

THE BELARUSIANS ARE COMING!

By Andi-Christine Bednarzig

“We love her like a daughter. She is our daughter,” Tracy Yuille said, as she embraced Iryna Burkenia. Iryna, or Ira for short, nodded and hugged her Canadian mother back.

Ira has stayed with the Yuille family at the Thousand Island community of Rockport for 16 summers. She was 10 years old when she first arrived as part of the Children’s Relief from Radiation Program, one of the many initiatives of the Brockville based non-profit charity, Canadian Aid for Chernobyl (CAC).

According to Eric McKenzie, President and Director of Communications for CAC, families have hosted over 750 children since the program’s inception in 1991.

When asked how she felt about coming to Canada for the first time, Ira asserted: “I wasn’t scared. I was very excited!” She explained that other kids had already stayed with families in Europe and returned with wonderful stories.

The radioactive fallout from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in the Ukraine continues to devastate the agricultural communities in the Chauzy region of eastern Belarus. Bringing children to Canada for a few weeks, and providing them with fresh air, and uncontaminated water and food has resulted in improved health and a strengthened immune system.

Tracy and her husband, Pat Yuille, initially heard about CAC through an ad in the local paper.

“We asked for a young girl since we already had two teenaged daughters. We got Ira and it was love at first sight,” Pat smiles. What were Ira’s first impressions of Canada? “Everything was different. Everyone drives everywhere. In Belarus people walk, Ira said.” Pat and Ira laughed as they recalled her bafflement of Canadians’ fondness for driving. After another trip into Gananoque, the little girl cried, “No more machina!”

Ira spoke no English when she arrived. Pat taped handwritten signs on common objects with the aid of an English/Russian dictionary. He wasn’t familiar with the Cyrillic script, but it all worked out. Nevertheless, interpreters were available 24 hours a day - just a phone call away.

Pat will fly to Belarus this Spring as part of a Delegation to help distribute non-perishable food, medical supplies, clothing, footwear, bedding, hygiene products, household items, and bicycles brought over in shipping containers.

The Yuilles recall a previous trip to distribute food boxes. They wanted to go to Belarus in case they ever lost touch with Ira, so they’d know where to find her. The first house on the list for deliveries was Ira’s family. When Pat and Tracy knocked on the door, Ira answered. “The look on her face!” Pat said, “Her brain just couldn’t process that we were there.” The Yuilles spent two weeks discovering their Belarusian’s daughter’s homeland. They were comforted to see where she lived and where a part of her will always be.

This year is different for Ira. She arrived last September to study English as a second language at St. Lawrence College. Ira is considering early childhood education or social work for future study.

In the neighbouring community of Ivy Lea, Francois Lacroix and his wife recalled how they attended a talk given by CAC’s Director of Humanitarian Aid and Orphan Initiatives, Dave Shaw. They hosted two girls, Anna and Yana, in 2009 and 2010.

Lacroix recounted the highlight of the summer; a fun day for all visiting children and their host families. Interpreter, Marina Ladyjenko, had little to do that day, as their grand-niece, Jessie, kept the group entertained with the help of Google Translate and her enthusiasm. The retired couple are no longer hosting children, but are active members of CAC.

“It became our choice charity, because it is managed and operated solely by volunteers. All money and other donations go directly to the children and needy people in Belarus.” Lacroix said.

Gala fundraisers and silent auctions are two events that help fund the many CAC initiatives. Tremendous support also comes from Brockville area dentists, physicians, and opticians for the visiting children. Another initiative, Shoe Boxes for Seniors, provides 700 boxes packed with toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, hand cream, socks, candies, tissues, and small towels.

Before the Delegation arrives in the Spring, Dave Shaw will personally meet the containers to oversee unloading and customs bonding. The distribution of aid is overseen by Shaw. **LH**

Follow the Spring Delegation on CAC’s blog on the CAC website or on Facebook at:

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