

Celebrate Life

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EUTHANASIA: Don't Gamble with Life

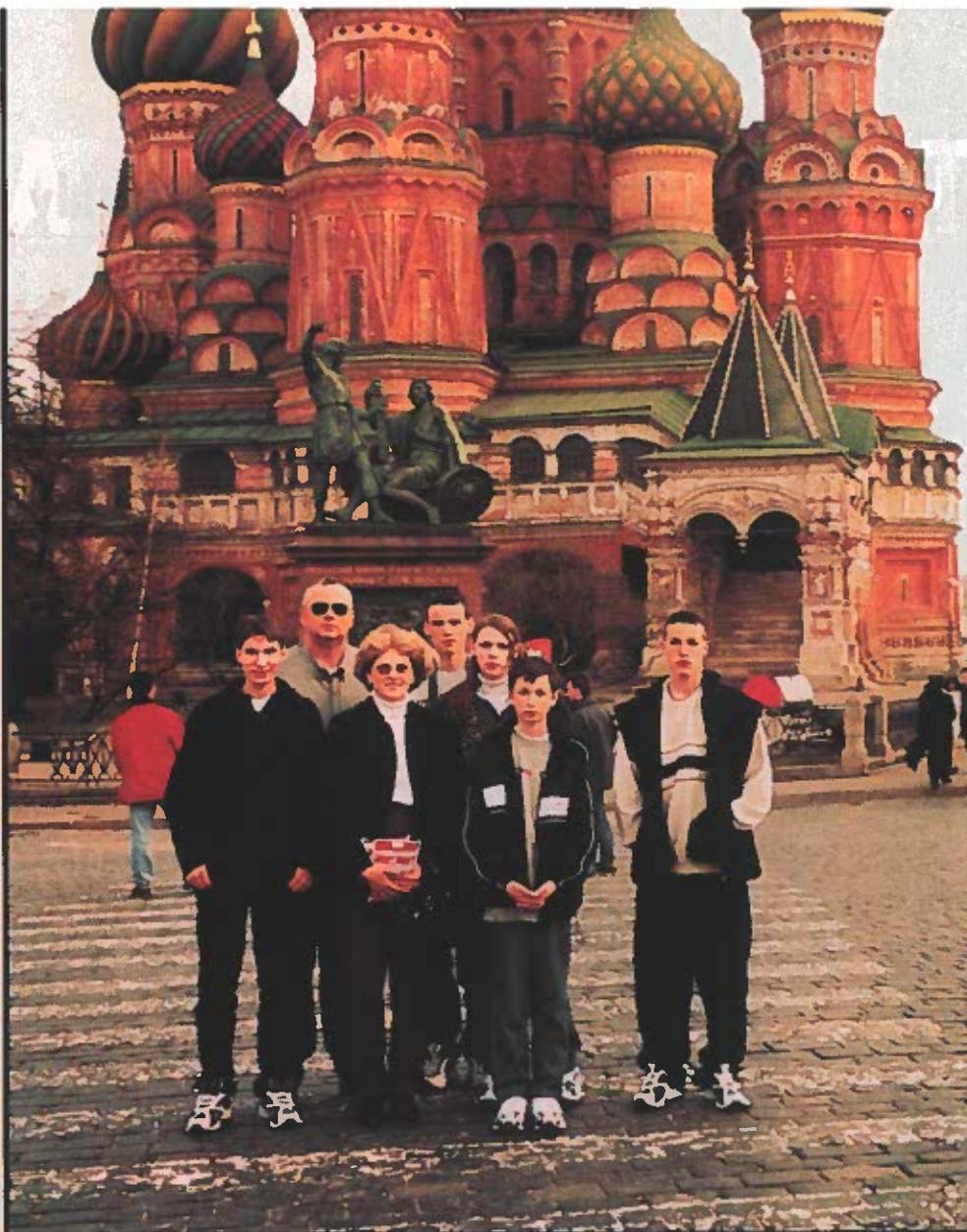
Bringing a family together through adoption

By Lori Williams

The Russian orphanage was a refuge for Maria, but she missed her sister Natalia. During the years when the girls lived with their grandparents, the sisters had been inseparable. They had often pooled their courage to steal money for food from a grandfather passed out in a drunken stupor. Many times the girls shielded each other from their grandfather's abusive words and fists. When together, the sisters had survived cold, sickness, and neglect. Now separated and living apart in different orphanages, the siblings had little chance of seeing each other again.

While Natalia and Maria's hopes waned, Bob and Sharon Wyrick began praying about adopting another child. The Wyricks had already raised three biological children and an adopted son on their farm in Atoka, Oklahoma; now the couple wanted their young son, Andrew, to have a sibling nearer his own age. Sharon found a website with photo listings of waiting children in Europe. She printed out many of the pictures and decided to pray specifically for each child. Three days later Sharon woke up in the night with the certainty that God wanted her to adopt one of the children. The child's name was Maria.

"Maria is on hold for another



The Wyricks at St. Basil's cathedral in Moscow—back row (l to r): Bob and Sergei. Middle row: Denis, Sharon, Yelena and Ruslan. JB is standing in front.

adoptive family," the caseworker said, "but may we send you a video featuring available children?"

Sharon reluctantly agreed, although she was still certain about adopting Maria. She then asked about a 7-year-old girl featured in the video.

"Yes," the caseworker replied,

"Natalia is still available for adoption. She is Maria's sister."

"Maria and Natalia are sisters?" Sharon repeated, not believing the caseworker's nonchalant tone.

"Technically, yes. But our agency doesn't list them as sisters because they're living apart."

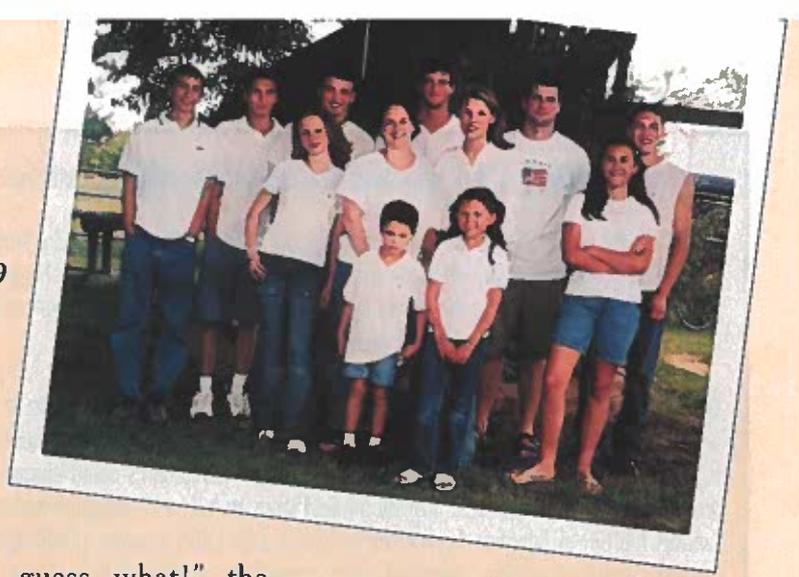
From **RUSSIA** with love

"But what about the family who's adopting Maria?" Sharon asked, still incredulous.

"They aren't interested in adopting siblings."

After the shock wore off, Sharon knew she needed to do something. Yet a right answer to the multiple choice dilemma she faced did not seem forthcoming. She remembered seeing another sibling group of three sisters on the agency video and began to think about adopting all three of them. They deserved to stay together, too. Still, Sharon felt pressure to pursue Maria; she looked at Maria's picture daily. Perhaps she and Bob could adopt Natalia and then try to arrange occasional visits with Maria. Sharon finally decided to call the agency and ask for more time to make a decision.

Bob and Sharon's 12 children stand united back home in Oklahoma.



"Sharon, guess what!" the caseworker said. "Remember the family who applied to adopt Maria? They'd even sent in their commitment fee, but now they've changed their mind."

"So I *didn't* miss God on this one!" Sharon thought. "All along He's been telling me not to give up on Maria."

Just seven months after Sharon first saw Maria's picture, the Wyricks traveled to Krasnodar

in southwestern Russia to adopt and reunite Maria and Natalia. The sisters, who had lived only two hours apart, were about to see each other for the first time in nearly three years. And the siblings, who had only communal clothing at their orphanages, would soon share a room of their own on a 400 acre farm dotted with eight fishing ponds. For the first time in their lives, Maria and Natalia were going home.

Where do I begin if I want to adopt internationally?

How do prospective adoptive parents choose an agency? There are few unbreakable rules, but the author, who adopted a child from Romania, makes these three emphatic suggestions:

- Verify that the adoption agency is accredited in the child's country of origin.
- Talk to at least two families who have used the agency within the last six months.
- Read contracts carefully, and ask for clarification when necessary.

The following websites are good starting points:

Browse the Inter-Country Adoption Registry at www.adoptachild.org. At the registry you may read objective comments written by adoptive families about numerous agencies specializing in international adoption. All of the information is provided on a voluntary basis, and none of the comments are censored by the agencies themselves. Many of the contributing adoptive parents provide e-mail addresses.

At www.amrex.org, you may complete an online personal information profile and receive a referral to an international adoption agency. By maintaining a database of hundreds of adoption agencies specializing in international adoption, Amrex is able to provide a free online matching service for prospective adoptive parents.

Family in Cottage 5

Nearly 740 miles north of Krasnodar, teenaged twins Denis and Yelena were also on their way "home," but first they stopped at the Russian Orthodox church in Ulyanovsk. The late afternoon dusk lent an unexpected cloak of privacy to their mission. The sanctuary was quiet, even hushed. Could it be that God was waiting with bated breath to answer their prayer? Their petition was the same as it had been countless times before, though now it was more urgent. The twins had been orphans for as long as they could remember. They needed parents,

—to Oklahoma, USA

Ways to make adoption affordable:

EMPLOYER ASSISTANCE: At www.adopt.org, you can read about adoption benefits and tax credits, as well as learn what companies offer financial reimbursement for adoption expenses, paid leave during the adoption process, and/or time off from work in addition to leave guaranteed by The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.

GRANTS AND LOANS: Visit the National Adoption Foundation's website at www.nafadopt.org to apply for grants or loans. There is no income requirement, but applicants must have completed an in-process home study. The Foundation's board awards grants on a quarterly basis. Also available are low interest loans to help with adoption-related expenses. Contact the Gift of Adoption Foundation at (262) 268-1386 or www.giftofadoption.org, to request a grant application. Awarded grants range from \$2000-\$5000. Applicants must have an approved home study, and preference is given to candidates who are childless (although those with children should still apply), financially needy, and seeking to adopt a special needs child. Waiting sibling groups are classified as special needs adoptions.

TRAVEL ASSISTANCE: Northwest Airlines and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines offer Special Delivery fares to families adopting children from over 100 international destinations. Call 1-800-322-4162 or go to www.nwa.com and click on Event Travel to fill out an online form. Roundtrip fares are reduced by 50-65%; one-way fares are half the price of roundtrip fares. Airline Ambassadors provide volunteers to escort orphans to their new homes. For more info, call (214) 780-9600, or send an e-mail to escort@airlineamb.org.

not only for themselves, but also for their three teenaged brothers. But time was precious for three of the orphans: In just three months, the twins would turn sixteen and be forced to leave their cottage orphanage. Worst of all, their oldest brother, Sergei, would not be eligible for adoption when he turned eighteen in May.

Ulyanovsk, the birthplace of Vladimir Lenin, perches atop the high bank of the Volga River in southwestern Russia. The city's population of 650,000 includes the orphaned residents of Cottage #5 and the adjacent Baby Hospital. In Cottage #5 Denis and Yelena lived with their brothers Ruslan, 14, Bashir, 13, and a dozen other young orphans. House moms and cooks, who work with or without

the promise of a \$30 monthly paycheck, serve in rotating eight hour shifts to love and care for the children. Cold showers, as well as one change of clothes, are rationed out on a weekly basis. The spartan cottages are a haven for orphaned children, but only a temporary respite for teens on the inevitable path to adulthood. For the time being, Sergei was able to live and study at a nearby university, where he received a \$12 monthly stipend to purchase food and clothing.

The youngest adopted children, back row (l to r): Melanie, Stephen Ruslan, David Denis, Helen Yelena, Jonathan Bashir, Maria. Front row: Natalia and Andrew.



"Why would someone from America be calling Cottage #5?" the housemom wondered, relieved that Sergei was visiting his siblings at the cottage that day. Sergei was studying English at the university, but he still struggled to comprehend what the lady on the phone was saying. Her name was so foreign sounding: SHARE-un WHY-rik. He asked her to speak slowly and repeat what she had just said.

"My husband and I live in Oklahoma," Sharon Wyrick said. "We've already adopted two sisters from Krasnodar. Now we want to adopt all five of you."

"So you want to adopt us?" Sergei paraphrased eagerly.

"Yes," agreed Sharon.

"Well," Sergei said, "can't I just call you Mom?"

Only two and a half months later the Wyricks and their large extended family had a celebration at their Oklahoma farmhouse. Returning safely with five teenaged siblings from Russia was ample reason for a party. But the occasion marked more than just a homecoming. Sergei had arrived home just in time to celebrate his 18th birthday.

Lori Williams writes freelance articles and curriculum from her home in Bethany, Oklahoma. Lori and her husband Dean adopted their daughter Aurelia from Romania eight years ago.