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The Intelligencer

Opening minds and hearts

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The Intelligencer

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On a hot July afternoon, a gaggle of children frolicked in and around a backyard swimming pool, shrieking and splashing with glee.

Unless you listen closely, it appears a typical scene from any family picnic or birthday party.

But for nine of the youngsters, this is anything but a typical summer.

Since the end of June, the group of Ukrainian orphans has been getting a taste of America and family life with the help of Souderton-based Love Cradle Mission.

"It's important to see what a loving family is all about," said Steve Yagilnicky, president of the international nonprofit that advocates for orphaned children. "These kids have had their hearts and minds opened."

Love Cradle has been working in Ukraine since 2000, but this is the first time the organization has brought orphans to the United States. And Yagilnicky doesn't think it will be the last.

The orphans, who range in age from 8 to 15, have been staying with host families on evenings and weekends. Weekday mornings are devoted to learning English. And the rest of the time is reserved for various educational and recreational excursions.

The children have been to the Philadelphia Zoo, the theater at DeSales University in Upper Saucon and a rock climbing gym in Doylestown. They visited the North Montco Technical Career Center in Towamencin to learn about graphic arts and create scrapbooks.

Many of the outings have been structured to help the children experience different careers they may pursue when they grow, said Ruth Bugge of Lansdale, a Love Cradle volunteer.

Last Thursday, the children were riding ponies and swimming at a farm in Franconia.

For 11-year-old Volodymyr, that outing was the most fun. But, he said, with Yagilnicky translating, what he loves most about America is his host family.

"People do good things here," Volodymyr said of the United States. "There are good and kind people everywhere."

As much as Volodymyr and his fellow orphans have been touched by their host families, so too have their hosts been changed.

Arlene and Dan McCloskey of Warminster, themselves the parents of an 11-year-old and 8-year-old quadruplets, decided taking in 9-year-old Viktor was something they needed to do.

"It's been absolutely wonderful," Arlene said. "We're learning from him as much as he's learning from us."

Story Images: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)



(***INTELL LEAD PIX***) Iryna, 15, and Anastasia, 14, (we are not allowed to use last names) a both orphans from the Ukraine who were visiting the area as guests of Love Cradle Mission of Souderton Here the girls have lunch at the Royer Family Farm in Franconia prior to swimming.7-16-09 Rich Kennedy/Staff Photographer [Buy Intelligencer photos](#)

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Though there have been a few moments of culture shock - Viktor's amazement at the affluence of shoppers buying a few items in the grocery store, his confusion with seat belts - Viktor has fit right in with the McCloskey clan.

Hand gestures and a Russian-English dictionary have helped, Arlene said.

But some aspects of childhood are universal, like riding a bike.

There are no bicycles in the orphanage. Once Viktor started peddling around the McCloskey's neighborhood, there was no stopping him, Dan said.

"We'd just stand by the side of the road with a sandwich for him to grab (as he passed)," he added.

These are exactly the kind of "life-changing," hope-filled moments Love Cradle is trying to provide, Yagilnicky said, noting that the orphans need all the hope they can get.

"They come from very strict institutional life," he said.

In Ukraine, there's not much difference between an orphanage and prison. Both are meant to keep people in. Even the children's school is within the orphanage's walls.

The sad fact is that most Ukrainian orphans are unprepared for life outside the orphanage, where they will be thrust at the age of 16, Yagilnicky said.

Only about one in 10 who graduate from the orphanage goes on to have a meaningful, productive life, he said.

The rest end up in jail, commit suicide, become addicted to drugs or alcohol or end up as sex workers.

"They just disappear," Yagilnicky said.


But he believes Love Cradle can help reverse that "sad statistic." Though the nonprofit does not facilitate American adoptions of Ukrainian children, they will not be abandoning the children once they return home at the end of July. In fact, representatives from Love Cradle will be meeting up with the youngsters at the large Black Sea orphanage where they live during the summer.




Love Cradle's discovery teams provide care and hands-on help to the orphans, bringing sports, construction projects, music, crafts, arts and Bible studies to the children on their home turf, according to the organization's Web site.


"Love Cradle will continue to follow them and advocate for these children," Yagilnicky said. "This is a springboard for much more."

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