

# Searching for Stasic:

## An amazing story of God's faithfulness

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Kristina and Vladic D., both school aged, were not attending school. Their parents, both alcoholics, were not always present to take care of the kids. Kristina remembers being responsible for cooking and cleaning, from the time she was 6 years old. Vladic, her brother, recalls having to find odd jobs and beg for food and money when he was 5 or 6 years old. The two of them were taken away from their parents and placed in an orphanage. Their younger brother, Stasic, was left with the parents. For several years,

Kristina and Vladic's family: mother, father and brother, Stasic, visited the orphanage every summer. Then Mr. D found a job in another part of the country and moved there with his wife and young son. The distance made visiting and communication difficult. The visits stopped. Occasional phone calls were the only way Kristina and Vladic stayed connected to their family. Later, sadly, the news that their father had passed away reached Kristina and Vladic at the orphanage.

It was at this point in their story that I met Kristina and Vladic D.

Kristina, the elder sister, is quite serious and mature for her years, poised and dramatic with her died black hair; she is assertive, standing up for herself. Kristina is the worrier and is very protective of her younger brothers. It took Kristina some time to accept that my concern and love for her was real and that I would be there for her. Her brother Vladic, has a great smile and can be very silly and playful at times, but is sweet open and trusting. He is the one who talks people into trying new things – he taught me to fish! He is an active learner, eager for new places to see and things to do. As these two kids told me their story, they captured my heart. As we kept in touch during the year that followed, they shared their concerns and hopes, especially for their baby brother, Stasic. We talked about the present and future hopes of reuniting with their family.

Kristina continued to have contact with her mother by phone, and I was able to meet their mother over the phone too. I called Kristina to check on how she and Vladic were during this

time. One day last spring, when I called Kristina, she was in a panic. She said “My mother is pregnant, and there is something wrong with the baby, she has no money for treatment I do not know what to do!” Since my trip to Ukraine was close, I told Kristina that that I would visit her mother and brother and see what I could do to help.

In April, 2011, when we came to Ukraine, my husband, Sean, and I spent an afternoon with Mrs. D. and her son Stasic. Stasic was very small for his age and very thin. Stasic had a great smile and was sweet and friendly. He had just turned 7 a week earlier; all he wanted was to go to school. We bought him a back pack and everything he needed to start 1st grade in the fall, as well as some clothes and coloring books to keep him busy until school began. We also bought them some food, as we were concerned about how thin he looked. We took some pictures with him before we left, and gave him some photos we had taken of his brother and sister.



After returning home to the U.S., I tried to keep in touch with the family, both with Kristina and Vladic in the orphanage and with Mrs. D and Stasic. Whenever I called Mrs. D.’s house, I asked to speak to Stasic, but his mother would tell me he was out, but that they were all doing well. One day, Mrs. D. told me that they were moving. The next time I called, their phone number had been disconnected. Kristina also lost contact with her mother. As time without contact passed, Kristina and I became increasingly worried. Kristina confided her fears, “She is not a good mother and Stasic is probably hungry and cold. What if she did not enroll him in school?”

Kristina wanted desperately to find him, and take care of her little brother. But how could she do this on her own? She was a 17 years old girl who just got out of an orphanage, with little money and no knowledge of traveling through big cities, like Kiev, capital of Ukraine. I reassured her of help, promising that on my next trip, I would set aside time and money, to take her and Vladic to search for their little brother. I was confident that with the information we had and God’s help we could do this. We knew where the family had lived a year before and had pictures of Stasic and his mother. Kristina agreed to wait and hope.

And so, in May, 2012, I picked up Kristina and Vladic and we were on our way. A bus to Odessa and an overnight train brought us to Kiev. By 8 am we had freshened up in a train station bathroom and left our bags in a storage room. We took two subway trains and an hour long bus ride to the town where Stasic and Mrs. D. had lived a year before. We began at the old residence, then markets, local streets, and door to door, showing pictures of the family and asking for any information. We hoped someone would know something. Some said, “They look familiar, but I have not seen them in a while.” We kept searching.

Finally, we got a break. We stopped at the store where we had purchased Stasic's school supplies. The sales woman remembered the boy in the picture! She remembered him from our shopping there, so we asked her to remember, "When was the last time you saw him?" "Well," she said "I heard that after the mother gave birth to a girl for her new husband, she gave the boy up to the local orphanage." Finally, a strong lead! We took a taxi to a nearby town where she told us the orphanage was. At the gate, there was caregiver with a group of kids. They stopped and looked at the pictures and told us that they had never seen this boy. We were advised to check with a government office that keeps track of the kids that were taken away from the parents.

As it was Sunday, and all the offices were closed, we had nothing else to do but return to Kiev, retrieve our luggage and just rest for a bit. We had been through a long, very emotional day, so I knew the kids needed a break and so did I. That night, I took Kristina and Vladic to "Kreshatik" in the center of the city, where we saw jugglers, break dancers, and just over all had fun. The break relieved some stress and let Vladic and Kristina get to see the capital of their country, and enjoy it. We were welcomed "home" late that night, to the apartment of my oldest friend who has known me since I was 4, and her family. The plan of attack was discussed that night. We could visit government offices, there could be lists of children enrolled in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, children who entered orphanages. We could check local schools and see if our Stasic was on their



registration list.

The next morning, heading back to the town, sitting on the bus next to Vladic, I told him, "I have been praying all morning about the search." To my delight, he said "We have some more time before we get there, let's close our eyes and pray some more together!" The kids' love for their brother, and their faith that with God's blessing, our search will succeed, touched my heart and encouraged my faith.

We got off the bus and found a taxi. The driver told us he could show us where all the offices we needed were. They were all in the center of town, surrounding a large plaza. We began at the closest office, and we were directed from one office to the next by a series of office workers. While waiting in a lobby to speak with a man who was busy on the phone, I noticed the sign on another office door. It mentioned "children and families", I thought, "While we are waiting, what harm would it do to ask there as well?"

We went in and told the woman at the desk, Mrs. Z., our story. I explained that the children with me were searching for their family and had serious concerns for the health and welfare of their little brother, Stasic. The woman asked us for his last name. A smile lit up her face, she

said, "I know this family!" She told us that, indeed, "She is not a good mother." We were invited to sit down to hear how Stasic's story continued after we had lost contact.

Neighbors had reported the family to the "Family Care" office because they became concerned about the baby girl who was ill. Over several months, this office tried to help by arranging extra food, medicine, and wood for the wood burning stove for the family. At each scheduled visit, Family Care staff found that everything looked "OK". Then two months ago, responding to a complaint, they made an unannounced visit and found the mother was not home, the baby girl seriously ill, and that Stasic was also sick and missing school.

When they found the mother, who had been drinking, she had to go to the hospital with the children. At the hospital, it was discovered that she was 7 months pregnant and she began labor soon after. It was a miracle that she was in the hospital for the birth, otherwise this baby girl might have died, and no one would have known that she was ever born. The children's mother left all three children at the hospital, while both girls were in critical condition. The process of arranging for care for the children began, with the paperwork and search for family expected to take months. Their mother did not show up at the court to take responsibility. Officials had no record of the older siblings, and tried to find other relatives. A woman came forward, saying she was an aunt, and Stasic was in her care at present and enrolled at a school nearby.

The social worker, Mrs. Z., was very nice and made calls for us to find out details about Stasic's school and his "aunt". Kristina was anxious about the "aunt" because she did not know of any relatives in this part of the country. I reminded her that while I was not her mother by blood or on documents, I am a "mother" to her anyway. So maybe there is a woman who cares for Stasic, who is taking a roll of his "aunt" in order to help him. Mrs. Z offered to walk with us to Stasic's school and introduce us to the director. After speaking in the hallway, the director asked us to wait. She returned not two minutes later with a teacher and a small boy. As he saw us and looked at Kristina, a look of recognition was on his face followed by a beautiful smile. Kristina asked, "Can we could take him outside?" and received a nod from the principal. She lifted Stasic up and carried him out, followed by Vladic and myself.

Kristina broke into uncontrollable sobs of happiness and relief for a few minutes as she hugged her long lost and finally found brother. All Vladic and I could do was stay



near them, till she finally let go. I waited for my tears to dry as well, and then went inside to ask if they would let him off school early to spend the day with us. We did not have much time, that night, Vladic and Kristina had a train to catch back to Odessa and I was leaving the country the following morning. When I shared this information with the school director agreed that we could take him for the day. We headed to aunts house to meet her, stopping at the store for food on the way. A sandwich, banana, bottle of soda, and the biggest, most expensive ice cream they had. This was a day to celebrate, the lost boy was found and he was our prince for the day! I told him, "You can pick anything to do or to eat because this is your day!"

Stasic took us back through the streets we walked, searching, the day before. Just one street over, as we had searched for him, he had been just a street away! The "aunt" who came forward to take him was the mother of his school friend. While he had lived with his mother, he visited this house a lot on weekends, she understood, and fed him. Just 10 days before, she contacted the police and asked if he could be released into her custody so that he could finish out the school year. She understood who we were, having heard Stasic tell about how Sean and I had bought school supplies and the backpack he was still using. She explained that the backpack was his only possession when he came to her and that she was sharing her son's



clothes. So, after exchanging phone numbers, and checking in with the police officer in charge of Stasic's case to get permission, we were off to make a day of it. To save time we grabbed cab, what a blessing, it was one of the drivers from the day before. We happily told him, "We found him!!!" As we traveled through the town and buying clothes, going on rides, having a picnic, all day, "We found him!" was our refrain as we met again with those who were part of our searching just the day before! We were met with smiles, nods, and praise from all around us.

"We found him! We found him! We found him!" was ringing in our heads.

Because this was a happy day we were ready to hear Stasic's story from his own lips. Stasic told us about his life with his mother, clearly an alcoholic and not fit to care for her children. She had kept Stasic at home to help care for the family by chopping wood for the fire, and often went out, leaving him to care for his baby sister. We spent a few hours looking for the children's mother. Stasic led us to her friends' houses and we asked about her, but no one had seen her in days. Stasic did not want us to leave, asking if we could stay overnight. We could not delay, however as we needed to keep our travel schedule, so we left money for Stasic's foster family. After all this excitement with Stasic, we had another matter to settle.

I had thought about the two sisters still in the hospital's care earlier, but reuniting with Stasic had been the first priority. Kristina's first reaction to the two baby sisters was that they were not our problem and that we needed to focus on finding Stasic. Now that Stasic was found, we could start talking about the two little girls. I knew Kristina was afraid to get attached to the girls, knowing her heart could hurt for them as it did for her brother for years now. I brought the sisters up again, telling Kristina that they are still her sisters, even though they have a different father. I asked her, "Could you help two little girls that no one wants?" She asked me, "What can I do to help them?" I told her, "Just by looking in on them, making sure they are OK. Showing them that someone cares, will make a world of difference in their lives." After a minute of thinking, she nodded her head. To our disappointment, it was too late to visit the girls that day, but we knew from the case worker that paperwork had been started so that all three younger kids would be transferred to the town where Vladic and Kristina live.

It took an hour and a half to get back to my friend's apartment, 15 min to collect bags, and an hour to the train. We made it just with 10 minutes to spare. I waited for the train to take off and two happy teenagers waved goodbye to me as the train took off.

*Update – as of September 2012*

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As I share their story with you, several months have passed since we began the search for Stasic. Since then, I have been in touch with Stas and his foster family "aunt". He has been happy at their home and is always excited to tell me new things he has been doing. He is also in touch with Kristina who calls him to talk all the time. The paperwork needed to transfer Stasic and the girls to the town and orphanage where Kristina and Vladic are living has been delayed. Some important documents needed for the three younger children to be released are missing. So Stasic will remain in foster care, for now. The girls are still living in the hospital. The older of the little sisters is now healthy but remains at the hospital as there is no foster family available. The youngest sister, born pre-term and having been in serious condition during our visit, remains very ill, and we fear she may not survive. Please keep all five children in your prayers. I hope their story helps us remember and reach out to all the other children who need protection, caring, teaching, and love but are without parents and cut off from family.

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