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## Children, prospective parents caught in limbo of US-Russia diplomatic tiff



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Wendy Paladini of New Jersey in 2008 announces to a little girl in a Russian orphanage, 'I am your mama.' Instantly her new daughter reaches out and touches Paladini's hand. The adoptive mother said the gesture was the best moment of her life. Today Paladini is co-president of the Whippany-based Concerned Persons for Adoption. She said she feels the pain of adoptive parents left in limbo by the recent action banning Americans from adopting Russian children. / Photo courtesy of Paladini family

When President Vladimir Putin on Dec. 28 signed a law banning Americans from adopting Russian orphans as of Jan. 1, the children took center stage in a diplomatic tiff about a Russian whistle-blower that had nothing to do with them.

American adoption advocates cried foul and Russian protesters cried out that the orphans had become political pawns.

Wendy Paladini just cried.

She understands what both the parents and children are going through and hopes adoptive parents left in limbo because of the measure won't lose heart.

Today Paladini is the happy mother of a Russian-born daughter and co-president of the Whippany-based Concerned Persons for Adoption, a 40-year-old pre- and post-adoption parent, advocacy, and education support group.

But in July 2008, when she and her husband, Gianluca, took their 28-month-old daughter home from one of Russia's 2,000 orphanages, the climate between the two countries also was icy.

Just a week earlier Russian/American relations had been strained when Miles Harrison, an adoptive American father, left his Russian-born son strapped into his car for nine hours. The boy died. Harrison was acquitted of manslaughter the following year.

"Our agency told us it didn't know if our adoption would go through," Paladini recalled. "That was a hard trip to take because we were on the plane not knowing what would happen when we got there. It was devastating because at that point you're already bonded with your child."

As part of the Russian adoption process, she explained, a couple is encouraged to leave with their child a photo album filled with pictures of themselves as well as the child's bedroom, home, and grandparents.

"The sad part about the Russian adoptions under way is that those children understand what's going on," Paladini said. "They understand that Momma and Daddy are coming to get them, and that's the hardest part for me to swallow."

"When my husband and I brought our daughter home from the baby house, she had no problems leaving that place and going with us," Paladini added. "Even at 2 years old, she completely understood who we were and where she was going."

According to U.S. State Department estimates, at the time the ban was instituted 500 to 1,000 American families were in various stages of the Russian adoption process.

The Russian Children's Welfare Society reports there are more than 700,000 orphans living in Russia and that their numbers increase at the rate of 113,000 annually.

Dana Fried of Morristown, the other co-president of Concerned Persons for Adoption, adopted a son in 1999 from Guatemala, which closed to international adoption Jan. 1, 2008 to make its system compliant with the provisions of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, a treaty created to end adoption trafficking.

"When you give birth to a biological child, you can't control what's going to happen," Fried said. "Physical things could happen—birth defects and other situations. Sometimes you can't control

an adoption, either.”

At the time Guatemala closed, no other country provided as many adoptive children for American parents. In recent years, Cambodia and Kazakhstan suspended international adoption, too.

In fiscal year 2011 Russia was third largest, behind China and Ethiopia, in the number of children adopted in the U.S.

Both Fried and Paladini agree that the world of international adoption can be fickle. Countries open their doors and they close them. Requirements change. Plans are disrupted. Lives are put on hold.

In the wake of Putin signing the Russian ban, adoption agencies also are pausing. According to media reports, some started laying off staff.

In New Jersey Lorraine Kolankowski is executive director of the Teaneck-based Homestudies and Adoption Placement Services, which handles international programs that include Bulgaria and China as well as Russia.

“We will maintain ongoing communication with our waiting families during this present difficult situation,” Kolankowski said.

All the uncertainty is part of the reality of international adoption, according to Paladini.

“Adopting from another country really is a leap of faith and you need to be prepared for almost anything,” she said. “People in the process now just have to keep an open mind, stay informed, and have faith that in the end everything will work out. All hope is not lost.”

That seemed to be the case Thursday when Putin said the Russian adoption ban would not take effect until January 2014, although what the announcement clearly and practically means to adoptions in progress is reportedly unclear to many.

Putin referenced a bilateral U.S.-Russian adoption agreement safeguarding both children and parents that was signed two months ago and that, by its own terms, remains in effect until next January.

Fried and Paladini said Concerned Persons for Adoption exists for adoptive parents in these circumstances, and all circumstances, as a vehicle of education and support—two necessities on any adoption journey.

CPFA, an all-volunteer nonprofit organization, runs an annual adoption conference that draws 350 to 400 potential adoptive parents, professionals, and adult adoptees. At such gatherings

adoptive parents learn the latest on all facets of adoption and support each other. The next conference is Sunday, Jan. 13. (See accompanying box.)

If there is a silver lining to the Russian adoption ban, Paladini said, it may be that Russians will be forced to make improvements within their own system.

“That’s the way I try to look at it,” she said. “From the very beginning Putin has been trying to get Russians to adopt their own. He’s been encouraging unwed mothers to keep their children and Russian citizens to adopt within their own country.”

On a similar note, Fried said that, as fewer Americans pursue intercountry adoptions, the trend is moving slightly toward domestic adoptions.

In fiscal year 2006 Americans adopted 20,680 children from many countries, a number that dipped to 9,319 in fiscal year 2011, according to the U.S. Department of State.

In the same time period the number of American children adopted from foster care rose from 51,000 to 57,000 in 2009 and then back down to 51,000 in 2011, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“In the United States there are more than 400,000 foster children waiting for forever homes, but it’s difficult to find an infant,” Fried explained. “Older children adoption is becoming more popular. If you want a child, you can get a child.”

The bottom line, she said, is that children need families as much as families need children.

New Jersey’s 31st Annual Let’s Talk Adoption Conference

8 a.m.-4 p.m. Jan. 13

Rutgers University-Busch Campus Center, 604 Bartholomew Road, Piscataway

Walk-ins welcome

Admission: \$50

Coordinator: Concerned Persons for Adoption

Cosponsors: Institute for Families at Rutgers School of Social Work; The New Jersey Interagency Adoption Council

Information: [www.cpfanj.org](http://www.cpfanj.org)



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