

Families with Homes Meet Kids Needing Homes

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In "his" bedroom, are the staples of any 8-year-old American boy. The toy cars and Legos are haphazardly spread across the floor. The Spiderman puzzle he put together this summer hangs on the wall, along with posters of a Dalmatian and a skateboarder. A baseball and glove rest on a chair in the corner.

Downstairs, in his Spiderman T-shirt, he sits with a tub of popcorn balanced between his legs, watching Nickelodeon's SpongeBob SquarePants on the flat-screen TV.

This is life as an American boy living with parents in the suburbs. And this is the way Maureen Lau will keep the spare bedroom in her Batavia home -- the board games tucked in cubbies, the little plastic mock basketball hoop above his closet door -- even after Vitaliy returns to his other life, in a Russian orphanage where rooms are shared and toys are communal.

"I would assume it's hard going back," said Lau, who signed on as the boy's host mother last month. "We can't really tell him we're adopting him, because if something legally falls through, it'd crush him."

Vitaliy arrived in the United States with six other Russian orphans in July through the Bridge of Hope program run by St. Mary's Services, an adoption agency in Chicago.

The five-week program is promoted as a summer camp-type trip for the children, who might otherwise never get a chance to come to America, said Michaelyn Sloan, St. Mary's Director of International Adoptions. But it also serves to get families who are interested in international adoptions acquainted with school-age children who need a home but are well older than most are looking to adopt.

In the 10 years since the Cradle of Hope Adoption Center in Maryland began running these types of programs around the country, 90 percent of the 450 children brought in have been adopted, Sloan said. Last year, three of the four kids brought over by the Chicago agency were adopted by their host families.

Lau, a social worker at Hubble Middle School in Wheaton, said she looked for years at adopting a child. Because she's in her mid-40s, she's among the relatively few interested in kids older than toddler-age and quickly found out that international adoptions, though more expensive, have fewer restrictions.

"I've just always wanted to have kids," said Lau, who got married last year. "It's definitely been a lot more lively."

Preparing for visit

Before Vitaliy's arrival, she said she scanned the Internet for any information she could find on how children from different countries adjust to life in America. St. Mary's held an orientation on what kinds of behavior to expect, warning that many of the children who grew up in rural orphanages have never been in stores or cars or family settings.

Lau also received a fact sheet about Vitaliy, whose last name is not being used at the request of St. Mary's officials. She learned he was "bright, social, interacted well with other people" but little of how he ended up in an orphanage two years ago.

So she and her husband prepared as they could, spending months picking out clothes that

matched his height and weight, and choosing toys that were "interesting but not overwhelming." They filled the once-empty guest room with blue linens and wooden cubbies. They learned common Russian phrases and contacted a translator who could be on call.

When they finally went to pick the boy up at the airport, though, Lau found preparation didn't draw out the details.

Vitaliy was familiar with Disney movies, but had never seen an ice cube or a rabbit. He quickly picked up on how to play with Super Soakers and on Slip 'n Slides but seemed taken aback by the grocery store.

Settling in

But 8-year-old boys of any culture are also fast learners, and in a few weeks, Vitaliy settled in easily to American life. He played games and put together art and crafts at a YMCA camp, swam in the afternoons, went bowling and mini-golfing -- and looked for rabbits every morning in the neighborhood.

"Given that he's a little kid in a foreign country, he's really adapted well," Lau said.

Though Lau was "very, very nervous" about the language barrier, she and Vitaliy have come up with their own way of communicating. He giggles when the Laus try to speak butchered Russian, and babbles on in his native tongue as if there were no barrier at all. At the zoo, he could name every animal in English, and says numbers one through 10, and "thank you, thank you" with ease.

He points at a banana, asks the question with his eyes.

"Yes, you can have a banana," Lau responds, before telling him to throw away the parts that have turned brown.

"He talks to us as if we understand everything," said Lau. "From the minute we met him at the airport, he nonstop talks and talks."

At the end of July, Vitaliy boarded a plane back to Russia. Lau knows that the international adoption process is "not smooth sailing" and can take lots of money and longer than a year. She knows that children from broken homes and other countries can be tough to raise in her calm Batavia world.

She also knows kids are resilient, and families are loving.

Lau can't say she's going to adopt Vitaliy, but she will ask the Russian government for permission to visit him, and for him to visit her.

"What we can say is that we're interested in adopting," she said. "And we will keep his toys and belongings in his room."