

# 'We Pray Someone Will Become Their Parents'

**American families hit by Russia's controversial 2013 adoption ban recall their experiences and express hope the law will soon be overturned**

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The prospective adoptive parents had already met their future children, hugged them and promised them a home when a new law crushed both their and the children's hopes. The “Dima Yakovlev” law, introduced in retaliation to U.S. sanctions on Russian officials, banned American citizens from adopting.

Four years on — and, by coincidence, on the eve of Donald Trump’s inauguration — the European Court of Human Rights finally ruled that the law unlawfully discriminated against

parents. It has returned the issue back to Russian and American agendas.

Here, American families share their stories — this time, with the hope that the law might finally be overturned, and the orphans they were forced to abandon will finally get what they need the most: families.

## **Distant Hopes**

Sara and Eric Peterson first decided to adopt children from Russia in 2012.

“One of my childhood friends is a Catholic nun working with orphanages in Vladivostok, [in the Russian Far East,” Sara recalls in a conversation with The Moscow Times. “We had an idea about the needs of Russian children with disabilities.”

Back then, the process of adopting from Russia was long and complicated. There were thorough background checks, medical and psychiatric exams, fingerprinting, some 100 hours of training. The whole process took almost a year.

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As things looked to be concluding, the Petersons were invited to Tver, a small city in central Russia, to meet the children in December 2012. The couple met their prospective son Dima, 3, and prospective daughter Arina, 4. Dima was paralyzed from the chest down because of a congenital defect called spina bifida, while Arina had Down syndrome.

“He is a very smart, friendly, cheerful little guy with a lot of potential. But he is very complicated medically and needs a lot of specialised medical care. Arina is pretty profoundly affected by her condition – she does not speak and is very much like a young toddler in most ways,” the woman recalls.

The Petersons were spending time with the children in their Tver orphanage when the law passed. Sara remembers hearing about it, and not worrying too much at first. “Everyone we were working with were still hopeful that adoptions that far along in the process would be allowed to proceed to completion, or exceptions would be made for children with disabilities, or that there would still be a good outcome of the situation.”

The couple returned back to the United States in the hope that somehow the ban wouldn't affect them. They waited for the last court hearing date to be set for them. It never was.

The Petersons appealed to the Tver regional court, advised to address the issue in Russian courts first. Their appeal was denied. Sara took action back in the U.S. as well, but to no avail: “I went to Washington eight or ten times to talk to our senators, representatives in the Congress and the Department of State since the ban has been in place. We were met with various degrees of support and sympathy, but in the end they couldn't find the way around the ban.”

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Four years later, Sara says that neither Dima, nor Arina have found new families. Dima was apparently taken into a Russian foster family in late 2015 – only to be returned back to the orphanage 15 days later.

All the couple can count on these days are sporadic updates from a few sources. Occasionally people from a charity that arranges medical care for orphans post updates on their website, and Sara finds out something about Dima's care. Several times, Sara sent packages to Arina's orphanage through different people, and they gave her some feedback about how the girl is doing.

“We see them grow through pictures that are sometimes updated in adoption databases,” Sara says.

Both the ECHR ruling and prospect of a new U.S.-Russia reset under Trump has provided the Petersons with hope. “I’m more positive than I’ve been at any time in the last couple of years,” Sara says.

But as much as the couple would love to bring Dima and Arina – now seven and eight years old respectively – to their home, they say their primary goal is that someone, not necessarily them, will become their parents.

“Every child deserves a family. Obviously, it is best if that family is in the child’s country of birth, but if it is not possible, a foreign family is preferable to an institution,” Sara says.

## **Jumping Through Hoops**

For Jennifer and Joshua Johnston, there was better news. Anastasia, the four-year-old girl they wanted to adopt from an orphanage outside of Moscow, was recently taken into foster care.

“Honestly, it was a huge relief to me,” Jennifer says in a Skype interview with The Moscow Times. “I’d much rather have her in a family setting.”

Jennifer says she fell in love with little Anastasia when she saw the picture of the girl while volunteering for a charity: “Something spoke to me. I let it go for a little bit, but as time went by, this feeling grew stronger and stronger. I thought like I had to do something about it and began fundraising for any family that would be willing to adopt her. Then, one day, my husband came home and said, 'Let's do it'.

Just like in the Petersons' case, the process took a little less than a year.

Eight months later, they were able to visit Anastasia in the orphanage. The little girl immediately grew attached to the couple. “She bragged about Josh – her new father – to all her friends,” Jennifer says. “At some point she got really territorial, becoming really jealous of other kids approaching us,” adds Joshua.

The couple spent four whole days with Anastasia, and promised her they would come back and take her home with them.

“She said she would wait for us. We broke that promise,” Jennifer says.

When the ban was signed into law, the couple was one court hearing away from taking Anastasia home.

“We were scheduled to go to court in February. After the ban, the court date got pushed forward, and we jumped through every hoop possible to make it, but failed. They basically gave us less than a week to get back to Russia, which we couldn't physically do,” Jennifer says.

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The Johnstons spent the next four years in limbo. There were multiple conference calls with the U.S. Department of State, group calls with other heartbroken parents and much more. “My children wrote letters, my friends wrote letters to our president to reach out and try to do something – but nothing came out of it,” Jennifer says.

The couple tried to stay on contact with the orphanage. “We did send a couple of packages and letters to let Anastasia know what was going on, but she was four, turning five at the time. How do you explain that to a child?” Jennifer says.

The Johnstons decided to join the lawsuit filed to the ECHR, and waited for four long years for its ruling. By that time, the couple found out that Anastasia had been taken into foster care by a Russian family.

“Our primary concern was her happiness. If she’s in a Russian family – great,” says Joshua.

“All those times that I tried to be public, I hoped that maybe someday she’ll see this and know that we love her so much. If she’s happy, if she’s loved, I’m happy. That’s the only thing I cared from day one,” Jennifer says.

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The couple now hopes Russia and the Trump-led U.S. will engage in a broad reset of relations.

“We hope that the law can be overturned for the kids that are still waiting and could come home,” Jennifer says. “It’s just about getting kids homes, be it in Russia, in the United States or whatever other country.”

*An in-depth story on the Dima Yakovlev law and prospects for overturning will appear in this week's issue of The Moscow Times, and, later this week, online.*

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