BRINGING BRIZZY HOME

JOURNEYING TO A WAR AND BACK FOR A DAUGHTER

СИН/ДОЧКА



BY PHILGRAVES WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTIE GRAVES AND PHILGRAVES

“We should adopt another child.” This is how my wife, Kristie, chose to greet me early one Sunday morning in January of 2021. I was in the shower of our Brunswick home and had music playing, so I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right.

“What?” was my reply. We already had four children, three biological and a beautiful little girl we adopted from Armenia in 2017. Four kids, one of whom has spina bifida and is confined to a wheelchair is hard enough. Surely, she doesn’t want to add another, was my initial thought.

“We should adopt another child,” she repeated, this time a little exasperated. I found out later that she wanted me to tell her no and let that be the end of it. However, I had made a deal with God several years ago, that if he opened a door for me, I would trust him and walk through it.

I said, “OK, what child?” She told me she had been looking at the Facebook page of an organization called Reece’s Rainbow, a nonprofit established in 2006 to advocate for the international adoption of children with special needs—the same site where we found our







first adopted daughter. On the page, an advocate had shared information about a little girl who had a prospective family working to come get her, but had to stop because of family issues.

Once I got out of the shower, Kristie showed me the Facebook post about young Bridget, who had originally been abandoned by American parents who couldn’t have a child naturally so they had hired a company in Ukraine to find a donor egg and surrogate.

Unfortunately, the surrogate delivered early, a boy and a girl, at 25 weeks. The boy died after six days and the surviving girl was thought to be profoundly disabled. Once the American parents learned of the disability, they instructed that no life-saving measures be taken and the girl should be allowed to die peacefully. She didn’t. She fought and survived. She was placed in a hospital, where she lived and was cared for by a special nurse named Marina.

After four years, Bridget was placed in an orphanage and available to be adopted. Because the family that had intended to adopt her was unable to continue, she was once again available and listed on Reece’s Rainbow. Kristie and I decided we would move forward and inquired about her.

Once we heard back, we agreed that if God wanted us to adopt her, he would make it clear to us. First, our family and friends would be supportive. Second, we would not take out any loans to pay for the adoption. We estimated it would be about $36,000 to $40,000. Finally, we didn’t want to have to sell anything to help raise the money.

MEETING BRIZZY

When we talked to our family, we expected them to tell us we were crazy. No one did. When we talked to our friends, we expected them to tell us it was probably a bad idea, as we already had a child with special needs. No one did. In fact, everyone we spoke to about it said it was an amazing idea and wanted to know how they could help us.

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We contacted the adoption service provider that we had used in our first adoption and also began the process of completing a required home study.

We moved forward and announced to our friends, family and Facebook that we were adopting again. The first hurdle was to raise $10,000 to cover our initial fees. I created a Facebook fundraiser and all the money was donated within 10 days.

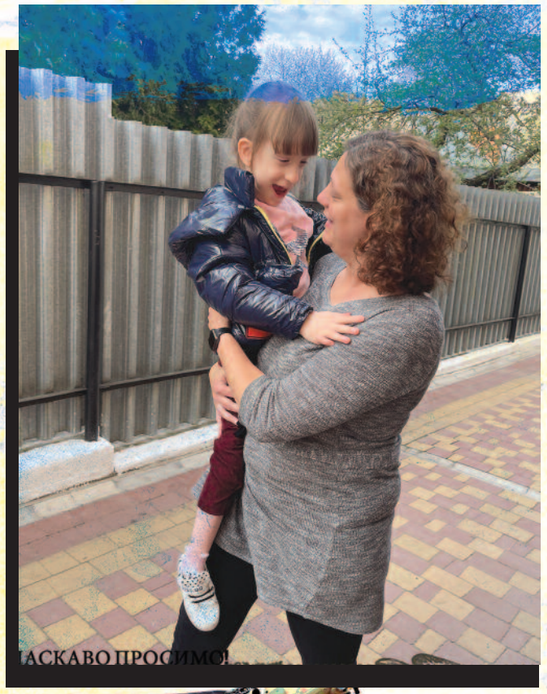
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The home study includes background checks, references, interviews, financial documents and fingerprinting. It might seem invasive, but prospective parents should have to demonstrate that they can support an adopted child, both financially and emotionally. You have to remember that kids who are in orphanages have experienced trauma and will experience more as they transition from the orphanage to your home.

This process takes several months and is typically followed by two trips to the adoptee's country. We were finally able to go meet Bridget in mid-December 2021. We flew from Dulles to Frankfurt to Kyiv and then took another plane to her city in Zaporizhzhia. Once there, we were able to meet with the orphanage director and the doctors to hear about her medical diagnosis. Then we finally met the girl we now call Brizzy and were able to spend a few hours playing with her in a playroom at the orphanage.

We were there a couple of days, spending a total of about six hours with her before we had to take a train to Kyiv for the flight back home. We were so excited and anxious to get back to Ukraine for court and picking her up to bring home. Normally it's about 30 days between trips. While we were there, we discussed the fact that the Russians were on the border threatening to invade. No one in Ukraine seemed to think this would happen and we were told to expect to return in late January or early February.

At home, we anxiously waited and watched the news. We started planning our vacations and other events around the expected pickup trip and the fact that we would have a new child. Early in January we heard there was an issue with her citizenship because her biological parents were American and her surrogate had been Ukrainian. That would take a few weeks to straightened out.



Finally, we were told we had a court date for Feb. 10, but then learned our judge had been hospitalized with COVID and we would have to wait a bit longer. In mid-February we were told we'd have an update on Feb. 25 and to expect to travel in early March.

WAR CONCERNS

The Russians invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. We were devastated and assumed our adoption would be on hold for the foreseeable future because Russia was expected to storm in and take over the country in just a few days. Because Russia had banned Americans from adopting its children in January of 2013, we thought we might never be able to complete the adoption.

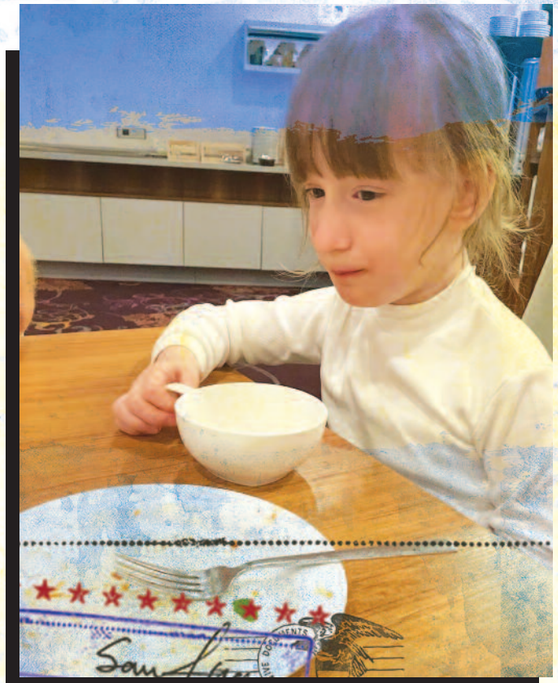
Because of her unique story, Brizzy had been included in a feature about the dark side of international surrogacy by the Australian Broadcasting Company in 2019. That story made many people around the world aware of her plight and there was great interest in her and her future. When we registered to adopt her, we were contacted by a journalist from the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. He asked if he could come talk to us about the war and our adoption. We agreed and he flew from Ukraine to the United States and spent three weeks with us.



The journalist, Timofey, helped us contact the director of the orphanage, the executive director of a nonprofit that funds the orphanage and even the former press secretary for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to see if we could move forward. No one was able to offer us any real help or hope. Ukraine was too busy defending itself to focus on completing adoptions. Timofey wrote his article and went home. We prayed and we waited, and we hoped.

The Ukrainians' resistance to the Russian invaders surprised the world. First Baptist Church in Brunswick, where I serve as senior pastor, held a prayer vigil, while we continued to wait. Finally, in mid-April, we received a message from a nurse who had cared for Brizzy in the hospital and continued to visit her in the orphanage every week. She told us a judge had agreed to hold court and allow us to complete our adoption, but we would have to give them a date when we could be there in person. During the pandemic, people were allowed to have court virtually, but during the war they wanted us in person.

Kristie and I registered on the U.S. State Department website, informing the government we would be traveling to Ukraine. We bought our plane tickets and





began travel on April 26. We flew from Dulles to Munich and then to Warsaw. Timofey met us at the airport in Warsaw and drove us to the border of Poland and Ukraine.

At the border, we weren't allowed to walk into Ukraine, so we ended up hitchhiking and getting a ride from a Red Cross humanitarian aid van. Once in the country, our adoption facilitator picked us up and drove us to Kyiv. As we approached the city, we saw the destruction of roads, bridges, gas stations and factories from when the Russians unsuccessfully tried to capture the capital.

When we got to Kyiv, we had dinner and went to our facilitator's home to freshen up. After about an hour, we headed out to catch a night train to Zaporizhzhia. A woman told our facilitator about missiles striking an apartment building about half a kilometer away. It was scary, but we had a train to catch. We arrived at the station and met up with another facilitator who would take us to court and help us get all our documentation.

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The train ride was uneventful, except when I woke up in the middle of the night. We had stopped and in a mild panic I wondered if the tracks had been destroyed or if Russian troops had stopped the train. I timidly looked out the window, only to discover we had stopped at a station to let passengers off.

MEETING BRIZZY... AGAIN

The next morning, we arrived in Zaporizhzhia and all the men on the train had to stand in line to have our travel documents inspected. Once we cleared the line, we grabbed an Uber and went to a hotel to shower, change clothes and have breakfast.

Finished eating, we headed to the courthouse to wait about an hour for the proceedings to begin. Air raid sirens began wailing. The judge asked if we would like to take shelter in the basement. No one else in the room seemed too concerned so we said we were fine to proceed.



After about a 30-minute hearing, the judge and two jurors agreed we would be great parents to Brizzy and gave us a decree. They also waived the traditional 30-day waiting period. We waited about 30 more minutes and the court documents and adoption decree were given to us and we headed out.

That evening, we went back to the train station and met up with Marina Boyko, the nurse who had taken such good care of Brizzy in the hospital and had visited her in the orphanage. We jumped on another night train and slept while the train returned us to Kyiv.

Once in Kyiv, we met again with the *Der Spiegel* photographer and our facilitator. We signed paperwork and hit the road for Lviv where our new daughter had been evacuated two weeks prior to our trip. On the road, we stopped outside Kyiv and took some photos next to a destroyed Russian tank which had the word "Wolverines" spray painted on it.

Once in Lviv, we went to the relocated orphanage, signed more papers and finally took permanent custody of our new daughter. While we were there, more air raid sirens went off. Again, no one seemed to be worried.

We left the orphanage and headed to a hotel for the night. In the morning we hopped on a bus headed to back to Warsaw, Poland. It took about nine hours total, two of which were crossing the border from Ukraine back into Poland.

Once in Warsaw we went to a hotel for a much-needed good night's sleep. We had been in Ukraine for four days, much of it traveling. In Warsaw we saw a doctor for a physical and blood work and then headed to the U.S. Embassy to begin the process of getting Brizzy a visa.

"Because of the war, we were unable to get our new daughter a Ukrainian passport, crossing the border with just her adoption decree and our passports."

Because of the war, we were unable to get our new daughter a Ukrainian passport, crossing the border with just her adoption decree and our passports. The U.S. Embassy would have to issue an emergency travel document, called a DS-232, to allow us to bring her into the United States.

While waiting for the doctor's report and the visa, we were able to spend a few days sightseeing and adapting to life as a new family.

After 12 long days in a hotel, we were finally able to pick up our paperwork and return home. We left Warsaw on Thursday, May 12, stopped for a few hours in Vienna, Austria, and finally landed in D.C. at three in the afternoon on the same day. Because of the paperwork we had done prior to going to get her, Brizzy was a U.S. citizen as soon as we landed.

We have been home a few weeks now. Brizzy, now 6 years old, is learning English, seeing doctors and adapting to life as a beloved daughter and sister.

This summer she will go on vacation with us to Pigeon Forge and get surgery to correct her club feet. This fall she will start kindergarten at Brunswick Elementary School. We are so grateful to God, our family and our friends for supporting us on this adventure. FM





