

## THE JOY OF THE ASLANOV FAMILIES

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"Oh....My.....GOSH!"

These were the first words spoken by 12-year-old Aslan Aslanov on May 2nd at the Cerebral Palsy KIDS Center in Louisville as he used the "joystick" on a demo electric wheelchair to move himself about. As his Physical Therapist Tony Henderson pointed out to me, this was the first time ever that Aslan--who has Cerebral Palsy and can't walk--could move himself where he wanted to go all by himself. Truly a miraculous day and one I feel honored and privileged God allowed me to witness.

This day with Aslan is but one of many such instances of God's abounding love and grace He has shown with the two Meskhetian Turkish refugee families sponsored by Springdale Presbyterian Church. Since the evening in mid-February when Lee Welsh, KRM Sponsorship Developer, came to one of Springdale's Mission Committee meetings to tell us about a Meskhetian Turkish refugee family needing sponsorship, Springdale has been swept full-force into God's work with not one, but two, refugee families. This journey, which is still unfolding, has been one of mutual admiration, respect and friendship.

When Lee told us about the family of six due to arrive the next week...a mom, dad, 13 year old girl, 10 year old boy and baby twins...the Holy Spirit guided us. And that way was YES to God's Will, and so, the adventure began!

Springdale wasn't new to sponsoring a refugee family; we had settled a three-member Liberian refugee family about three years ago. Still, there were so many answered and unknown questions about the new family and their unique needs. But ultimately, it was God that led the way.

With less than a week's notice, Springdale members sprang into action to get everything ready for the arrival of Khusan and Gulchekhra Aslanov (a) and their children Sevda, Kamal and twins Darya and Deniz. Pastor Whit Malone and Associate Pastor Jean Davidson put out calls for help from the pulpit Sunday morning, and immediately everything began flowing in: identical matching twin cribs from two different families...clothing....household goods...gift certificates...money.....two baby car seats....offers for rides, tutoring, help with medical needs, job offers..the list went on and on. In a whirlwind of activity, Springdale members furnished, cleaned and got ready a two bedroom apartment for the Aslanov family in just a few days.

Everything was done to make the Aslanov's new home as welcoming as possible.

When arrival day came at the Louisville Airport, a contingent of friends from Springdale met the Aslanovs...who were weary from a long, long journey from southern Russia. How tired they must have been yet anticipating a new life in Louisville.

When we took the Aslanov's to their new apartment home, we were met by many extended family members who had prepared a feast and welcoming party. It was also the first time we were introduced to just how hospitable and generous the Meskhetian Turkish people are: we joyfully partook in the welcoming dinner.

From the very first day, the Aslanov family showed their enthusiasm and dedication, taping up English words on the walls. Khusan somehow got himself to the first day of English class at KRM with no assistance from us.

"Gula" was so welcoming and friendly and became an instant friend. Sevda and Kamal were eager to begin school and were so helpful in caring for Darya and Deniz.

The Aslanovs were here just a few weeks when I learned that Khusan's twin brother, Khasan, and his wife, Gulnora, and their three children were also coming to Louisville. I had heard about Aslan and his handicap and how he had no medical treatment or schooling in Russia. I had seen pictures of Aslan and his sister, 13 year old Elmira, and 2 1/2 year old brother, Murat.

And slowly, an idea began to form.

I did the budget numbers for our first family. Was there any way we could "squeeze" the budget and help the second family, perhaps not in full sponsorship but somehow, some way? Dare I ask my Co-Chairman Brenda Harral, Education Chairman Mary Lynne Ziegler, Pastor Whit and Pastor Jean, for us to help another family due to arrive in.....just a few days? What would the Mission Committee say? Would the folks at Springdale think I had finally Lost My Mind? Would my friends change their phone numbers?

Yet I needn't have worried. God called, Springdale answered. Nancy Dutton, former Parish Nurse Minister at Springdale, said yes to helping Aslan with his medical needs. Mary Lynne said yes. Brenda said yes. Pastor Whit and Pastor Jean said yes, as did the Mission Committee and the Session. Not just to partial helping but to full sponsorship. Praise God, what a day!

Church members came up and thrust money into my hands; a newlywed couple hand-delivered generous gift certificates; another member kept putting generous checks into my hand every time I saw her; donations poured into our foyer and office and spilled everywhere. An entire truckload of furniture donated by our families was gathered. Pastor Whit's call to "sister Churches" resulted in even more abundance, with Harvey Browne Memorial Presbyterian Church gathering furniture and huge amounts of household goods.

Not only was there more than enough items to set up Khasan and Gulnora's family, but much left over to help other refugee families that didn't have sponsors.

Again, a second welcoming at the Louisville Airport. Another wonderful feast and welcoming dinner prepared by Gulnora and the other Turkish women to celebrate. We learned that you could tell the extent of the gathering inside a home by the number of shoes left outside at the doorway, and this celebration had many shoes gathered.

For Khasan and Gulnora's family, we were faced with the unique challenge and opportunity to help Aslan, who had received no therapy or treatment for his disabilities.

Aslan wanted to go to school so badly but no help was provided for handicapped children to go to school in Russia. Gulnora and Khasan yearned for adequate medical care for Aslan and had high hopes from the American medical community. So many dreams!

And in the space of just two short months, so many of those dreams have come true. Brenda Harral transformed a wheelchair gathering dust in Springdale's storage closet into Shiny Fred: Aslan's first-ever wheelchair. Nancy Dutton advocates on behalf of Aslan's medical and therapy needs, helping the family navigate the American health care system. Mary Lynne Ziegler advocated for Aslan's special educational needs and played a critical role in helping Aslan school placement. We were able to witness another miracle: the first time Aslan has ever been to school....placed in Ms. Jamie Gallager's ECE class at Westport Traditional Middle School. While all the kids are in school, Springdale member Dayle Darby leads an English class once weekly for Gulnora and Gula, that has also attracted other Turkish family members living at their apartment complex. Many other "Springdalers" have spent hours taking the family members to medical and other needed appointments. Every time I ask a Springdale member for help the answer is always a resounding "YES"!

In so many ways Aslan symbolizes the hopes and dreams of both of the Aslanov families as they continue their journey. For those of us at Springdale, the hundreds of hours of volunteering, advocacy, tutoring, transporting and sharing have translated into a blessing for our Congregation. What are some of the things we have learned from the Meskhetian Turkish people? For me, it has been about hospitality, the love of family and friends, everyone sharing and helping one another, resilience, a sense of humor, the joy of a shared meal and cup of tea.....and how a tasty piece of chocolate can make any day a great day!

Or hear the words of two other Springdale members: first, Bettie Shadburne:

"I volunteered to help one of our refugee families because of my great admiration for their courage in coming to a new world. I cannot even imagine such bravery and determination, and I want to help them in settling here."

And the thoughts of Nancy Dutton:

"I am amazed at the resilience of God's children. They carry community with them and exemplify the meaning of hospitality. All are welcome in their home and treated as honored guest. The children are loved and cared for by all. We wonder if they understand God's grace. Yet they are amazed at the care of people from Springdale and the love and concern they have met in the physicians and therapists for Aslan. In return they will give all they have without being asked."

May all of us working together to help all of our refugee families continue in earnestness, encouraging one another and Praising God for all He continues to do for the strangers in our midst. As we work with our families and enjoy friendship, so too does our Faith grow! As Nancy Dutton puts it so well....we can see the Face of Jesus in so many places as we walk this journey with our refugee families!