International Efforts

Support group helps Louisiana couples who adopt children from eastern Europe

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When the Soviet Union's collapse opened eastern Europe's doors to the West, some of the first people to leave were children. They're still coming.

Western adoptions of eastern European children no longer draw the attention it received when television cameras first recorded bleak conditions in some orphanages. Still, it happens often enough that a support group was formed a year and a half ago to help Louisiana adoptive parents.

"I get a call about every week," said Karen Bordelon of Mandeville, regional chairperson of Louisiana Eastern European Adoptive Families (LEEAF). It has 20 families, and that number doesn't represent all the families in the state who have adopted from that region. Most of the members live in south Louisiana, Bordelon said.

The group is not an adoption agency but assists families with the myriad details involved in international adoption and provides information to families considering such an adoption.

"Most of the agencies don't have children available," said Calvin Wiggs. He and his wife adopted a 16-month-old boy, Sasha, from Russia in October. "If you go with an agency to get a domestic adoption, you have to actually advertise and try to find a birth mother who is willing to give their child to you. That's something we really didn't want to do."

So, they contacted Los Ninos International Adoptions Center. Nine months after that, they were returning home from Russia with Sasha.

That does not mean international adoptions are simple. There are all sorts of forms to complete and requirements to fulfill for Louisiana, the United States and the child's country of origin.

"We had a lot of challenges through this whole thing and it was very stressful at times," said Todd Gaudin. He and his wife, Hope, adopted 5-year-old Barnabas from Hungary. "We wondered if we were doing the right thing."

His conclusion: They were. But they learned a lot of lessons the hard way before joining LEEAF, which tries to use its members' experience to help those trying to adopt overseas.

"You're going to run into red tape," Todd Gaudin said. "You're going to run into problems."

The Gaudins had not considered adoption until a friend who had adopted a Hungarian child broached the subject. The friend had a tape of a young boy in the same children's home. The boy had hearing problems, and the Gaudins knew sign language.

"We were, like, 'Thanks,' like we don't have enough to..."
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Gaudin looked at the video and changed his mind.

"I looked at it and said, 'What a cute little kid. He's gorgeous,'" he said. "I don't know really of a reason why not to. Yes, it's expensive, yes, this and that might be hard. Those just didn't seem quite important to me. It seemed everything should be overcome." He and Linda thought about it for a week. "It was very difficult for us," Todd Gaudin said. "For some reason, these kids can't be adopted quickly. I think there's an out in normal curve was his length to see him getting involved in what they were doing. Now, he plays. He interacts. He likes to hold hands with someone or have them swing with him.

"For some reason, these kids can communicate with him better than we can. I guess they're on the same level. They'll sit and play and do their own little things with the trucks and whatever. They communicate. I don't know how sometimes, because I know he doesn't understand some of the things they're saying. He goes with the flow and plays and interacts with the kids."