



Update Newsletter

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Special edition

Personal Reflection from Ukraine Trip, May 15-29, 2014

By Wendee VanOrder

*With inserts from Marina James,
President, Marina's Kids*

Most individuals would have said I was crazy to travel to a country which was experiencing political unrest. Believe me; I did pray about it, a lot. Every time, I heard the Lord gently say, "There's something to be gained from journeying with Marina." These words are what propelled me forward on days when others expressed their concern about my going on a two week mission trip to Ukraine. I held onto God's words, not man's. I'm so glad I did.

On May 13th, I drove from Suwanee, Georgia to Glenside, Pennsylvania and reconnected with Marina, a college friend, after 12 years. The last time I saw her and her husband, Sean, was in September 2002 when I was traveling with a group from Philadelphia to go on another mission trip to Northern Ireland. It's funny how life brings us back around.



Wendee VanOrder, Marina James, and Kirill Maksimov



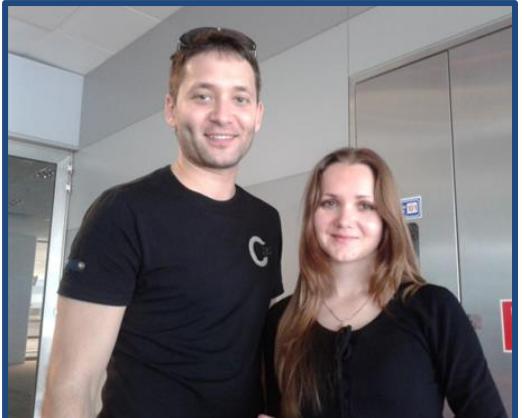


When Marina and I finally boarded our flight at JFK to Zurich, and eventually to Kiev, there was some catching up to do. I was humbled to hear the story of her own life journey; being born a Jew in Soviet Union, now Ukraine, and due to experiencing hardship from anti-Semitism, her family decided to leave when she was 15. Her childhood was spent in several hospitals away from her own family due to misdiagnosis. I could see how her own background set the stage for God to use her to minister to the orphans she now serves. I realized that even though we were friends in college, I really didn't know her like I thought I did.



Wendee and Marina

Yuri and Julia



Listening to Marina share how she first started her non-profit organization to help orphans in Ukraine, and knowing she is currently a mother of five biological children, four adopted children, and has fostered many others, my respect for her deepened. I began to see I was in the company of great wisdom. The words God spoke about this trip would come back to me.

My initiation into the country was a rough and unexpected one, as we were separated at the airport by authorities. Not knowing the language and being sent through doors of a corridor leading to the airport lobby alone, I was uncertain what would become of us. Frantic to find our contacts Yuri and Julia, I was feeling desperate. I initially met a short girl fitting the description of Julia and who held a sign for someone named "Maureen." I thought maybe she just misspelled Marina's name. However, after a few minutes of talking with her, I realized this was not the Julia I was to locate. Fear set in as I began to pray even harder, not knowing what was happening to Marina and unsure how I might find the right contact. Marina ended up being detained for 4 hours. Eventually, I was found by Yuri. Besides the relief of being able to speak to someone in my native tongue, he was able to make phone calls to obtain legal help for our situation. I have to admit, I began to doubt my decision to come to Ukraine. Would the rest of the trip be like this?



Eventually Marina was released. She appeared shaken up from the ordeal, understandably so. We spent the next few hours talking it through and getting advice from Yuri about what to do. We knew we needed a lawyer. Arrangements were made to meet with one a week later, as several thousands of dollars were confiscated. This event changed our course and schedule, but we were determined to press forward and do what we came to do, minister to the children.



A Note from Marina: I would like to explain what happened in a few words. Kiev's airport now has a brand new terminal, and with the current political situation, not many foreigners fly to Kiev. Somehow, as we were going through the airport, I did not see the place where the declaration forms were. Wendee and I were the only two people in a large room that leads from baggage collection to the exit from the airport room. We were stopped by authorities and asked if we carried any thing that needed to be declared. We were bringing in money for several projects and our travel expenses. I did not hide anything. The money was on me, and I told them exactly how much. I was detained, while Wendee was let go. The summary of what the authorities told me is this: "You stepped into the "green corridor", and passed the white line without the form filled out. Therefore, you broke the law."

After an overnight train ride to Odessa, we met up with Kirill Maksimov, former orphan himself and 20 year old helper to Marina of several years. He became our travel companion for the remainder of the trip. Besides assisting with various projects, and demonstrating a real love for the little kids in the orphanages we visited, Kirill also expressed a real sense of humor at times. This provided some much needed comic relief to what might be considered stressful circumstances. His love for food and music was evident as songs could always be heard from his phone. Even still, I cannot hear Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" without thinking of him. I shall never forget the day in Zatoka when he told me he was going out to lay on the beach at the Black Sea and wanted to get "chocolate" as he put it. I laughed so hard.



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Kirill added a wonderful element to the trip as I began to see firsthand how Marina has not only mentored him, but the dynamic between the two was a very unique one. There were moments it seemed they were true partners, making decisions about supplies, scheduling and so forth and there were moments I could see a more mother/son type relationship. I saw him argue his points on philosophy and she would give examples and demonstrate certain points which he would ponder and sometimes take in. They would talk, laugh, argue, prove their points, but somehow manage to come back to a place of mutual respect for one another and move on. I admired their relationship. At times, I wish I knew Russian that I might be privy to what was actually spoken, but somehow I found the non-verbals were enough. I felt it was more my place to watch and pray. I was but a witness to the workings of God.



We first stayed in an apartment in Izmail, which her organization rents out as a Kid's Club. There was a volunteer named Yana, a graduate student studying law, who lives there and ministers to teens in the technical schools nearby. It was here I met some of Marina's original kids: Vlad, Pasha, Puvlik, and Slavik. We ate a large meal together and immediately my heart was drawn to these boys. Hearing their individual stories and how little they had, how survival and an orphan mentality plays a part into their daily existence was heart breaking. My nurturing instinct kicked in and my mother's heart was provoked. You just want to help them all.





We visited an orphanage nearby, a new location for Marina. I was able to do a brief art therapy project with them about emotions they experience and how God is love. We also visited the tech school where some of the boys lived and met with the director who was upset about a window being broken. I could read the disappointment in Marina's face and she expressed her desire to be able to spend more time with the kids. Visiting only twice a year was not enough to help bring stability to the kids and it seemed their connection to other volunteers who were there long term, was not the same. I understood the need to be more active in these teens' lives. They needed someone to help guide them along in this vulnerable stage of life.

As time went on and we reached out to individuals like a pregnant single mother also named Marina, buying clothes and supplies for her baby, I began to recognize similarities between Marina and me. My own ministry to children, many of whom are in the foster care system, has been on a 1x1 basis. I find myself going out of my way for the one child I am drawn to or who needs it most. Marina did this countless times. She would travel a great distance to find one boy Dima who was in the original orphanage she worked with and whom she lost contact when the orphanage closed. To me, it was like going on a treasure hunt for the ones who were so precious to her and God. She too, would leave the 99 and go after the one. It made my heart smile.



**Marina and Marina;
Marina's Kitchen**



A Note from Marina: This is Julia. In January she had a baby. Her decision to keep the pregnancy and the baby was greatly influenced by our volunteers in Izmail, Yana and Angela. They have provided counselling, helped with documentation, and things for the baby. Julia has changed a lot in the last year. She turned from a moody teenager into a wonderful mom!



**Our
volunteer
Angela with
Nastia,
Julia's baby**



We traveled to another orphanage , several hours north from Izmail, and met with the director. We learned from her that due to the political unrest, the stipend the government usually gives to orphanages has ceased and so it was for such a time as this that we would be there to help provide basic things such as cleaning supplies, shampoo, laundry soap, toilet paper, socks and underwear. It was wonderful to spend time with the children, hearing more of their stories of how they were placed in the orphanage. Marina learned that the few kids she did know spoke so highly of her that the director was intrigued and welcomed us warmly. Marina's love and reputation preceded her.

We bought supplies at the market for the orphanage as well as tiles and mortar so they could renovate a supply room which had been destroyed in a recent flood. The room reeked of mold and it was evident they needed help restoring a place to put donations for the kids. The director was most grateful.



I think the greatest joy for me was watching Kirill interact with the little ones and listening to him talk about how they called him Papi. I thought it must be meaningful for him to be able to give back as he does, having lived in an orphanage himself. The video Marina captured of him spoke volumes. Even now, as I scroll through my pictures from the trip, I think this ministered to my own heart more than anything else. There is something about a man playing with children that speaks so poignantly of the Father's heart. Having worked in a field that is 95% women all my life, it really touched me deeply to see the role of a father figure played out before me. I tear up looking at the pictures and remembering Kirill's love for the children.

I may not have been able to speak the language but learned that simple things like braiding hair can express love. I enjoyed having some of the little girls braid mine. In fact, one of my favorite pictures is me holding a little one who is braiding a strand of my hair. ☺

Saying goodbye was hard, but I felt a sense of satisfaction that we had made a difference there and the kids knew they were loved.



From there we traveled to another location where we met up with another one of Marina's kids, a teen gypsy boy named Yura. He met us at the market and we had lunch with him and Oleg and Valera. I was humbled when he showed us his house. Not more than bare walls and a bed. I saw this often actually. The tech school room, the pregnant mother's apartment. It made me realize what is truly essential as opposed to "extra". I tried to imagine what it would be like during the winters and the cold and drafts were present. It's amazing what people endure.



Yura in his home. The outside of his home is pictured in the above right hand corner.



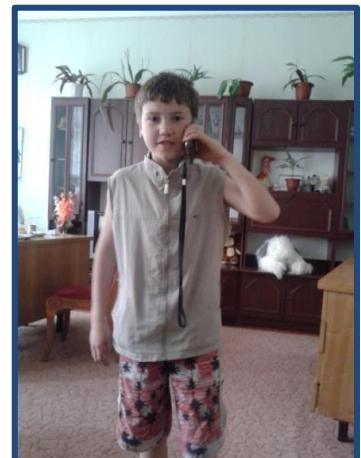
We returned to Kiev mid trip to see the lawyer about our case. Again, I was not privy to the conversation at hand, being that it was in Russian, yet I learned the money would be returned but would take several months. I felt the pain of the situation as this would mean the children in the orphanage which the money was designated for to build shower houses, would not be getting them. Despite this setback, Marina accepted this news.

We then traveled to see another one of her kids, a boy Stas, younger brother of Vlad and Christina. I realized part of Marina's mission is to keep siblings connected and despite Stas being in a foster home, she made sure they spoke on the phone with one another. Stas seemed in high spirits and was grateful for the sneakers and soccer ball Marina brought him.

After another overnight train back to Odessa, we stayed in Zatoka at a hospital and connected another sibling group Koila, who was receiving treatment for his leg, and his sister Olia, who was in a nearby orphanage. Upon our arrival, even more kids who knew Marina stopped in to the director's office to say hello. There was little Igmar and Ricardo, younger brother of Pasha. Again Marina made it possible for Ricardo to connect to his sibling by calling him on the phone. The smile on his face and watching him walk around the room in excitement while speaking to his older brother made my heart melt with joy. It had been six months since they last spoke to each other. I kept thinking, what if Marina never came? How much of her job description (the one that doesn't really exist) is that of helping these kids remain in contact with family members. Surely God is in the business of doing the same.



Time with Stas



Ricardo is talking to his brother, Pasha



I watched as Marina hugged each child and spoke words of endearment over them. I found it almost intrusive at times, my presence. I knew I was getting a front row seat into seeing her ministry and the love she has for each child. She amazes me that in so many trips and locations, she remembers each one by name. That is truly a gift from God.

We did some art with the kids in the orphanage, given each a piece of paper with a pre-drawn portion of a bear image on it. They water colored the squares and we reassembled them based on numbers written on the back. The kids seemed delighted with seeing the image emerge as we glued them together. We also celebrated Olia's birthday with a cake, despite expressed concern from the director that too much cake would cause them to get stomach aches. Sometimes you just have to break the rules!! Let them eat cake!

We did face painting and art with the children at the hospital. What a cool thing to share the story of Moses making the bronze serpent from Numbers 21 and having the kids create a piece of art, a mosaic style cross to illustrate this theme of looking to the cross for one's healing. I prayed for healing for all of them. Some had scoliosis and others some form of bone deceases. We visited a new admission, a five year old boy with a hump on his back. My heart went out to him and his roommates who had their legs strapped to wooden boards. What a way to spend a summer. All you can do is view the ocean, but you can never run and jump and play in it. I prayed for all of them as well. We also saw the windows Marina's Kids replaced in the hospital, a huge help during winter months especially.

I enjoyed a morning lying out in the sun on the beach of the Black Sea. As Kirill would say, I was attempting to become more "Chocolate" or at least get a base tan. Each night we would walk about 4 blocks to a nearby cafe whose name meant "Seagull" and we'd use the wifi to connect to Facebook and do our nightly updates of the day's activities. We became friendly with the waiter, who after consecutive nights eating there, knew our "usual" orders.





We headed north as Oleg and Valera picked us up for the last leg of our trip. We visited a tech school and that's where we realized Marina's "lost son" Dima was in another area doing an internship. We traveled some back country roads, through a pasture and cemetery to find him soot covered from his labor. He was shy, but grateful to see Marina again. It was a treasure hunt and we had succeeded.

The boys in this orphanage learn how to fix their shoes



From there we traveled to Nikoaevka, a new location. We visited an orphanage for special needs kids. We had stopped previously in Odessa at a huge store called Epicenter - a cross between WalMart and Lowe's- to buy supplies for the orphanage. The director kept saying "Super" when she saw what we had brought them. She gave us a tour of the place and I felt like I had stepped back in time. The buildings were early 1900s and the workshop area, tools and equipment they had were extremely dated. I was stunned to see the type of work the children did there: fixing shoes, embroidery, paper art, woodworking projects, etc...



A Note from Marina: This is Liza. I have known her for about three years. Last year she was moved to another orphanage, but I managed to get there, as well. Every time at the end of my visit (about 5-6 times now), she cried uncontrollably. But not this time. I told her, "I will be back, do you believe me?" She just nodded her head. I asked, "Why do you believe me?" Her answer was, "You always come back, and you always do what you say."



We moved on to visit some older women in a nursing home, Oleg provided some books for them to read. We also stopped by his new property which was centrally located to the orphanage, nursing home and a tech school. I was able to get a flavor for the domestic life of Ukrainians as we peered through the window of one the houses on the property which was previously owned by an 80 year old grandmother. I was delighted to find some beautiful glass wine bottles embossed with grapes on them. Oleg was generous to let me keep two of them. WOW! An authentic souvenir!

We finally reached Marina's Kids location #3 . The conditions of this orphanage were not as good as the previous ones. The ceiling in our bedroom was dripping from the rain, there were no hot showers, and Marina gently asked me if I was afraid of mice (her way of saying I see one). At this point, I was honestly homesick. I had become tired of bread, soup, hot tea, and potatoes on a daily basis. I longed for something familiar, something cold (it was summer after all). My body craved my usual breakfast staple of cereal. I realized my American comforts were gnawing at me and I felt bad, but was honest to express this when Marina asked how I was doing at dinner. I think I was bit travel weary as well at this point in the trip. Thankfully, we took a walk to the nearest market and I found some Russian style cornflakes and milk. This made me happy.

We viewed the greenhouse, which I thought was a brilliant idea. I saw it as a great way to grow their own source of food right on the orphanage premises. It would help sustain them in the winter when vegetables and such might be more scarce. We spent a few days at this orphanage, helping to shop for needs of the kids and even those who were apart of host homes. Marina took some to have photos taken for VISA's so they could travel to the US this summer. We did our last face painting time and I also shared a message from Proverbs 22 with some of them about the importance of a good name. I shared the meaning of their names and blessed them. I gave them an art directive to create a banner illustrating their future dreams using watercolor. I learned most of them were going to a host home and some were even in the process of being adopted. This gave me hope and as I watched Marina try and connect with host families via phone or skype, I realized her job description was once again so much more than helping orphans. She is a bridge for so many to connect with others.



Tea and cookies time with kids





On the train ride back, her and I talked about our thoughts of the trip and even her own children at home. It was evident her ministry is expanding and she is in need of help. Not only financially, but in practical ways as she is stretched in several directions and needs people to be planted there in Ukraine to help kids on a regular basis. There was also the issue of the shower houses and wondering if money could still be raised in time to make the project possible.

In conclusion, as I consider all that took place on this very intense two week journey, I can't help but see God's amazing grace. So many contacts, so many children, so many expressions of God's love. As an art therapist, who has worked for the past 10 years with abused and neglected children, I was blessed to engage with the kids using art, but I know the bigger blessing was being able to see upfront and personal what Marina does. Her heart is beautiful and in many ways it was the heart of God that I experienced time and time again. The mother's heart is something I'm familiar with, but the extent to which it goes is unfathomable.

There is a line from a Steven Curtis Chapman song that says "I saw the face of Jesus in a little orphan girl." I can say I saw Jesus on this trip but it was in far more than just the face of an orphan. I saw Him in Kirill's playing with little children, in Marina's hugs, in Yuri's generosity to help us, in Oleg's partnering and driving us throughout the Odessa region, in little girl's braiding my hair, in Viktor's winking of his eyes, in the laughter shared, as well as the hundreds of prayers prayed from so many back at home making all of this possible.

I'm not sure what the future holds, but I do hope the vision Marina has to grow the organization and expand throughout all of the former Soviet Union becomes a reality. As I look back on the words God spoke to me about this trip, I realize I have gained something from journeying with Marina. I've gained a greater appreciation for the heart of a mother who keeps on loving despite the many difficulties and unknowns as well as the heart of the Father who loves to give good gifts to His children. I've gained a deeper awareness of how God truly loves the orphan, and sometimes through the willingness of a mother, a young man, and an ordinary woman like me, we can make a difference.



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displaying one of this on your car, please let me
know marina.james@marinaskids.org

A Note from Marina: To follow up on confiscated
money: We have won our court case!!! We expect
to be able to pick up the money soon.
So what is happening to the shower house project?
This project can only be done in the summer, when
the kids are not on the orphanage grounds. For a
while it looked like we had to postponed till next
summer, but God is good, and it looks like we can
still get it done this summer😊

We are looking for volunteers: secretary, different
project managers, grant writers, writing and editing,
driving for different projects, clothing donation
collectors and sorters, fund raisers, organization
presenters and promoters. There are many other
needs, please contact Marina, for more info.
267.210.4909 or marina.james@marinaskids.org

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*Every penny counts, Thank you.
Marina James, President, Marina's Kids*

**Please continue to pray that God would give
wisdom and guidance to the leaders, volunteers,
and children we work with.**

Thank You

***For your support,
Marina James,
President, Marina's Kids***

Marina's Kids | 123 New St. | Glenside, PA 19038
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