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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

SUCCESS STORY

Ten Days that Change Lives for the Better

A girl takes on a more active role in her community after a USAID-sponsored Democracy Camp



*Yulya thinks over a task at the Democracy Camp at Besh-Kungey village.
Photo: IFES*

USAID-supported democracy camps have enabled numerous high-school students from all regions of the country to learn about leadership and civic responsibility.

Yulya Protopopova is a 9th-grader at the only school in the village of Grigoryevka on the edge of Lake Issyk-Kul in the mountains of eastern Kyrgyzstan. The landscape is picturesque, but opportunities for learning are limited. Yulya's school, like many educational facilities in rural Kyrgyzstan, suffers from a dearth of qualified teachers and modern textbooks, as well as inadequate facilities. Such difficult environment leaves little opportunity and time for the youth to learn how to tackle the political and socio-economic challenges facing Kyrgyzstan's emerging democracy.

Early in 2009, when more than half of all schools in the country were forced to close for two months because of an energy shortage, Yulya and her classmate Janat Erkinbek kyzy found a unique opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills. Both girls participated in a 10-day Democracy Camp organized by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) with funding from USAID. Each summer and winter, such USAID-sponsored democracy camps offer Kyrgyz youth an opportunity to learn democratic values, leadership skills, their role as citizens, and how they can advocate for change in their society. The camps combine group discussions, simulations, small-group exercises, games and competitions, cultural activities, and sports in their program and encourage the participants to look for opportunities to use their knowledge at school.

"After democracy camp I became proactive and more responsible in school and in life," says Yulia. Upon returning from the camp, Yulya and her friend Janat taught their classmates about democracy camps, so that more young people can learn from them. Soon they also helped to organize elections of a school president and school parliamentary deputies. Yulia worked on the election commission, counting the votes and helping to find the winner. The girls were also invited to deliver a presentation titled "Responsible and Sustainable Leadership" at a meeting of school directors, vice directors, and regional education officials.

Yulya's mother has also noticed the change in the girl's attitudes to education and to life. "My daughter started to read more after the camp," says Yulia's mother. "She is getting more educated and she has started to talk like an adult." Both Yulia and her friend firmly believe that the small changes they are making at their school, together with the hundreds of initiatives undertaken by other participants of democracy camps, will make the world a better place for everyone.