

## Best-selling author helps student from Chechnya attend Alfred University

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ALFRED, NY The story could be straight from the pages of best-selling international spy writer and Alfred University graduate Robert Littell: A young relief worker's convoy is ambushed in Chechnya, but he escapes when his quick-thinking driver speeds off as masked commandos open fire on the car. A bullet shatters a window and the relief worker is cut by flying glass, but otherwise he is unharmed. His grateful family rewards the driver, a Chechen, by helping him realize a lifelong dream of sending his oldest son to college in America. But Littell didn't write this story of international intrigue and goodwill; he's living it. The relief worker is his son, Jonathan Littell, and the Chechen driver's 21-year-old son, Akhdan Susarov, is here in America, enrolled as a full-time, scholarship student at Alfred University. Robert Littell graduated from Alfred in 1956, worked as a writer for Newsweek in the '60s, then moved to France where he's made his home for the past 30 years, earning international acclaim as a writer of spy thrillers. Jonathan Littell, a Yale graduate, worked for the international humanitarian organization Action Against Hunger for the past seven years. He headed the agency's mission in Chechnya, a largely Muslim republic in southwestern Russia, which has waged an often-bloody battle for independence since 1991. Jonathan Littell was part of a team assessing humanitarian needs in Chechnya in January of 2001 when the ambush occurred. It drew international headlines because Kenny Gluck, head of the Mission for Doctors Without Borders, was kidnapped in the attack. Gluck would be released unharmed about a month later, to the surprise of many observers including Robert Littell, who said previous raids had left no doubt about the attackers' motives. "It was very clear that they wanted the foreigners, either to kill them or hold them for ransom," Littell said. "There had already been three New Zealand boys who were kidnapped and later found decapitated, and five people from another relief agency were murdered. It was a terrible situation." There were a few agonizing hours when Robert Littell, after hearing reports of the attack, didn't know if Jonathan was safe. He later told his son that he wanted to do something for the driver who had helped him escape capture. Adam Susarov was more than Jonathan Littell's driver. He was a trusted and knowledgeable Chechen who had become a key member of Littell's field staff. He was in charge of security and field operations for Action Against Hunger in Chechnya. Littell called him "the single most honest and loyal Chechen" he had met in his two years in the country. During renewed hostilities in 1999, Susarov sent his wife and two children to Kazakhstan to stay with relatives. His oldest son, Akhdan, a gifted student, had seen his academic scholarship to Turkey cut off by Russian governmental pressure. Jonathan Littell told his father of Susarov's dream to send his oldest son to an American university. Robert Littell turned to his alma mater. "When I thought of Akhdan I thought of Alfred University," said Littell. "I love this college. My experience in Alfred changed my life. I knew this is where Akhdan would be received generously and warmly." University President Charles M. Edmondson thought it was a great idea. "We were delighted to collaborate with the Littells in enabling Akhdan to become a part of Alfred University. We believe our American students will benefit from the opportunity to work and live with someone of Akhdan's background," he said. Susarov met the university's academic requirements. Fluent in Chechen, Russian and Turkish, he was tutored to bring his English skills up to admission standards. An economics major, he was awarded a scholarship for tuition and room and board. Susarov said he is grateful for the opportunity to study in the U.S. "An American diploma and the English will make it easier to find a job and earn money to help my family," he said. There was concern that Susarov would have trouble getting a visa to come to the U.S. Robert Littell said that after 9/11, many students from Islamic countries are being denied access to America. Littell thinks his son's letter to the U.S. consulate helped get Susarov through the door. In the letter, Jonathan Littell warned that the U.S. is being consumed by a "negative stereotype" about Muslims, when the Muslim masses "still look to America as a source of inspiration, education and democratic values." Robert Littell said he is reminded of a speech given by the late Robert F. Kennedy in South Africa. "Bobby Kennedy said that how you affect the world is like throwing a little pebble into a pond and watching the ripples spread out. That's what Akhdan is, a little pebble. And Alfred, in its generosity, is throwing it into this troubled pond," said Littell. "For many years people from all over the world came to American universities and then went back home, and the things that are good about America were being taken out into the world." "There will be ripples from Akhdan," Littell added. "Just think, in a few years there is going to be a young man in Chechnya who was educated at Alfred University."