

Ukraine Welcome Circle Update

A message of Thanksgiving

As our parish family approaches Thanksgiving, we once again acknowledge the gifts that God has bestowed upon us during the past year. In a very special way, the Ukraine Welcome Circle and the Kushnyr family - Dmytro, Valeriia, Dariush and Aniela - are reflecting upon the extraordinary gifts God has been sending for the past six months. With this in mind, on September 17th, members of the core team of the Ukraine Welcome Circle gathered to celebrate the milestones and accomplishments reached by the Kushnyrs. In the holy space of Mary's room, the team, our priests and the Kushnyrs welcomed many of the volunteers who contributed to the success of this venture. Sharing a delicious meal, the afternoon was filled with stories, laughter and emotions. While the Kushnyr family is grateful for our support, we, too, are grateful for the privilege of welcoming them to America. With much anticipation, a great deal of planning and our community's tremendous generosity, we watched a hope and a dream unfold and become a reality. In the touching words of Valeriia Kushnyr, "A few months ago you did not know us at all, but you decided to join forces and help! You didn't just help us, you gave us a sense of security and faith in a new life. We still can't believe we're here."

At this "thanksgiving dinner," team leaders Mary Joan Papajcik and Dan Gauntner acknowledged members of the core commitment who started meeting in December to discuss the idea of sponsoring a young family needing to leave Ukraine. The St. Christopher Ukraine Welcome Circle (UWC) was born and the work began. As God's grace would have it, a group of parishioners with experience in required fields offered their assistance. Spiritual advice came from Fr. Tim, who felt compelled to take action when he could not bear to watch another story about children dying in Ukraine. Providing required oversight and housing support was George Blaha; frequent communication and counsel came from Mary Joan; Ron Papajcik committed his financial expertise. Dan Gauntner tackled the area of securing government benefits in coordination with Catholic Charities; he also helped teach the adults how to drive and secure their licenses. Heading the employment effort were Vincent Hvizda and Lisa Boettcher. Medical and mental health services were made available by Mike DeHaan and Mary Ellen Grady; securing educational and English language programs became the responsibility of Carmen DeHaan, Cheryl Williams, Kim Kelly and Robert Jameison. John Gannon, Judy Makaryk (real estate agent), and St. Basil's Fix-It Team coordinated moving the furniture into the house. Tiffany Barker was quick to take over furnishing the home, generating a Sign-up Genius and recruiting help from parish groups like Ladies Guild and the day school. The result was remarkable and brought Valeriia to tears upon seeing the perfectly furnished, decorated and well-stocked home. Carmen DeHaan has the privilege of producing the updates and telling their story.

When we needed her most, God sent us Cindy Becker, who offered to create and manage our online sign-up. This proved to be vital to our scheduling success - getting Dmytro and Valeriia to and from language classes, as well as medical, employment and required appointments with Catholic Charities. Equally important, if not more so, an "army of volunteers" was needed to provide childcare. The list of needs was long and, thank God, the list of volunteers was even longer. Through the generosity of 911 Driving School of Rocky River, the Kushnyrs learned to drive; as their English improved, they gained more independence. Eventually, the adults acquired their own vehicles. The family still has daily contact with members of UWC, and we have indeed become family. The Kushnyrs continue to enjoy invitations to dinner, holiday celebrations and social events.

In addition to an astoundingly generous community, they were also embraced by our priests, pastoral team and staff. With a strong desire to join the Roman Catholic Church, the Kushnyrs consider St. Christopher their "home parish." They appreciate the warm welcome and unconditional regard they have received. For the sake of convenience and to build community, they joined St. Leo's Parish near their home. Thanks to volunteer and driver, Peggy Voldrich, the family continues to enjoy the embrace of St. Leo's faith community.

In many ways, the Kushnyrs and our Welcome Circle have only just begun. At the same time, strong personal relationships have been forged. As the journey continues, a heartfelt and profound expression of gratitude goes out to all the volunteers, advocates and supporters of this extraordinary cause. All of the gifts received - large and small, cash and in-kind, time and prayers - are greatly appreciated. Your love, generosity and kind words have never gone unnoticed. To our amazing parish community, our friends and neighbors, the Kushnyrs and UWC say THANK YOU! We could not have done this without your support. May God bless you all, and Happy Thanksgiving!