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Ukrainian orphans find family feeling in Phila.

By Kristin E. Holmes
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In the 28 days since nine orphans from Ukraine stepped off their plane in the United States, they've visited a zoo, the Liberty Bell, Cinderella, and an Iron Pig.

But for 10-year-old Oleg, the best thing about his first trip to America was in the driveway of his Bucks County host family.

"To tell you the truth," Oleg said through a translator, "I liked riding the bicycle."

For the last month, the young visitor from an orphanage near the Crimean peninsula has been part of a new kind of family. He lived with Steven and Claudia Fischer of Jamison as part of the Rainbow of Hope Hosting Program, an initiative of the Love Cradle USA mission.

The organization is a nonprofit orphan-advocacy and charitable group based both in Souderton and in Ukraine. This summer's visitation program - Love Cradle's first - is an effort to introduce Ukrainian orphans to what it means to be part of a family.

"If these children never have a chance to live with a family and learn a different lifestyle, then what is their measuring stick?" said Stephen Yagilnicky, 47, president of Love Cradle.

Yagilnicky, a native of Canada, and his Russian-born wife, Iryna, started the organization to show Ukrainian orphans that there is hope. The couple is trying to prevent orphaned youngsters from falling prey to the perils of homelessness, prostitution, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking that befall some orphans when they must leave institutions by age 18 and fend for themselves.

U.S. host families must be cleared by an FBI background check and a home visit by federal agents.

More than 100,000 children live outside family care in Ukraine, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development. They live in orphanages, boarding schools, and shelters, or on the streets.

Ukraine had until recently suffered from a dramatic economic decline that began after the former Soviet republic became independent in 1991.

Families struggling with poverty, unemployment, and other social and economic problems cannot take care of their children and thus turn them over to institutions, said Steve Vetterlein, founder of the United Orphaned Children's Fund of Pennsylvania, a Ukrainian-orphan charity.

U.S. families seeking adoptions have been hindered by the Ukrainian bureaucracy, said Orysia L. Hewka, executive director of the Ukrainian Education and Cultural Center in Philadelphia.

Iryna Yagilnicky is an ethnic Ukrainian. When she returned to Ukraine in 2000, the plight of the children became her motivating force.

"I realized that no program, no government, can take care of a child like a family," the 43-year-old pediatric nurse said.

Orphanages often are old buildings - some without hot water - with many children living in one room and using a bathroom that is no more than a porcelain bowl, she said.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer
Oleg, a 10-year-old Ukrainian orphan, with the Fischers, his American host family in Jamison, as grace is said. As part of a program sponsored by the Souderton-based Love Cradle USA organization, Oleg and eight others were paired with American families for a monthlong visit that will end today.

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She began a one-woman charitable effort. She donated food and clothing, and visited orphans. Love Cradle came out of those efforts, starting in Ukraine in 2002 and expanding to the United States in 2006.

Stephen Yagilnicky also works as a program director with Esperanza Ministries, a mission organization based in Vancouver, British Columbia. When not traveling, he lives with his wife in the Souderton parsonage of Immanuel Leidy's Church, where Love Cradle is based. The congregation is one of several area churches that support Love Cradle.

Iryna Yagilnicky is program director for Love Cradle, its one paid U.S. staff member. There are five part-time workers in Ukraine.

The group's charitable efforts include collecting winter coats, organizing mission trips to Ukraine, and helping Ukrainians navigate the process of becoming foster parents.

It took nearly a year and a half to get visas and passports, raise money, and find U.S. host families. The trip has cost about \$2,650 a child.

The youngsters, ages 9 to 15, had a packed schedule that included trips to the Philadelphia Zoo, a production of *Cinderella*, and a Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs baseball game. They have ridden fire trucks and ponies, made pizza, and caught fish.

But for Oleg, all that paled next to the bicycle at the Fischers'.

The family has watched its houseguest's transformation from a shy little boy who arrived with just the clothes on his back and a pair of flip-flops to an affable youngster who gleefully tried on 10 pairs of shoes at Kmart and rushed over to pick up 2-year-old Hannah Fischer after she had fallen.

The children are scheduled to return to Ukraine today. They will ride a van for three hours, a plane for 11, and a train for 18. Stephen Yagilnicky said they will arrive with a "suitcase full of possibilities."

Oleg, though, wants to stay here. He said he'd work, make money, and go back home in about seven years.

Today, he said, is too soon.

Contact staff writer Kristin E. Holmes at 610-313-8211 or kholmes@phillynews.com.

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