

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By
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Now that school is back in session in the few valley communities around DX Hill, Charlie and Mary are able to turn some of their time toward the children and their needs. Mary, of course, is a very skilled crafts person and has been active with a large group in their church that's dedicated to sewing and quilting. They've invited school-aged children to come and visit the group and see what fun as well as rewarding crafting can be. Last year, Mary went to three different middle schools and spoke to their crafts class. Of course, the three teachers who invited Mary were members of her church group. The theory that an expert from "the outside" always knows more than the regular every day instructor is as true here as in any other situation. Students invariably listened to Mary intently as she described how to do her magic.

There's a community center called the "Drop Zone" directly across the road from the very large regional high school. The Drop Zone's intention is simply to provide teens with a place to 'drop in' after school, attempting to provide distraction away from street problems and other mischief attractive to idle hands. The center is town sponsored but in reality, run by the students themselves, so its success is truly a reflection of the youths' effort and dedication to its goals. They hold all sorts of events there after school, on weekends, during school vacations, holidays, just about any time at all. The most severe limitation, like other things in life, is funding. Mostly to pay full time staff to open, close, clean and protect it. Fortunately, the utility companies and a community donation provide heat, A/C and full digital Internet, cable TV and telephone service. Hours at present are from 7 AM until 7 PM on school days and from noon to 7 PM other times.

Charlie has left brochures about amateur radio there in the past, but with very little benefit or notice. I guess it's just one more piece of paper that if not understood immediately, will be ignored. One day recently and without announcement, Charlie and his Collins collector friend, Mike decided to set up a station there just after the start of school. Of course, they secured permission from the center beforehand. Actually, they had done so weeks before and the center Director was excited about providing one more attraction for the young folks. By noontime, they had a small tower and tri-bander erected on a portable push-up mast. They mounted it on an unused flag pole base and before long, had an HF SSB and CW station set up working Europeans contest style. By the way, a tall automated and illuminated pole replaced the previous short flagpole shortly after 9/11 by a benevolent town resident. Charlie eyed that with some interest since it's about 80 feet tall. Hmmm...

The noon break at the high school always brings a flood of students into the Drop Zone even though its intended purpose is really for after school activity. Only the juniors and seniors are allowed off campus at noon, for no obvious reason other than standing tradition. Usually, they sit in small groups and simply talk but this time, they crowded around Mike who was chatting with a fellow from Ukraine at that time. Charlie explained to the students where the other station was and received a variety of responses all the way from "cool" to "where's Ukraine?" to "why doesn't he just use Internet like the rest of the world and then he won't need all this stuff?" A very big and muscular lad listened with interest as the on-air conversation continued. He asked Charlie if he could be permitted to say something to that other operator and of course, Charlie nodded and tapped Mike's shoulder and said, "Mike, you have a guest operator here."

The boy spoke with a slight accent. He sat and started speaking in what sounded like very familiar Russian. Immediately, Mike and Charlie became nervous since they're required to be in control of the transmissions and they were unable to do so when they couldn't understand their operator. Happily, he switched over to English and continued saying that he was from the

Ukraine and had been in the US since after the fall of the USSR in 1991. The UR2 station was pleased and spoke in Russian back to him. This brought a broad smile to the student's face. He turned to Mike and said, "This guy wants me to come back home to my country. He doesn't realize that this is my country now."

All the while, many other students had gathered around and Charlie asked if they had any questions. One of the girls said, "Victor is our star wrestler. This is the most I've seen him talk since he came to our school three years ago. I thought he was just shy or something." It seemed clear that she had just learned more about him. Charlie told her that he doubts that Victor could be shy and also a star wrestler since those two traits hardly go together.

Victor had said "dos vedanya" to the Ukraine operator, wishing him good bye. He got out of the chair turned to Charlie leaving Mike to call CQ again. Several students had become interested and crowded around behind Mike to see what country the station's signal would drop into next. One said, "Wow, that's cool. You talked way over there?" He pointed out the Ukraine on the large azimuthal map they had taped to the wall.

Charlie and Victor stepped away from the group so they could talk without disrupting the others who by now were very interested in listening to the strange sound of single sideband. Charlie asked Victor if he found this interesting and Victor smiled and said, "Oh yes, sir. Very much, sir. Thank you." Charlie smiled and asked if he'd like to become a ham and have his own station. Victor seemed astonished and said, "You mean I can do this alone, without you with me?" Charlie explained how he could become licensed and do exactly that but then Victor replied, "Oh, I have not enough money to do this. I can't." Charlie explained that a license isn't expensive and getting equipment would be simple for him too. The school would help and Mike and he could donate equipment.

Victor smiled with a truly peaceful expression. "This is my American dream. Spasibo. I will work hard. I may call you if I need help, sir?" Charlie replied, "You certainly may call me to help but please call me Charlie. Here's my phone number on this QSL card." Charlie handed Victor his QSL. Victor thanked him again and noticed the time had flown by. He announced to the others that they had better get back to class. They followed Victor and all wanted to say something to him. It seems they learned something new about their classmate.

Mike and Charlie shut down the station after the students returned for their afternoon session at the high school. The center director had been observing with interest all the enthusiasm shown by the dozen students who had observed the demonstration. Then, he told Charlie and Mike about a partially utilized room in one corner of the building that he could dedicate to a permanent station if they wished to do that. Of course, they jumped at the chance and made plans to make the antenna system a bit more permanent as well.

Do you have a similar opportunity to showcase amateur radio in your community? You may find an interested audience among our young folks. It may take some patience since their reference points such as those involving Internet and e mail are far more advanced than we may be ready to handle, but they may also see it as a challenge, one that might lead them into a technical career. Give it a chance. Maybe someone like Victor will emerge who can provide the "bridge" we need to connect with the new generation. Opportunities often present themselves in unexpected ways. We must have our minds open to all of them.