

Brooklyn family to adopt four children from Russian orphanages

By Hannah Disch

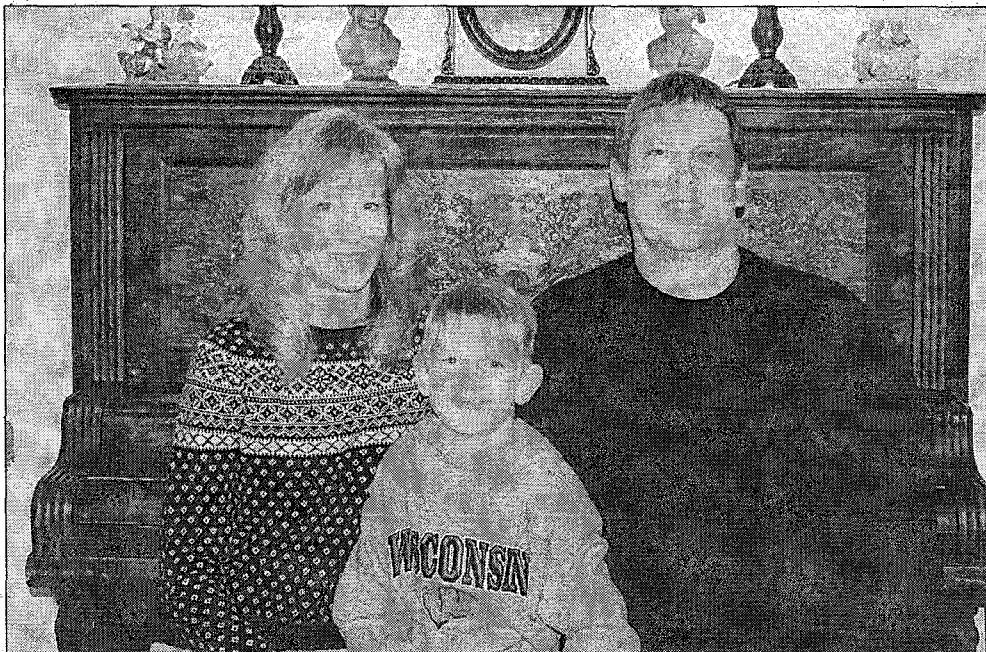
Observer correspondent

Those of us with one or two children often can't imagine having more. But imagine what it would be like to go from having one child to suddenly parenting five. That is exactly what the Klahn family of Brooklyn is about to do, and they couldn't be more excited.

When Camille and Jeff Klahn went to Ukraine six years ago, they were looking to adopt two children. At the time, they were only able to find one child whose medical needs they felt able to meet, and so they brought their son Joshua home to Wisconsin.

Joshua, who is now a healthy nine-year-old, had been crib bound in an orphanage for the first three years of his life. When they brought him home he was unable to crawl, walk, or talk and weighed only 21 pounds. It was at this point, say the Klahns, that the miracles really began.

One of the first doctors that they took Joshua to was a hearing doctor. While there, Joshua charmed both the doctor and his receptionist, who later went home to their families and started filling out paperwork to adopt their own children from Ukraine. And they weren't the only ones.



Camille and Jeff Klahn, along with son Joshua, are about to see their family grow significantly when the Brooklyn family adopts four children through a Russian agency.

'We came to the decision that it wasn't a decision of resources nearly as much as it was a decision of the heart.'

Jeff Klahn

"Because of Joshua's influence and just the sparkle in his eye, there are now at least 13 kids from Ukraine who have permanent homes in the United States," Jeff Klahn said.

Helping other people to adopt their own children felt like a natural way for the Klahns to repay the gift they'd been given in Joshua.

They have also held a couple of clothing drives and have since sent a ton and a half of clothes back to orphanages in Ukraine. Joshua's doctor found his own way to give back by starting an ongoing hearing aid drive which has given the gift of hearing to over 70 children in a Ukrainian orphanage for the deaf.

When the Klahns began to think about adopting siblings for Joshua, they looked first to Ukraine. But conditions there had changed, making it extremely difficult for foreigners, especially Americans, to adopt, so they turned to a Russian adoption agency. They asked the agency to look for two children younger than Joshua — at least one a girl — without any severe and irreversible medical issues.

Camille Klahn says that most children in orphanages have multiple medical problems,

and that they knew they were not going to find the "Gerber baby" in an orphanage, as "even the best orphanages can't do what we can do in a home."

But they did want to find children they felt capable of caring for and who had a chance to really thrive.

After looking for a year without finding any children who met these criteria, the agency found a seven-year-old girl who was suffering from tuberculosis, but was otherwise healthy. The Klahns said they would take her.

They spent three months "looking at her picture every day, falling in love with her, thinking we were going to get her," Camille Klahn recalls. Then they received a call that she had been adopted by a Russian family. Later that same day the adoption agency called to ask if they would consider adopting a group of four siblings, three girls, ages six, three and two, and a boy, age five.

After looking at pictures of the four children, the Klahns received the childrens' medical records which showed only minor health issues. They spent several weeks making their decision.

Money was the biggest hurdle, as interna-

tional adoptions cost around \$20,000 per child.

"Besides just the additional upfront costs, we know the costs when we get them back are going to be much greater too," Jeff Klahn said.

The Klahns did talk to other people who had adopted larger groups with fairly limited resources, including a family they'd seen on Dateline NBC who had adopted a set of twins from Russia only to find out that there were two more sets of twins from the same family in Russian orphanages, whom they then adopted as well.

"We came to the decision," says Jeff Klahn, "that it wasn't a decision of resources nearly as much as it was a decision of the heart. If we made the commitment to get them home and to give them a good life, we'd find a way. It's going to take sacrifices — this house is going to be really, really cozy. But we finally figured out that we had to. They were what we were looking for."

A family trip to Russia to meet the four children (who are currently living in two separate orphanages) only affirmed their decision. Joshua, who is extremely excited to be a big brother, got along great with his future siblings.

"In just a split second we were playing," he says. He has plans to teach the children some soccer and basketball moves and the family routine, although the first thing he'll help them learn is English.

Although the four children currently speak only Russian, Camille Klahn says she expects them to learn English quickly, as Joshua did.

She adds, "Instead of being worried about the communication, the real sadness is how fast they forget their native language. When they get here most kids want to do everything American because they've had difficult experiences and it's easier to forget and move on."

The Klahns will have to make another trip to Russia to adopt the children once all the paperwork is complete and their court date is set.

Both domestic and international adoptions require a lengthy and sometimes invasive legal process that Camille describes as extremely involved but not impossible. The process includes having a social worker conduct a home study, background checks, federal police checks, being fingerprinted by the FBI, a psychological exam, and "mountains" of paperwork.

The finances, she says, are really the scary part.

"But what do people do that have triplets or quadruplets or more? You make it work somehow. We didn't dive in with our eyes closed," she said. "We sat down and figured it out. The kids would probably have been split up if we didn't take them, and I couldn't imagine that for them... When it came right down to it we felt like these children were supposed to be our children."

The Klahns know there will be difficult moments and trying times ahead when they wonder what they've gotten themselves into, but they feel blessed to have overwhelming support from family, friends and the community, and are eagerly anticipating the day they can bring their four new children home.

They are surprised and humbled by everything their friends have done to help them achieve this dream, and truly appreciate all the help that they've been given.

For further information on the Klahns' story, how you can help, or adoption in general, visit www.helpinghands4orphans.googlepages.com/home.