genuine commitment to help her feel proud of her very rich Kazakh heritage, and in some ways, we now feel that we are part Kazakh, too.

Unfortunately, when we came home with Sara in 2001, there were not many Kazakh cultural resources or social supports. I knew of one other family in my general area who had also adopted their daughter in Kazakhstan, and within a year, I knew one other family. Two total. I was hungry to connect with other families like mine, and I wanted my daughter to know other children like her, and two families just didn't seem like enough.

To help locate other families with children from Kazakhstan, in March 2002 I founded the Kazakhstan Adoptive Families' Network of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (KAFN), an online social and support group on Yahoo Groups. We began with a handful of members, and today there are over 100. Together with other members, I organized regular social events for families. I am so happy to say that my daughter has made strong friendships with children who like her were born in Kazakhstan, and I have made some wonderful connections among my fellow Kazakhstan adoptive parents.

It was great organizing these social gatherings; however, always looming in the back of my mind was the daunting challenge of finding Kazakh culture to incorporate into the events. I'm sorry to say that because there is a dearth of Kazakh culture here in the U.S., my KAFN events were primarily social in nature. Social connection and support is vitally important for all of us, but I nonetheless struggled with trying to figure out culture pieces to help educate all members of the families and, in turn, help our children learn more about themselves.

Then fate entered the picture when I was lucky to find the Baidaralin family during the early spring of 2003. At the time, I was simply focused on planning ahead for my daughter's summer activities. She was about to turn 3, loved to dance (still does), and I thought it would be fun and convenient to sign her up for ballet classes at the local ballet company, the studios of which just so happen to be a few blocks from where we live....A simple matter of visiting the website one afternoon to check out the rates and rules....and lo' and behold, I saw that they had among their ballet faculty, not just one - but two! - teachers, a husband and wife, from Kazakhstan!

I'd like to say that I was cool, calm and collected when I read this online, but all pride went out the window when I discovered that there were people from Kazakhstan working literally blocks from me. I called immediately and started leaving phone messages for Vera Kurmasheva (Zhanat Baidaralin's wife). I'm sure they thought I was nuts at first, but the chance for my family to meet theirs was nothing less than a huge honor for us, and I was on a mission.

We soon learned that Zhanat's and Vera's backgrounds in their native Kazakhstan extended beyond teaching ballet. Vera had been a ballerina and later a ballet teacher in Almaty, and Zhanat was a ballet master and choreographer who had worked in theater, film, television, the Olympics, and had directed national festivals for the Republic of Kazakhstan.

We kept in touch and gradually got to know each other. Our new friends were thoroughly ***LETTER continued on next page***

surprised that we Americans were interested in their culture. Moreover, Zhanat in particular was also very sad to see before his eyes the living proof that his country was not able to take care of some of its most precious citizens. He didn't verbalize these feelings initially, but many months later he explained that it was extremely painful for him to see us with our daughter and know that there were hundreds, thousands, more families like ours with children from Kazakhstan here in the U.S. Zhanat later spoke of feelings of shame that his country could not take care of its children, and thus, we began to understand his feelings from a Kazakh perspective.

In traditional Kazakh nomadic culture – in the Aul – children are most precious, and your family is everything. In traditional Kazakh culture, people would never ever conceive of placing a child in an orphanage; indeed, prior to the Sovietization of Kazakhstan there were no orphanages. The Soviets decimated traditional Kazakh culture, and with that decimation went traditional social supports and structure. For Zhanat, seeing our daughter here in the U.S. with Norman and me, her parents, represented a tragedy on many levels for Kazakh society.

Let me emphasize that this was not an attack on Norman and me; rather, it was a deep and visceral cultural feeling for Zhanat that was very understandable given the circumstances of Kazakh history. Gradually, in time, Zhanat shared some of this perspective with us, and together we mourned for Kazakh society and its huge loss. I cannot stress enough what an honor it felt for Norman and me to be able to speak with Zhanat on this level, and to gain this important sad insight into our daughter's birth culture.

Nonetheless, as Zhanat then said, "what is done, is done. The children are here, and it is our responsibility" to educate them about the wonderful culture of their birth. Thus led to a long series of conversations about what we might be able to do to help Sara and her fellow Kazakh-American compatriots here in the U.S. During the fall of 2004, Zhanat, Norman, and I began meeting regularly at Norman's and my house to discuss our mutual dreams to establish a cultural center to bridge both the American and Kazakh worlds. We recognized that being Kazakhstani may mean being Kazakh, ethnic Russian, Tatar, Uighur, Korean, or one of many other nationalities, and we were determined to be welcoming to all within our fledgling Kazakh cultural center. Through our informal meetings, the idea of a community inspired by the tight knit social structure of a traditional Kazakh Aul evolved. And, here we are. :-)

Zhanat is the Aul's Cultural and Artistic Executive Director, and as such, he is the major generator of cultural ideas and oversees all our cultural activities. My responsibilities as Administrative Executive Director include this newsletter, our website, record keeping, and coordinating Aul events. Zhanat identified a regional director for our Kazakhstan Division in Almaty, Leila Bassenova, who is taking care of the other end of our Kazakh-American cultural bridge, publicizing our mission in Kazakhstan and making plans for future heritage trips for families (see Spotlight on Leila Bassenova, page 8). Together, Zhanat and I put together a wonderful Executive Board that includes myself, Norm, Daniyar Baidaralin (who is responsible for the fabulous graphics on our letterhead and website and all of the artistic works for the Aul, including decorations at the sites and our promotional materials. See his Ask Daniyar column on page 9), and some wonderful impassioned parents of Kazakh children: Audrey Englander who has extensive experience working with nonprofit organizations and as a day care provider, Heather O'Toole who is amazing at administrative coordination (read Heather's story on page 10), and Jill Updegraph, an attorney who provides legal insight and is a great cheerleader for our cause. With oversight from Zhanat and myself, the folks at the Aul are a great team, and all of us volunteer our time and energy to the Aul's mission. We are delighted to be starting an American Aul and are very glad that you are here, too.

Warmly,  
Susan

### **Kazakh Aul of the U.S., Association for American & Kazakh Families**

*Board of Directors* \* Daniyar Baidaralin \* Audrey Englander \* Heather O'Toole \* Norman Remmler \* Susan Saxon \* Jill Updegraph \*

*Administrative Executive Director:* Susan Saxon

*Cultural & Artistic Executive Director:* Zhanat Baidaralin

*Director of the Kazakhstan Division, Almaty:* Leila Bassenova



**Vera Kurmasheva, Susan Saxon, and Leila Bassenova at Nauryz.**

**“The children  
are here, and it  
is our  
responsibility to  
educate them  
about the  
wonderful  
culture of their  
birth”**

## Nauryz 2005—Celebrating the Kazakh New Year

TOPSFIELD, MA— On Sunday April 3, 2005, the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., Association for American & Kazakh Families, held its first annual celebration of the Kazakh new year—Nauryz— at the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield. Nauryz is a Central Asian celebration of spring and nature, and more than 160 people gathered to celebrate this wonderful and unique event that was held both indoors and outdoors at the sanctuary, including inside the Aul's own yurt that was shipped directly from Kazakhstan.

The event took place all afternoon, but many people came early to help set up the yurt. In keeping with Kazakh tradition, the event was truly a community effort, as everyone came together to support the new Aul, the Kazakh word for community. We are all extremely grateful to all the tireless volunteers who took part in this effort, including helping with childcare, food set-up, clean-up, selling of Kazakh souvenirs, dismantling the yurt and loading the truck.

A major part of the festival was made possible by a huge permanent loan to the Aul by Leila Bassenova of Almaty. Leila, who came from Almaty to attend the festival, donated the use of the yurt, including all its accoutrement, such as rugs, furniture, tapestries, and decorations. (for more information on Leila, please see Spotlight on Leila Bassenova on page 8). While participants celebrated inside the Sanctuary's "barn" and enjoyed the nature trails, the yurt was the true center of the celebration. With its gorgeous rugs and fabrics, the yurt was a truly beautiful place to sit and experience the culture of Kazakhstan.

Zhanat Baidaralin, the Kazakh Aul of the US's Artistic and Cultural Executive Director welcomed participants to the festival and spoke of his excitement to be involved in starting a new cultural organization that will benefit children from Kazakhstan and their families. Festival attendees were treated to a performance by two brothers from Almaty, Daniyar and Bakhtiyar Baidaralin, who performed the traditional dance of the fight between the Light and Dark Spirits. This dance represented a common Nauryz theme where dark and light fight—winter and spring— and, spring wins. Daniyar also gave lectures on Kazakh culture and nomadic life in the yurt to many interested festival participants. Vera Kurmasheva and Leila Bassenova cooked traditional food on an outdoor stove, and people were able to try Plov (a rice and lamb dish), Boursak (small fried dough), and traditional Kazakh tea with milk.



**Building the Yurt**



Nauryz 2005 was truly a special time for all, a memorable event to lay a strong foundation for our new American Aul, the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., Association for American & Kazakh Families.



**Fight between the Dark Spirit  
and the Light Spirit (photo  
courtesy of Michelle Menard).**

NAURYZ 2005 continued  
on next page

## Nauryz 2005 (continued)



**Zhanat Baidaralin addresses the people of the Aul. Zhanat's son Daniyar is on the right. (photo courtesy of Michelle Menard).**



**Inside the yurt.**



**Daniyar Baidaralin lectures inside the yurt. In this photograph, Daniyar is showing a Kazakh cradle. (photo courtesy of Michelle Menard)**

**In order to accommodate all the people who wanted to hear his lecture on Kazakh nomadic culture, Daniyar gave the lecture at three different times over the course of the afternoon. Pictured to the right is one of Dan's audiences. (photo courtesy of Michelle Menard).**





**Traditional Yurt. Graphic by Daniyar Baidaralin**

## Historic Background and Cultural Significance of Nauryz

By Susan Saxon and Daniyar Baidaralin

Nauryz – the Kazakh New Year - is one of the most important national holidays of the Republic of Kazakhstan. With origins in the ancient traditions of nomads, Nauryz is usually celebrated around the 22nd of March, the spring equinox, when day and night are of equal duration. It is a time to welcome spring, celebrate nature, family, and the strength of the Aul (the Kazakh word for nomadic village).

It is important to note that Nauryz is not unique to Kazakhstan, and is also celebrated throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. Celebrations of Nauryz first appeared in Persia during the early centuries B.C. At that time, the huge geographical area that ranged from Egypt in the west to China in the east was basically one big cultural melting pot; all the different traditions of this vast region were mixed & transferred from nation to nation. In this manner, Nauryz became prevalent throughout most of Eurasia, not just in the region now known as Kazakhstan.

**“Celebrations of Nauryz first appeared in Persia during the early centuries B.C.”**

For the Kazakhs, the arrival of spring was a time for great celebration. Life was hard for nomads on the Kazakh steppes, and Nauryz marks the end of the difficult winter season and the beginning of spring renewal. With spring came the beginning of a new year’s cycle of life, the time of year when the nomads happily said goodbye to harsh winter weather, welcomed warm weather, and rejoiced in the birthing season of their valuable livestock upon which they depended for food and their very livelihoods.

Nauryz symbolized the birth of a new year’s cycle of life and Kazakhs came together in their Auls to celebrate as a community. Nauryz was an Aul celebration because throughout the year, families worked together on behalf of their village. The Aul provided vital community support that kept families alive during harsh times, and the Aul as a whole welcomed spring and celebrated the easier times that came with the new year as symbolized by Nauryz.

Nauryz was considered a time of peace, when all wars were suspended. Former enemies exchanged their weaponry and celebrated the new year together. At Nauryz, even the worst of enemies drank from the same piala (a small bowl or cup) and ate from the same dish.



**Fight of the Dark Spirit and the Light Spirit. Graphic by Daniyar Baidaralin.**

New year celebrations lasted for an entire month, and that is why in the Kazakh language, March is called Nauryz. Moreover, the holiday is so important to Kazakh culture that it has several additional meanings in the language. It is notable that Kazakh is a very poetic language and it is common for important concepts to have multiple philosophical meanings. In Kazakh, Nauryz means more than the New Year; more than the month of March, it also represents the victory of the Light Spirit over the Dark Spirit, concepts that are rooted in traditional Kazakh lore. The Light Spirit brings spring and new life to the Steppe, while the Dark Spirit symbolizes the cold winter. The Light Spirit makes the Dark Spirit run far away.

Today, Nauryz celebrations in Kazakhstan are major events. People clean their houses to meet the New Year, and strive to welcome it in wealth and abundance. During the holiday, people wear new clothes, eat from new dishes, spread new rugs and cook with the meat of young lamb. Games are played, traditional ceremonies are performed in and around yurts, and traditional foods are eaten. People wear festive clothes and visit friends and relatives to deliver expressions of well being and to wish good luck for the coming year. Kazakh tradition says that the more one celebrates Nauryz, the more successful the New Year will be. Nauryz is also known as the Day of Great Celebration (*Ulys Kuni*) and the People’s Day of Great Celebration (*Ulystyn uly kuni*).



## Learning what it means to be part of an Aul

By Jill Updegraph and Susan Saxon

As members of the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., we are excited and proud to be able to create and host Kazakh festivals like the Nauryz event we held in Topsfield, MA in April of this year. As much as we think we know about Kazakhstan from our travels and our research, we Americans on the Board are discovering how much more there is to know about the historical and cultural significance of the traditions that we are trying to re-create here. Luckily, we have the honor and privilege of having as our guides, some amazing Kazakh individuals who are patiently and lovingly imparting to us, this gift of the heritage of our children's country of birth. They are gently showing us that creating a Kazakh festival is about more than just playing Kazakh games and cooking traditional foods. It is about incorporating and creating the sensibility of an Aul.



Jill and Darya Updegraph

During one memorable Nauryz planning meeting, we were wondering how many people were going to come, how many people it would take to build and take down the yurt, and whether or not we were going to be able to pull it off. Jill, thinking like an American, suggested that we consider hiring some young men to help us. At that, Zhanat looked at us with his piercing Kazakh eyes and shared with us that the building of the yurt is an honor that is reserved for members of the Aul, that the act of working together to create the celebration helps to form the strength and bond of the community. That this year, of all years, our goal is to build our nucleus, to form our foundation, to create our Aul. In fact, he encouraged us to refrain from extending open invitations for the celebration so that we could truly do this together and form a bond as an Aul. Once that bond is formed and the Aul is strong, then we can think about opening up the celebration to the general public in future years.

So, Zhanat shared with us this vision, and we held it. Leila bought and shipped here the beautiful yurt with her own money, then flew here to help create the celebration. Many Nauryz participants came early and volunteered their time to help build our Kazakh home, to set up our festival, and to make it all work by serving food, cleaning up, or volunteering to sell souvenirs. All of the time and love that everyone devoted to our Aul, and the size of our community that came to celebrate together, is a true testament to us, and to Zhanat's vision of who we are and who/what we will become together!

In this way, we learned from Zhanat that being part of an aul is about being part of a strong community where people support one another, work together, and are bonded together as members of their Aul. This spirit of the tight-knit community of traditional Auls is the guiding philosophy that drives the Kazakh Aul of the United States, Association for American & Kazakh Families. Together we are on a journey with all of our families, and please know that as members, you are part of this new and growing community. We look forward to working together and supporting one another. We're glad you're with us!

***“...the building of the yurt is an honor that is reserved for members of the Aul, that the act of working together to create the celebration helps to form the strength and bond of the community...”***

### Summer Retreat (continued from page 1)

teachers from the nearby Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center will come to conduct an educational program just for us and our young children on Saturday. Retreat activities will continue through mid-day on Sunday.

Admission includes all weekend festivities as well as the use of the trails in the nature preserve, the school playing fields, facilities and playground. In case of rain, we will move indoors to the very well equipped school. To get the best rates, please sign up by July 1st. For more information, please visit our website at [www.kazakh-aul-us.org](http://www.kazakh-aul-us.org).





**Leila Bassenova , the Aul's Regional Administrative Director in Almaty, visiting with Sara Remmler in Providence, RI.**

**“To Leila, who is a mother herself, helping Kazakhstani children in the U.S. is an important mission to which she is wholeheartedly committed“**

## Spotlight on Leila Bassenova

The Kazakh Aul of the U.S. is extremely fortunate to have Leila Bassenova as our Regional Administrative Director in Kazakhstan. Leila is a successful independent business woman, and when she heard about the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., and its mission to educate Kazakhstani-American children about Kazakh culture, she decided she wanted to help. To Leila, helping Kazakhstani children in the U.S. is an important personal mission to which she is wholeheartedly committed and we are delighted to have her aboard.

Leila's first effort on our Aul's behalf was to obtain a yurt, because as she and the Baidaralins explained, good Kazakh celebrations are centered around yurts. The yurt is particularly important to Kazakhs because in traditional nomadic culture, it is more than a mere shelter or house; the yurt has significant philosophical meaning for it is considered to be a personal place of worship for the family and to be the home in which spirits of ancestors live. To Leila, having a yurt here in the U.S. is a cultural necessity with which to impart Kazakh culture to our children.

At great personal expense, Leila purchased a yurt in Kazakhstan with all accoutrement, including rugs, tapestries, and furniture, and then shipped it all to the U.S. She also purchased and shipped traditional souvenirs and t-shirts for the Aul to sell to help cover some of the shipping costs of the yurt. The yurt is considered a permanent loan from Leila to our Aul.

To say the least, we here at the Kazakh Aul of the U.S. are nothing less than thrilled to have Leila's yurt. The yurt provides a genuine Kazakh experience, and when you sit inside it, you could be sitting on the steppes of Kazakhstan. We look forward to having many events in this yurt.

Leila's role for our Aul extends beyond making purchases in Kazakhstan. Leila is our Aul's ambassador in Almaty, and is currently concentrating her efforts on public relations and publicity. To date, she has arranged two articles on our Aul in newspapers and one television piece about our Aul's Nauryz 2005 festival. In the future, Leila's role will expand to include the coordination of family heritage trips in Kazakhstan and to implement our own Aul in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Leila demonstrated perhaps her greatest level of commitment to the Aul's mission when she traveled to Boston and Providence to attend the Nauryz festival, to meet with the Aul's Board, and to meet the children and families of the new Aul - *all within days of getting married, leaving her new husband back home in Almaty!* If this weren't enough, Leila's trip proved to be a working vacation, for she was not content to merely attend the festival as an honored guest; instead, Leila worked very hard cooking, cleaning and organizing various details during the festivities. We are eternally grateful for all of Leila's tireless efforts on our behalf, both here in the U.S. and in Kazakhstan. Leila is a true heroine for all that she has done and continues to do for our children. Thank you Leila!

## Submit Your Child's or Family's Photo to the Aul

As I put together this first newsletter, I am sorely aware that as a proud mama I have included many photos that include my darling daughter Sara, simply because these are the photos that I have. Please know that this was not intentional and we want to put faces with names and know all the adults and children of our Aul. If you would like your child's or family's photo in a future newsletter or posted on our website, please feel free to email them to [ssaxon@kazakh-aul-us.org](mailto:ssaxon@kazakh-aul-us.org). We'd love to see your photos! Thank you!



**Haley Menard at Nauryz**

Susan

## *Ask Daniyar*

We are pleased and proud to introduce our Ask Daniyar column, a new, regular feature of our newsletter devoted to your questions about Kazakh culture. Daniyar Baidaralin is a 26-year-old Kazakh man, born & raised in Almaty. He currently lives in Rhode Island, & is excited to answer your culture questions. Please submit your questions to Daniyar at [askdaniyar@kazakh-aul-us.org](mailto:askdaniyar@kazakh-aul-us.org).



Dear Daniyar,

My son is starting to ask questions about his birth parents. Unfortunately, I do not know their names, but I thought it would be nice for him to call them by the Kazakh words for mother and father. Can you please help us? - Heather

Dear Heather,

I think that's a really great idea! The words for mother and father are among the most important in Kazakh culture, that's why there is no quick way to answer this question. Motherhood and fatherhood each have a few meanings – large and small.

Used in everyday speech, and in the family, the word “ana” means mother; but it also means “native.” “Ana Zher” means both Mother Land and Native Land. Ana-Zher is the place where a person (tribe, nation) comes from, as if we all came from our motherland's womb.

The most common word for father is “Akhe.” This is the way children will address their father at home. In addition, the literary version of the word father is “Ata” and this may be used to emphasize one's father's public and social greatness.

Not to confuse you, but the everyday meaning of the word “Ata” is Grandfather, and there is a good reason why sometimes Kazakhs use the same word for Father and Grandfather. In Kazakh philosophy, fatherhood is not just a position in the family, but it is also a condition of mind and soul. When a man reaches the point when he is able to carry responsibility for his family (nation), when he has become a real protector of his Ana-Zher, then he is taking his place among the great Fathers of the Nation - he is becoming the Ata. One of the most important Kazakh words “Atameken” – (the Land of Ancestors, the Land of Fathers, Native land, Our Land) has the word “Ata” in it.

**A quick tip on Kazakh pronunciation  
from Daniyar:**

**“The main rule for all Kazakh words is that you have to ALWAYS place emphasis on the last syllable of each word. For example, the word ‘ana’ is pronounced a-NA.”**

This a lot more than you asked for, Heather, but I hope it helps you understand the different Kazakh meanings for mother and father. For your purposes, “Ana” and “Ake” will do just fine. :)

Daniyar

Dear Daniyar,

Do they circumcise boys in Kazakhstan? We adopted our son when he was 1, and he is not circumcised. - Dana and Chris

Dear Dana and Chris,

Yes, Kazakhs always circumcise boys. This tradition became obligatory when the Turkics first adopted Islam. Unlike the Jewish tradition, where boys are circumcised shortly after birth, Muslims wait until the boys reach the age of 5-7 years. Then, it is a huge celebration, because it is not just a hygienic act, but it is the boy's initiation – now he has all the signs of an adult man. Every relative comes to congratulate the boy for becoming Djighit (Kazakh word for guy, daring, bold). Everybody is obliged to give the boy an expensive gift and praise him for his bravery. Then, the boy's family organizes a “Toi” – a big celebration where all the friends, neighbors and relatives come and it can last for three days or even more. During this time, the boy is laying in his yurt with a piala (a small bowl) covering his groin. All Kazakh boys wait for their circumcision more than birthdays, because of the many gifts and the “adult” status that they receive. It is one of the major events in a man's life, and basically, a boy's childhood is divided into “Before Circumcise” and “After Circumcise” periods.

Daniyar

ASK DANIYAR continued on Page 12

## Developing a Connection from Within

by Heather O'Toole



Heather O'Toole

My husband Pat and I adopted our two children, Alina and Kairat, from Almaty, Kazakhstan in 2002. Before we traveled, I read many books on international toddler adoption. One major theme throughout the books was for adoptive parents to share in their children's heritage. It seemed clear to me that this was going to be an important part of building healthy self-esteem in our children. However, I wondered to myself: *how would I be able to provide this information to my children when I knew so little about Kazakhstan?*

When my husband and I finally arrived in Almaty, we were struck by the city's unique beauty and the generosity of the people there. We were impressed by the strength of a culture which despite many years as a Soviet Republic is once again embracing its ancient history and its rich culture. We saw the faces of our two children in the people of the city, and the more we learned about Kazakhstan, the more we were determined to teach our children about their heritage.

While in Almaty, we did everything we could to ensure that Alina and Kairat would know the country of their birth as they grew up. We purchased beautifully made rugs and a large scenic painting of the Tien Shan Mountains, and had them shipped to our home in the United States. We also purchased a traditional Kazakh costume for each child, and although we had two busy toddlers and lots of luggage, we insisted on carrying three very large (and heavy) books full of information about the culture, art and people of Kazakhstan. We took many photos and hours of video. We wanted to fill our home with all that might help our children to feel a sense of pride about their origins. We happily returned home as a family and busied ourselves with the everyday tasks of parenting our young children. Then, one year after arriving home, Alina had her second birthday, and unexpectedly, she showed me how important knowing her birth culture is for all of us.

***“How would I be able to provide this information to my children when I knew so little about Kazakhstan?”***

I had decided to get her an Asian doll, figuring that at some point it may be helpful for her identity development if she had a doll that resembles her. To my amazement, when Alina opened the present, the first word out of her mouth (as she excitedly pointed her finger) was, “Eyes!” She very clearly saw in the doll someone with eyes like hers. I had not expected Alina to make this kind of physical connection quite so soon, but she did, and in doing so, she made me realize its significance.

Since that day, our family has been on a mission to connect with other Kazakh adoptive families by phone, email and especially in person. The Yahoo Group, the Kazakhstan Adoptive Families Network of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (KAFN) has been a great resource for meeting local families like ours. The families in this group all share a unique bond because we all want our children to feel connected with other children born in their country. Kairat and Alina always look forward to their “Kazakh parties” where they get to hang out with their “Kazakh friends”. We as adoptive parents also feel a connection with each other based on our similar experiences and our love for Kazakhstan. However, although KAFN has been a wonderful social avenue for reaching out to other Kazakh adoptive families, Pat and I have been yearning for a way to bring even more of the culture, art and unique history of Kazakhstan into our children's lives.



I am now quite honored to serve on the board of the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., and am confident that as our children grow into adolescents and eventually adults, the cultural information and experiences the Aul will provide will be crucial for them to have a positive self-image.

Since becoming a board member for the Aul, I have been touched in many ways. At the first annual Nauryz Festival in April of this year, my four-year-old son proudly wore his traditional costume for almost the entire day, posing and smiling for pictures as requested. When we arrived home well after dark, he was sound asleep in his car seat although his Kazakh hat was still sitting on his head! It was the first time that I could see that he sensed that this celebration was all about him, and better yet, that he wanted everyone to know!

DEVELOPING A FROM CONNECTION WITHIN continued on next page

As I took in the scene at the festival, I recalled a day in August 2002, east of Almaty along the Tien Shan Mountains. To celebrate Independence Day in Kazakhstan (August 30<sup>th</sup>), our adoption coordinators treated us to a day of fishing and feasting in the countryside. Preparations included loading up our cars with mounds of delicious foods including various breads, meats, cheeses, fruits, and of course delectable pastry for dessert. There were vendors on the sides of the road selling the freshest watermelon, tomatoes and cucumbers, and we stopped at many. We knew we weren't going to go hungry on this day. Along the way, we stopped at an ancient burial ground and were told many historical facts and legends surrounding it. The weather was cool and overcast, but the country side was breathtaking.

As we entered the valley, all around us were very steep mountains which looked as though they were mounds of clay just dropped from the sky, and the sun began to peek through just as we arrived at our destination. We were brought to a fish farm, and were able to round up 25 trout between the 12 of us in our party. After the fish were cleaned and prepared for cooking, we all gathered together in a yurt for the meal and were treated to the delicious food, freshly brewed tea and the selfless generosity of our Kazakh friends. There was a toast made to us for our family's happiness and safe travels back home. Following the meal, we enjoyed a hike up one of the smaller hills and stopped on a bridge over a wild river rushing with white water. This was a great photo opportunity. From this viewpoint on the side of the hill, we could look down on the valley below and see just how beautiful and special this place was.

Before leaving the valley, we stopped our cars at a clear spring along the side of the road. We each were given a cup to drink from the spring which we were told would renew our souls. Next we stopped along what is called a Tree of Life. Here, we were given a piece of cloth to tie to one of its branches, connecting us to the Great Spirit. It gives me comfort to know that the cloth I tied is still there today, no matter how tattered or torn, and continues to connect me to this place of peace.

I will never forget this day and how as their guests, we were treated with the utmost respect and felt forever connected to these people and to this country. We sensed how important it was to them that we experience the culture, for the sake of our children.

The founders of the Kazakh Aul of the U.S. share this same passion. They are committed to teaching our families the uniqueness of Kazakh culture so that our children in turn will feel this connection to their ancestors.

Now, almost three years later, it seems like questions from Alina and Kairat about their very beginnings are coming more and more often everyday. Many of the answers are quite complicated and must be simplified to terms which a three- and a four-year-old can understand. One thing I have noticed is that these questions come most often just after a Kazakh families' gathering or a board meeting for the Aul at my home. It is apparent that the more they are surrounded by Kazakh culture, the more they want to know. I feel very fortunate that we have these connections which will continue to open up conversation in our home and create an atmosphere of trust now and well into the future as our children grow.

Someday, we hope to return to Kazakhstan again as a family with the help of the Aul and its director of the Kazakhstan division, Leila. I look forward to the day when we can show Alina and Kairat the beautiful city of Almaty, the towering Tien Shan mountain range and the vastness of the steppes. I want them to see themselves in the faces of the people of the city. I want them to understand that part of their soul comes from a very special place, a place they should be proud to call their own. I do believe that this connection deep from within will only continue to strengthen throughout the years as my children grow, thereby enriching all of our lives. How ironic it is that in all this time, we as parents have been trying so hard to educate our children about their origins, when it is the children who make up the basic foundations of the bridge to Kazakh culture. I am forever grateful to them!

*We'd love to hear your story! If you would like to contribute your story to the Aul newsletter, please email it to [ssaxon@kazakh-aul-us.org](mailto:ssaxon@kazakh-aul-us.org).*

***"...we were treated with the utmost respect and felt forever connected to these people and to this country. We sensed how important it was to them that we experience the culture, for the sake of our children."***



**Alina and Kairat O'Toole**

## Kazakh Aul of the U.S.'s Nauryz Festival on Kazakh TV!

Yes, it's true! A story about our April 3rd Nauryz festival was shown on Kazakh national television, on a show called, "Everything Besides Politics."

Kazakhstani composer-turned filmmaker Edward Bogushevsky attended and filmed the event in Topsfield, Massachusetts. He was interested in documenting the story of how a Kazakh Aul came into existence here in the U.S., and in recording the unusual occurrence of a real Nauryz festival in America. Mr. Bogushevsky also wanted to show his compatriots back home that American parents of Kazakhstani children genuinely care about their children and about teaching them about Kazakh culture. He made a beautiful montage of our festival and sent it back home to Almaty where his documentary aired on national television.

Edward Bogushevsky immigrated to the U.S. several years ago and is now working as a filmmaker. If you own a copy of Alma Kunanbay and Wayne Eastep's beautiful book, *The Soul of Kazakhstan*, please look on page 209 to see a photo of Mr. Bogushevsky.

**Coming Soon: An English-language subtitled version of Edward Bogushevsky's Nauryz 2005 documentary will be available for purchase on DVD and VHS. All proceeds will benefit the Kazakh Aul of the U.S., Association for American & Kazakh Families.**

Details are forthcoming. Watch your email or the Fall newsletter for order information

### *Ask Daniyar (continued from page 9)*

Dear Daniyar,

*My daughter has curly hair, and all the Kazakh children I've met have very straight hair. What does this signify and do you think she might be of another ethnicity? - Susan*

Dear Susan,

Kazakhs are a very unique national formation. Our official history starts in the year 1456, when two great Khans, Zhani-bek and Kerei, separated from Abulhair Khan in Central Asia and started their own Horde called "the Kazakh Khandyk" – the Kazakh Khandom.

The Turkic word "Kazakh" means free, independent, rebellious, unruly, bold, daring, a roamer or wanderer. Many tribes from the huge Turkic Nomadic world (that covered the area from Iran to China) that used to be "kazakh" by nature joined the new Horde. This is why modern Kazakhs, although they speak one language (with no dialects!) may look very different. You can find Kazakhs that look Arabian, Caucasus or even Slav. Some of us may look Tatar or Uigur, there is a strong Mongol-Kalmuk, blood influence and so on. People of the young Kazakh nation are products of a "melting pot" that has no one exact type, and that's why it is no wonder that your daughter has curly hair and some other kids have straight hair. In fact, many Kazakhs have curly hair.

Daniyar



## New Aul Members



The Kazakh Aul of the U.S. now has members from 19 different states! We are growing! :-)

A warm welcome to all the following new families who joined our Aul:

- |                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Anderson & Miklebost    | Hoberecht            |
| Bankoski                | Johnson Wiley        |
| Barnett & Kaplan        | Piccolo              |
| Cale-Young              | Libou                |
| Cantor & Cassidy        | McDonagh             |
| Carroll                 | McGill               |
| Chernin                 | McLaughlin           |
| Cleaver                 | Myers                |
| Clegg                   | Norvelle & Lester    |
| Davidow                 | O'Brien & Shaw       |
| DeCore                  | O'Toole              |
| Drolet                  | Payne                |
| DuBose                  | Peterson             |
| Farinella & Tagliaferro | Reeb                 |
| Fergione                | Russell & Donovan    |
| Finkel & Feldman        | Schivell & McCulloch |
| Flynn Tanner            | Sperber              |
| Galvin                  | Sweetwood            |
| Gest                    | Tuttle               |
| Grimes                  | Updegraph            |
| Haeberle Corsi          | White Waldie         |
| Haver                   | Williams             |
| Helms Daley             | Wood & Wheelock      |
|                         | Zelazny              |

### Donors

- Ann Aubin
- Leila Bassenova
- Doris Carroll
- Susan Clegg
- Decore family
- Denise Galvin
- Reeb family
- Leah Russell and K.C. Donovan
- Jill and John Updegraph
- Lisa White Waldie
- Elizabeth Wood and Jerry Wheelock
- Terri Sperber



### Local Chapters?

Several Aul members have asked us about local chapters. Our Aul is growing and our numbers are slowly gearing up to be able to support chapters. So far, we have enough members in eastern Massachusetts to support a chapter there. We also have numerous members in each of the states of VA, NJ, and NY.

We need motivated people to volunteer to coordinate local Kazakh Aul of the U.S. gatherings. If you are interested in being a local Aul chapter president, please let us know!



**Father and daughter at Nauryz. Filmmaker Edward Bogushevsky is at work in the background. (photo courtesy of Michelle Menard).**





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### **Our Mission**

The Kazakh Aul of the United States, Association for American & Kazakh Families, aims to establish a cultural center dedicated to educating and enriching the lives of children from Kazakhstan who were adopted by loving American families and who are now growing up in the U.S. Together with their families, children will participate in Kazakh heritage camps and cultural education, to develop a deeper sense of knowledge and understanding of their birth culture, how they fit into both the Kazakh and American worlds, and to develop skills that in the future may be used to contribute to both their mother-countries, Kazakhstan and the U.S. The Kazakh Aul of the United States will serve as a cultural bridge to bring together the children of the two enabling countries, helping them be citizens of the world and thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding that will sustain through the generations.



## **Nauryz 2005—Our Kazakh New Year festival—held on April 3rd in Topsfield, Massachusetts**

*More information inside*



Pictured to the left, looking up through the roof of the Aul's yurt at Nauryz, is the Shanyrak, which serves as a skylight and ventilating system for the yurt. The Shanyrak has very important symbolic meaning in Kazakh culture. It is the top and the center of the yurt; it crowns the yurt and symbolizes the sun, the sky, the essence of the household. To the Kazakhs, the yurt itself represents the universe, and the word Shanyrak has many meanings, including, "home", "homeland", "household", "universe" and "Sky."



**Zhanat Baidaralin welcomes guests into our Yurt.**



**Nauryz celebrants inside the "barn" at the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield, MA.**