

Jeff Around Town – February 24th, 2026

Jeff: This is Jeff Around Town, and my very, very special guest is Olga Smola. You are the executive director for the Nebraska Crossroads Music Festival, and you're on the faculty at the University of Nebraska at Omaha School of Music. You've done so many amazing things. You're an amazing performer. And we're going to be chatting about Mike Yanney, who recently passed away, a great supporter of the university and many, many other endeavors in the community, and a big supporter of yours. And, Olga, thanks for joining me.

Olga: Thank you for having me for this sad but very special conversation.

Jeff: Yeah, and you are here really because of Mike Yanney.

Olga: Yes.

Jeff: Can you just share a little bit about how that all happened?

Olga: Well, I first time met Mike and Gail and also Walter and Susan Scott in Moscow 20 and a half years ago. It was fall 2005, and it was very special celebration of the relationship between United States and Russia, which happened in the very center of Russia, in the Red Square. We have a historical museum, which never opens for any events, but this was very special event. So, it was very small celebration for very special people. And I was performing there. I was invited to perform. And this how first time I met Mike. And since then, we were always in contact. Over the years, we became closer and closer until the moment when I moved here. And I would say he was my American father because he adopted me the way that he was my mentor, my guide, my inspirational angel. I called him angel because he inspired me to do many things what I did in my life and I do. And I'm very thankful.

Jeff: When he spoke of you, I mean, he just... he lifted everyone up. He just he was so great and touched the lives of so many people. And I just think about that, Olga. I think about how he touched your life and helped you, made your life better. But you are touching the lives of so many other people around the world and in our community. You're touching the lives of young students, of those who appreciate your music. And I just if you if you have not had a chance to listen to Olga perform, you have to do it. I just you were quite there.

Olga: Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff: You are quite the performer. What a what a beautiful what a beautiful tribute to someone who really championed you so, you know, caringly.

Olga: Well, his mentorship for many people, as I especially heard in last week since he passed. When I talk about him with many people around community, it became obvious for me how he was... he was talented in. He was a genius in so many things. But one of the very best things what he could do, he could inspire people to serve better and improve the life of people around them. And I... he truly I have the pile of postcards from him.

Jeff: Oh. You still have those? Handwritten. Of course, handwritten.

Olga: I had all of them, of course. And is they full of inspirations, quotes, recommendations and like great words. Inspire you to do more and to be a better, better person the next day than you were before. And I was... I always knew that, but probably because I had this

privilege to be so close to him and privilege to spend hours while having conversations with him about different topics. I knew how big he is and he touched so many levels of people's life. He had such a huge influence on relationship between Russia and United States. He did so much in the community, but somehow this great person also always found time to make little thoughtful touches and get here for people he loved. And this was absolutely unbelievable.

Jeff: Olga... Olga Smola, thank you so very much for sharing those thoughts on Mike Yanney. Really. Thank you.

Olga: Thank you for having me for before. Because I appreciate the opportunity to talk about him.

Jeff: More than happy.