

Maryland couple adopts Ukrainian daughter amid war

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BRUNSWICK, Md. (BP)—Looking back on his family’s journey to adopt their 6-year-old special-needs daughter Bridget (“Brizzy”) from Ukraine last spring, Pastor Phil Graves described the journey as “improbable.”

Feb. 24 marked the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but the journey for the Graves family to adopt Brizzy goes back even farther.

‘Decided to move forward’

Graves, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Brunswick, Md., said he and his wife Kristie thought their family was complete after finalizing the adoption for their daughter Elliana—who suffers from spina bifida and hydrocephalus—from Armenia in 2017.

“At the beginning of our relationship, we talked about wanting to adopt. And in 2015, my wife came to me and said, ‘If we were going to adopt, we should do it before we get too old,’” Graves said. “We had both agreed that four was enough, and we were done.

“My wife later told me one day, ‘I think God wants us to adopt another kid.’ She wanted me to tell her no and be done with it. But I didn’t, because I made a deal with God that any time he opens the door, I’ll walk through it.

“We were like, ‘If one of our friends tells us we’re crazy or our family tells us it’s crazy then it is crazy.’ But nobody said it was crazy. So, we decided to move forward.”

Complicated birth

Around this time, Bridget, who was born in February 2016, was a preschooler, staying in a children's home in Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine, under the close watch of a nurse who had cared for her since birth.

Brizzy's would-be parents—the couple who commissioned her birth—are American, but she was born via a surrogate mother in Ukraine at 25 weeks.

Her premature birth resulted in severe developmental challenges, including cerebral palsy. Her twin died a few days after their birth.

Brizzy was the subject of much international media coverage related to the ethics of surrogacy programs in Ukraine. According to a report from [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), her American parents sent a letter to the children's home requesting she be taken off life support when she was a few months old and severely ill.

The child survived, and her parents sent a second letter consenting to her placement for adoption.

The Graveses came across her story via an adoption advocacy organization's Facebook page.

Challenging timing

After completing the beginning steps of the adoption process with the agency and with Ukraine, Phil and Kristie Graves made plans to come see Brizzy in December 2021.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine were already high.

“The Russians were performing war exercises on the border, but they had not invaded,” Graves said. “Everyone was saying, ‘Oh, they will never

invade.’”

After visiting, the Graveses were told to expect the process to take a few weeks before they would return to Ukraine in order to finalize the adoption.

Issues with Brizzy’s Ukrainian citizenship and a judge’s case of COVID-19 delayed their date until Feb. 25, but the Russian invasion the day before changed all of that.

“Our first response was shock, then worry, because the assumption was that the Russians were just going to come in and take over in a few days,” Graves said.

“We were worried they would come in and say ‘no adoptions,’ and we would be forever without her. I was basically told everything has been suspended until the war is over. Then we just committed it to prayer and asked our church and everyone we knew to pray.”

The nurse who had been caring for Bridget had met the Graveses during their visit two months prior. She was determined to see the child adopted and consistently called the court to ask about the case.

Perilous journey to Ukraine

The Graves family received a call from the nurse in April explaining the judge was willing to finalize the adoption if they could both appear in court in person.

There was no hesitation from the couple, who flew from Dulles Airport to Germany and then into Warsaw, Poland. They were met in Poland by a German reporter who had been in contact with them regarding writing a story about the adoption.

The reporter took them from the airport to the Ukrainian border, which

they crossed by riding in a Red Cross vehicle delivering supplies. Once across the border, the couple's adoption facilitator was waiting for them.

They took a night train ride to get to Zaporizhzhia. Russian missiles had recently hit a building half a kilometer away from the train location.

After arriving in Zaporizhzhia in the morning, the couple went to court to finalize the adoption. The judge waived the normal 30-day waiting period.

'Running on adrenaline and prayer'

The Graveses went to pick up Brizzy from her orphanage and then took a long bus ride back to Warsaw. All the paperwork Graves had for Brizzy was her birth certificate and adoption paperwork, but no passport.

Officials at the Polish border let them across with that paperwork, and then the American Embassy in Warsaw granted an emergency travel document called a DS-232 to get her into the United States without a passport.

Despite all the difficult circumstances, the Graveses simply rested in what God had called them to do.

"Going through an adoption, when you see that child, there is a connection and you know that's your child," Graves said. "Especially after we'd met her, she was our child. You could imagine your child being caught in Ukraine in the war, you would do what you had to get your child.

"It was also obedience to God. ... I don't think we were ever really scared while we were there. We were running on adrenaline and prayer. God just kept propelling us forward.

"He had made it blatantly clear that he wanted us to adopt her. We knew that if God was calling us to adopt her that God would keep us safe to go get here. It's not easy, but when God calls you to something, he equips you

to do it.”

‘Like warm butter on hot bread’

Brizzy is now in kindergarten and beginning to pick up English well. She had surgery to repair clubbed feet and can now walk with assistance from a walker.

“She has folded into our family like warm butter on hot bread,” Graves said.

The Graveses oldest biological daughter is now a freshman in college, pursuing occupational therapy after being inspired by her adopted sisters.

Graves said there have been many spiritual lessons learned from the journey.

“We’ve learned to sacrifice our own wants and desires for the greater good, and I think our marriage is richer and deeper because of adoption,” he said.