

Why a Former Orphan Wants to Go Back

In March of 1995, a rosy-cheeked little girl awoke to one more day of her 17-month-old life in a Russian hospital. The high in Pskov that day would have probably been in the upper 30s, with the promise of new life hiding just beneath the earth's surface, waiting to burst forth in the glorious colors of spring.

Not that the coming change in season would have mattered much to Elena, since she spent most of her time confined to her crib. Not because she was sick, or disabled, but because she was one of many children in the hospital's orphan wing with limited staff and resources.

What she couldn't have known, as she awoke to look at the world through the bars of her crib on that morning, was that the frozen earth of her own confinement was about to be transformed with the warmth of God's love, and her new life was about to bloom into the beauty and hope of a future that would come just because one man and one woman chose to step out in faith.

Unable to become pregnant, Dallas couple Twyla and Mark Hall knew that adoption was the only option they wanted to consider for having a family. To the Hall family, adoption is an accurate picture of how God invites each of us to be his sons and daughters through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Wanting to live out that representation, Twyla contacted her church to ask about options for adopting a child. Her church put her in contact with an adoptive family who in turn referred her to the Gladney Center for Adoption in Fort Worth.

"We first met with Gladney for Elena's adoption in August

1994, and adopted her in March 1995,” Twyla said. “We had seen videos and pictures of her at various ages, but we had legally adopted her in Russia before we ever actually saw her in person.”

The journey to finally see their daughter face-to-face entailed about 12,000 miles of travel, round trip. Yet, just as no distance is too great for God’s love to bridge the gap between humanity and Himself, the expanse of the whole earth is not enough to hold back the love of a mother and father from the child they long to embrace in their arms.

“We were completely thrilled to finally hold her,” Mark said. “Her sweet smile was so adorable, and she seemed happy to be in our arms. We were completely enchanted with her.”

But it wasn’t all enchantment and roses as the couple began their long journey home with the toddler they soon realized hadn’t ever learned how to walk or even chew food. It was during the overnight train ride back to Moscow when they realized that their little girl had probably never actually eaten solid food.

“I was sharing my bunk with Elena, and not really sleeping,” Twyla said. “Somewhere along the way, we gave her a Cheerio, but she just held it in her mouth without chewing or swallowing. Thankfully we had plenty of formula, and she liked it.”

Within a year of Elena’s arrival home in Dallas, she learned to speak English, feed herself, drink from a sippy cup and walk on her own. Her rapid progress and zeal for life have been a tremendous joy for Twyla and Mark as they have watched her grow into the godly young woman she is now. Today, Elena is a thriving student at Baylor University who is passionate about her third year of religious studies and her desire to return to Russia.

“When I was a little girl in ballet class, the teacher would

ask us to share someplace we wanted to visit," Elena said. "While everyone else was saying things like Disneyland and grandma's house, I always said Russia!"

"My wonderful parents have always told me I was adopted, and I find joy in this," Elena said. "I believe I have always had the deep want and need to visit Russia because it is a part of me that I have yet to explore. The best way I can think to see Russia is by honoring the people through sharing the joy I have because of Jesus and allowing them to teach me about where they receive joy too."

On June 1, Elena is planning to depart on a month-long mission trip to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus at several orphanages in St. Petersburg with Buckner International's Project Go.

"I created the T-shirts primarily to raise awareness, but they will only make up a small part of the funding," Elena explained. "Raising financial support is something that is necessary but also one of the hardest parts of missions. It requires humility, prayer and faith for both the giver and receiver, and it results in spiritual growth because both need to trust God wholeheartedly."

To learn more about how a mission trip can become a part of your story, or to contribute toward Elena's trip to Russia, please visit her site. For parents considering adoption, Elena's story may serve as a glimpse 20 years into the future to see how the power of redemption can gloriously come full circle.

"Being adopted is something that I cannot fully explain to someone. All I know is it is a wonderful thing that God can use for His glory," Elena concluded. "It has shaped how I think, reminded me of God's grace, and given me an earthly family that is made up of the best people in the entire world. It makes me emotional every time I think about it because it

is just so awesome!”

*Adapted from , a ministry founded by **Barrett and Jenifer Johnson**. After serving in the local church for 25 years, Barrett and Jenifer launched INFO for Families as a ministry designed to encourage people through speaking, personal coaching and resource development. Barrett served for 15 years in youth ministry before serving for 8 years as the Family Minister at Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the largest churches in the South. He has degrees from Texas A&M University and Southwestern Seminary, but he and Jenifer have received their best education through the no-holds-barred nature of everyday family life.*