

ARTS & CULTURE

Four Ukrainian sisters adopted into four families in Willmar

By Ralph Dickerson
Staff Writer

Four families from Willmar, friends that attend the same church, each adopted a young girl from the Ukraine starting 20 years ago; more importantly, each of the young ladies come from the same family. Though adopted into different families, the sisters remained connected through the friendship of the four families, and attending Refugee Church. Eric and Stacy Roberts adopted the youngest sister Nadya approximately 20 years ago, and Art and Annette Benson adopted Anya two years later. One year after the Bensons adopted Anya, Tony and Sharon Cruz adopted Sveteta and Ross and Dawn Marcus adopted Marina.

In essence, four families became one due to the adoption of these sisters. After adopting the girls, the families needed to figure out how to refer to each other. They finally decided on their relationship status.

“The other three girls are my nieces,” Art Benson said.

So, how did four families from Willmar end up adopting four sisters from Ukraine? World politics set the stage for the adoption process to start. In December of 1991 the former Soviet Union dissolved, and many of the “republics” surrounding the Soviet Union became independent countries, such as Ukraine. A few years later the Minnesota Baptist Association started a sister church affiliation with churches in the Ukraine. Seventy churches joined this effort, including Refuge Church in Willmar. Soon thereafter members of the church started to take mission trips to Ukraine.

As part of these mission trips church members visited the city of Drabiv, and developed relationships with members of the community. Their mission trips took them to various areas in that region, and on one of these trips they visited an orphanage in Chigirin, located about two and a half hours away from Drabiv. On one of these trips Eric and Stacy Roberts met Nadya, then age six. Seeing her pulled at their heartstrings, and the family made the decision to adopt. They went through the process, and brought Nadya to

their home in Willmar.

“When they got back, they found out she had siblings,” Annette Benson said.

When the Bensons learned of Nadya’s sisters, they started talking about adopting one of the sisters. After talking over the issue as a family, they decided to adopt one of the girls. It took two years, but they adopted the second oldest sister Anya, then age 13. That left two of the sisters in Ukraine.

“We could see the heartbreak of the sisters being broken up,” Art said.

This led to a discussion among church members about what to do about the two sisters, Sveta and Marina, left at the orphanage in Ukraine. One Sunday morning during the worship service church officials informed the congregation about Sveta and Marina’s situation, and asked members of the congregation to consider adopting these two young girls. On that particular morning the Bensons sat behind Tony and Sharon Cruz, and noticed them reading the flyer the church passed out, and talking among themselves.

Anya noticed the Cruz family looking at the flyer and talking among themselves and asked them if they planned to adopt her sisters. After church the Cruzes asked the Bensons to go to lunch with them to talk about the adoption process. After the discussion, they decided to adopt, Annette said.

“They got in touch with an immigration attorney in the cities,” Annette said. “He asked for a \$1,000 retainer.”

By coincidence, after the church informed members of the congregation about Sveta and Marina’s situation an anonymous member of the congregation made a donation to the church to help handle expenses associated with the adoption. When the Cruzes informed their pastor they planned to adopt one of the girls, he told them about the donation he received in a sealed envelope. They opened the envelope and it contained a check for \$1,000.

Due to Sveta’s age (17 at the time), Ukrainian regulations forbade a child of that age being adopted by herself. Sveta and Marina needed to go as a package deal. They adopted both girls, and once they brought them to the U.S. they



Photos submitted

Though adopted into different families, Nadya, Sveta, Marina and Anya never lost their sisterly bonds and continue to remain close to one another, as this photo shows.

un-adopted Marina, and Ross and Dawn Marcus adopted her.

The Bensons chose to adopt Anya due to her age being between the ages of their children Ashley and Alex. Art and Annette said Anya immediately fit right into their family.

“She has such a bubbly personality,” Art said. “She is always happy.”

Art said he calls her “a little Energizer bunny” because of her constant activity. He said they owned a trampoline when they brought Anya home, and she loved to jump on it for hours at a time.

Interestingly, all four sisters quickly bonded with their adopted families and the community. Art said he thinks the mission trips by members of the church congregation

helped the girls to adjust to life here because they already knew a large number of people in the church.

“There have been about 80 people from our church that have gone over to the little town of Drabiv and spend time there,” Art said.

Though the girls came to a different country with a different culture from their native Ukraine, knowing so many people helped keep the girls from developing attachment disorder; this disorder refers to the children not seeing the people that adopted them as their family.

Art said Anya’s bubbly personality also helped with her transition. He said the day they picked her up from the orphanage a staff member simply told her to go with the Bensons, and she hopped into

the car.

“She gets in the car and we drive off to America,” Art said.

The Bensons arrived back in Willmar with Anya in August of that year. Shortly after arriving they went for a pontoon ride on Green Lake with Ross and Dawn Marcus. This pontoon excursion around Green Lake marked Anya’s first time on a boat. As they boated around Green Lake they passed the home of Chris and Katie Duinink, and they noticed them on their dock at the lake shore and turned the pontoon toward land. The couple went on several mission trips to Ukraine, and Anya knew them.

“Anya gets so excited to see them she starts running and jumps right off the front of the pontoon,” Annette said.

“She got so excited to see somebody she knew.”

The orphanage where Anya lived sat near a river, and the children often played in the river, which caused a funny incident when Anya arrived in the US. Art said another time the family went to an area of Green Lake called Lone Tree, a huge sandbar out in the lake. Boaters often dock there and enjoy the afternoon.

With Anya growing up beside a river, everyone assumed she knew how to swim. When they docked at the sandbar Anya jumped into the water, and immediately went to the bottom. Art said he watched her for a few seconds before he realized she did not know how to swim and they had to jump in and bring her up.

Through these four sisters, four different families became an extended family. Shortly after all four girls arrived in the US, the mothers started a tradition. At Christmas time each year the mothers and daughters go out for coffee and just hang out and catch up with things going on in their lives.

“They are so funny,” Annette said. “They are totally still sisters.”

Today the girls range in age from their late 20s to early 30s. Though they lived here over half of their lives, other family members live in Ukraine. Art and Annette said they learned the girls’ mother gave birth to two more children later, which does cause concern due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition to the girls’ family, members of the church developed lasting friendships with the people in Ukraine.

“We feel like we are at home there when we go there,” Annette said. “The people are so nice. We were always in the smaller towns.”

Art called the whole situation regarding the girls’ adoption a “God thing.” When they started going on mission trips to the country, they did not go with the object of finding a child to adopt. Instead, circumstances simply led to members of the church adopting the girls.

“It was pretty amazing how it all worked out,” Annette said. “There was no master scheme plan, it just evolved.”



Sveta, Anya, Marina and Nadya ended up in an orphanage in Chigirin, Ukraine when the state removed the children from their mother due to her being unable to care for them. The girls spent several years in an orphanage before being adopted out to four families in Willmar.



Shortly after all four sisters came to the U.S., the mothers and daughters started a Christmas tradition of having a day out. Pictured from left in front are: Sveta, Anya, Marina and Nadya. In back, Sharon Cruz, Annette Benson, Dawn Marcus and Stacy Roberts.



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