



# FALLING INTO PLACE

East Principal Rob Burnside and his family recall their unique adoption story as they adopted their daughter, Zhana, from Russia in 2012 and their son, Ruslan, from Ukraine in 2015.

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**W**hat started as a random email appearing in an inbox ended with two international adoptions: one from Russia and the other from Ukraine. For East principal Rob Burnside and his wife Angel, random occurrences seemed to just keep falling into place to bring them their children.

It was a day like any other when Angel opened her email inbox in February 2011 to find an email from a random sender. Unsure of why she was receiving it, she opened the message to see what it contained: information on international adoption. Not knowing why or how she was sent the email, Angel deleted it from her inbox. A few weeks later, another appeared. In it were photos of children up for adoption, one of which being her soon-to-be

adopted daughter Zhana from Russia.

“I just started clicking through and looking at the kids. And when I got to [Zhana’s] photo, I gasped. My boys were playing a video game across the floor. And they said, ‘What is it?’” Angel says. “There was just something about when she popped up on the screen that made me go, ‘oh my goodness, that child.’”

What the sender of the email didn’t know was that Angel and Rob had just started discussing the idea of adoption about a month prior after a sermon series at church. Their pastor urged them to tackle something they have been wanting to do, but haven’t because it is “just too big.” Post-it notes were passed around at the service for people to write down what they wanted to tackle. Angel had written

one word: adoption.

“We hadn’t told anyone. [My husband and I had] only talked about it between ourselves. We hadn’t told anyone at church. We hadn’t mentioned it to a family member, nothing. So I thought, maybe this [email] is a sign,” Angel says. “My husband and I talked about it and decided to just take the first step. And if that looks doable, then we’ll just keep going until a door gets slammed in our face and we find it’s not the right thing. But that never happened. Things kept falling into place.”

While Angel had been passionate about adoption for some time, Rob didn’t feel the initial pull to adopt but wanted to support his wife in her passions.

“I remember telling her she could start

(left) Rob and Angel Burnside with Zhana in her orphanage in Russia at the end of 2011.

(right) Rob and Angel Burnside outside of the court room in Ukraine with Ruslan after his was adoption finalized in March 2015.

doing her research on fundraising, grants, and things of that nature. I wasn’t going to stand in her way, but I didn’t want her to get her hopes up to be able to bring this girl home. I told her that even by the time we raise the money, she might be gone by the time we get there,” Rob says. “I came home from work that day and there’s a full-page 8.5” by 11” picture of this girl printed out and stuck to my refrigerator.”

**H**owever, his mindset suddenly changed one day after going on his usual run. As he went to make a right turn near the Lebanon Home Depot store, a song started playing in his earphones and tears started to well in his eyes.

“Something about the words of the song just hit me. If this [child] were [my biological kids,] Braden, Isaac, Zane, or Marah who were stuck overseas and alone, I would not stop at anything to get them home,” Rob says. “By the time I got home, I was bawling. From that point on, my mindset had changed, and [the adoption] became very important to me.”

Soon after, the pair emailed the adoption agency to get a starter packet to look over. They put down the first payment to get the ball rolling and waited for the packet to arrive in their mailbox. As Angel and Rob packed up preparing for their annual getaway trip, Angel checked the mailbox one last time to see if it had come. There it was sitting in their mailbox just in time before they left, so she grabbed it and decided to take it with them to read over while they had time on vacation.

Upon their arrival in the small town of Leavenworth, Indiana, Rob and Angel went to grab sandwiches from the town’s only General Store for dinner. As Angel went to check out at the register, she noticed a small bookshelf behind the counter. In particular, she noticed a book entitled “Adopted for Life.” So, she asked

the cashier if she could take a look at it.

“He put it down and it was about a guy adopting kids. So I said ‘I want to get this book too,’” Angel says. “The guy behind the register picked it up and he hesitated for a couple of seconds. He looked at me and he said ‘today this book is free, I just don’t feel like I need to charge you for this.’ I didn’t tell him why we were buying it or anything.”

Angel took the book back to the Bed and Breakfast where they were staying to begin reading. The book was about a man who adopted two boys from Russia. The Burnside took this as another sign. They completed the packet and began working towards a home study in hopes to bring Zhana home.

At the time of her adoption, Zhana was approximated to be 8-years-old. Due to her being found wandering a village by herself when she was 3 or 4 years old, there are no previous records of her birth or information.

Zhana doesn’t remember much from her time in Russia, but she can recall the conditions being poor.

“I remember there not being much food, and I would run away a lot,” Zhana says. “I was scared a lot and lonely and cold.”

Rob distinctly remembers meeting Zhana in Russia for the first time in November 2011, right after her approximate birthday in September.

“[Zhana] came in, and they said ‘tell them how old you are’ and she said she seven. The people from the orphanage had to correct her and say ‘no, she’s eight,’” Rob says. “That hit me like a ton of bricks to know she just had a birthday. Every kid should be able to celebrate their birthday. That was really hard for me.”

On Jan. 1, 2012, Zhana came home as one of the last few kids to be adopted out of Russia before Russian President Vladimir Putin enacted a law banning citizens of the United States from adopting children from Russia that went into place on Jan. 1, 2013.

“Only about 63 kids got out of Russia after [Zhana] did because they closed [adoption] down the next year, which was part of some of the steps that led to the tensions that we’re experiencing today,” Rob says.

Zhana didn’t learn about the law until several years after her adoption, but she feels lucky to have been able to be adopted out of Russia when she did.

“[My adoption] seemed almost like a God thing,” Zhana says. “It makes me kind of sad too—to know that some of the friends I might have made might be on the streets or something. I definitely feel blessed.”

Even with the excitement of having Zhana home, the transition was far from easy.

“I had to tell all my kids that she doesn’t understand right from wrong right now and she’s not going to understand you telling her to stop,” Angel says. “She grew up in an orphanage, so her mentality is not ‘I need to be respectful and listen to my brothers and sisters.’ It’s going to be ‘I’m going to do whatever I want to get what I want.’”

Isaac Burnside, the second oldest of the biological children, recalls Zhana’s initial arrival to their home being a difficult adaptation.

“When she first got here, that’s when you really noticed the cultural differences with her because she would just butt heads with anything you had to say,” Isaac says. “Even if it was common sense like telling her not to do something, she was still going to do the opposite thing you just told her.”

Zhana remembers feeling overwhelmed by her new and vastly different environment.

“I went from having nothing to having everything,” Zhana says. “I remember stealing everything and just trying to take in as much as I could. I didn’t know I was gonna be there for a long time.”

**T**he other main hurdle to tackle was the language barrier. Upon her adoption, Zhana only knew Russian and no English. Two days after arriving home, Zhana started going with Angel to work at a preschool. There, she started gaining more exposure to English. Within the first few months, Angel could see that Zhana was starting to understand simple English instructions, so she purchased English workbooks to work through twice a week after her afternoon classes.

Another tactic they found successful was

### January 2011

Following a sermon series by her pastor, Angel Burnside decides she’ll pray about adoption.

### April 2011

Angel and Rob Burnside begin the process of adoption with fundraising & doing paperwork.

### January 1, 2013

Russian President Valadimir Putin bans citizens of the United States from adopting Russian children.

### February 2013

The Burnside decide not to host a new child at the time due to expenses.

### June 29, 2013

The Burnside agree to host Ruslan from Ukraine for seven weeks of the summer.

### March 2015

Ruslan is adopted and becomes a member of the Burnside family at 16-years-old.

## Zhana’s Adoption Story - Russia

### February 2011

Angel received an email by mistake including a photo of Zhana who Angel felt immediately drawn to.

### January 1, 2012

Zhana is adopted and comes home at approximately eight-years-old.

## Ruslan’s Adoption Story - Ukraine

### May 2013

The Burnside hear of Ruslan, whose fees have been covered, but his family can no longer host him.

### December 2013

Ruslan comes back to America for four weeks and tells the Burnside that he wants them to adopt him.

reading books together every night.

“I read that the number one thing you can do is read them books, so every night I would make her sit with me and her other two siblings and read books and point to the pictures as I’m reading them,” Angel says. “When I took her back after two years to have her evaluated again at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital to see where she was progress-wise, the psychologist was like ‘what did you do?’ She made tremendous strides. That was the key to her opening up.”

Zhana believes that is part of where her love for reading began.

“I definitely think that my mom reading to me contributed to my love of reading today,” Zhana says. “I remember hating to read and I would get pulled out of class to get extra help and we would read and we would do math, all the things I struggled with. I don’t know what happened, but the next day I just liked to read. My mom definitely contributed to that.”

Less than a year after Zhana’s adoption, Angel was approached by Guglielmo’s Hope, a non-profit organization that works to aid children living in orphanages by connecting them with host families in America. She was asked if her family would be interested in hosting a child in their home. Having just completed Zhana’s adoption and still struggling to help her adapt, the Burnside’s ultimately decided to pass on the hosting opportunity.

“We just finished the adoption. Financially, we were strapped,” Rob says. “There was no way we could fundraise and go through that again to host. We were not sure our family was at a place we could do it, and we definitely couldn’t afford it.”

However, a few weeks later, Angel received another phone call from Guglielmo’s Hope in May 2013. There was a 14-year-old boy from Ukraine named Ruslan preparing to be hosted in America, but the family intending to host him had to back out at the last minute due to a terminal illness in the family. The fees had already been covered, and since the Burnside’s had teen boys, they were asked if they would be

interested. With the fees being covered and the boy flying in June just before their home study was set to expire, the Burnside’s agreed to host Ruslan for seven weeks of the summer.

Again, the Burnside’s found odd coincidences lining up to host Ruslan just as it had in the adoption process with Zhana.

Ruslan’s cohort would be flying into Chicago on June 29, 2013. Each year as a tradition, the Burnside’s would plan the same trip each year. Coincidentally, in March 2013, the family decided to go somewhere more

**“I could not be more proud to call Ruslan and Zhana my brother and sister. They’ve impacted my life and really changed my perspective on things. I could not tell you where I would be as a human being or the mindset I would have if we hadn’t adopted them.” -Zane Burnside**

affordable given just having gone through the adoption of Zhana. They landed on Chicago.

“We started shopping Groupons, and she came across tickets to the Navy Pier and they were buy one get one free,” Rob says. “[My wife] bought four passes because there were seven of us and when we got to the Navy Pier, we were going to take our seven tickets and give the eighth ticket away. [Ruslan] was that eighth person.”

Additionally, Angel’s aunt had downsized apartments that same March. She asked the Burnside’s if they would like to have a twin bed and dresser. While they didn’t need it at the time, they said yes and kept them in their basement. Little did they know, they would have the perfect use for them mere months later.

However, hosting another child in their home also required some sacrifices. Braden, the oldest of the Burnside’s biological children, had just gotten his own room for the first time. Hosting Ruslan would require him to share. Angel considered this when deciding whether or not to host and asked him his thoughts.

“I knew [Braden] was going to have to give up his own room. He was helping me with laundry and I told him I needed to talk to him about something and that I wanted him to tell me the truth, because it matters to me about making this decision. I said, ‘you would have to give up half of your room and this would affect

how much money we can spend on doing fun things and change your life,” Angel says. “As soon as I stopped talking, there was no pause. He just continued to fold the laundry and said ‘why would I care if we were giving a boy a home that doesn’t have a family?’”

Zane Burnside, the second to youngest of the biological children, recalls one of his favorite memories of Ruslan the first night of them hosting him.

“The first night we had him, I remember we were having spaghetti and meatballs,” Zane

says. “He sat down, looked at everything, and then I guess he decided he didn’t want any of it. So, he got up and walked to the freezer and got vanilla ice cream and that’s what he ate for dinner the first night was here.”

One rule of hosting is to not bring up adoption during their visit. As Ruslan’s stay with the Burnside’s over the summer was coming to an end, Angel and Rob instead asked him if he would ever want to live in America when he grew up. At that time, he was still unsure. With friends still back in Ukraine, he wasn’t sure if he was ready to leave them.

“The best part [about my orphanage in Ukraine] was that I had a lot of friends,” Ruslan says. “It was a really hard decision for me to leave all of them.”

While Ruslan didn’t know if he wanted to live in America quite yet, the Burnside’s asked if he would want to come back for Christmas. Ruslan said yes and flew back to America in December 2013, staying until early January 2014.

“In the beginning, like the first week, I think [Ruslan] knew the question [of adoption] was coming. He was real tense and grumpy,” Angel says. “He wasn’t the kid that we sent back in August.”

Ruslan still spoke primarily Russian, so understanding why he was upset was difficult for Angel.

“I took him to a little Russian market and I asked an older woman working there if she could see if [Ruslan] would talk to her about why he was being so grumpy. She talked to him for five minutes as they chatted back and forth,” Angel says. “[The woman] said, ‘he’s upset because he knows he has to make a choice

on this trip and he loves you and he loves his friends.’ So I asked her to tell him that he doesn’t need to decide right now. [After that,] he really loosened up again. He just needed to know that he wasn’t going to be pressured.”

From that point forward, the Burnside family enjoyed their time together through the holiday season free of any pressures of adoption. However, one Sunday after church, the family was sitting at Culver’s when Angel recalled her boys running up to tell her that Ruslan was staying in “America forever.” Angel leaned back to look towards the kids’ table as Ruslan was looking back at her.

“We got home and I just wanted to clarify the news and make sure there was no misunderstanding, so I used Google Translate,” Angel says. “I was asking him [if this meant he wanted us to adopt him] several different ways and typing the sentence different ways just to make sure it was translating it correctly. By like the third time, I could tell he understood and he said, ‘yes.’”

Isaac remembers that moment clearly and was excited to have him as part of the family.

“I’d already met [Ruslan] before and kind of experienced what it would be like to have him as my brother,” Isaac says. “So, when he decided he wanted to join us, I was ecstatic. I knew we were gonna change his life for the better, and I was very happy to be a part of that.”

Ruslan recalls that decision as the best one he has ever made.

“I am really happy that I said yes to my family,” Ruslan says. “They are the best thing that ever happened to me, and I will always be thankful for what they did for me.”

Ruslan was set to be adopted and brought home around August 2014, however due to conflicts taking place between Russia and Ukraine at the time in Eastern Ukraine where Ruslan’s orphanage was located, the date got pushed to March 2015 when he was 16-years-old.

Unfortunately, this was not the only time Ruslan has been affected by the conflicts. More recently, on Feb. 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. With Ruslan’s town being located about 30 miles from the Russian border, the news brought the Burnside’s “absolute heartbreak.”

“[I felt] absolute heartbreak and we continue to feel that. We’ve been experiencing it from the beginning,” Rob says. “Knowing that Ruslan’s childhood town has been displaced and had to evacuate, knowing that my son’s orphanage has actually been destroyed and the town where he grew up has been destroyed in this war, things like that really hit us hard.”

The week of the invasion, Rob and Angel went up to Columbus, where Ruslan now lives, to see how he was doing.

“Knowing Ruslan’s history, we went up the week that Russia formally invaded to have dinner,” Rob says. “We were more letting him



The Burnside’s recently celebrating Angel’s birthday. Left to Right: Zhana, Zane, Ruslan, Marah, Angel, Braden, Isaac, and Rob.

talk if he wanted to, rather than asking him about things because he’s very guarded on a lot of stuff.”

Ruslan’s initial thought upon hearing of Russia’s invasion was of his friends.

“I do not remember the exact moment, but I remember I was told that we were under attack by Russia and I felt horrible and scared for my friends,” Ruslan says.

Through Ruslan’s friends and the friends that Rob and Angel made while visiting Ukraine during Ruslan’s adoption, the Burnside’s were hearing first-hand accounts of the tragedy. Some, like Ruslan’s close friend, Sasha, have even been drafted to fight in the war.

“I’ve been very worried about close friends, particularly [Sasha] who was hosted not far from us in Lebanon, [the second time we hosted Ruslan]. He was reasonably one of Ruslan’s best friends and we had Sasha over a couple of times, so I got to know him,” Angel says. “He’s a sweet, tender soul and when I found out that he got drafted, I thought, this kid is not a fighter. He is not built for it, he is as gentle as can be. At least once a week I get on Facebook to see if the kids have posted anything recently and some of them have not for a while, like a couple months. That’s always on my mind.”

Still having connections and relationships in Ukraine is one way in which Ruslan and Zhana’s adaptation to living in America differed.

“Ruslan had to work through the sadness [of leaving], but that also meant that there was a part of him that was much healthier than Zhana—because he understood and had close relationships. He knew all about loving family and caring for friends and how precious it is because he had it once and he lost it,” Angel says. “Zhana didn’t have any memory of ever having that. We don’t know how she was cared for or if she was cared for, so it took a long time to teach her how you love family, and how family treats each other.”

For Zhana, these hardships she had to overcome bear a sense of pride.

“I want to make sure people know how hard it was to get here,” Zhana says. “The fact that I was adopted and was once in poverty and now I’m just like [everyone else]; I feel like I have an advantage of surviving something.”

The road to adapting to a new environment wasn’t an easy one for either adoption, but for Angel, it matters more what it taught them.

“It’s not easy. Financially it was hard, emotionally it was hard. But there’s things that we learned and that grew us that never would have happened. Our kids learned that there’s other things that are more important about saving your money. It’s not all about the big house or the big car. There’s more impactful things out there that you need to be worried about,” Angel says. “I feel like there’s a certain part of their character and a certain type of compassion developed through that, that would never happen any other way. Their worldview is much broader than most people their age.”

Isaac says that adoption is something he wants to carry through into his future family as well.

“[Adoption is] actually something I’m really passionate about doing,” Isaac says. “The process of changing somebody’s life in the way that my parents did is amazing, and I want to pass that on to somebody else in the future.”

Zane Burnside, the second to youngest of the biological children, also sees himself adopting in the future.

“I would absolutely adopt. It is not an easy process, but [adoption] definitely builds a family bond,” Zane says. “I could not be more proud to call Ruslan and Zhana my brother and sister. They’ve impacted my life and really changed my perspective on things. I could not tell you where I would be as a human being or the mindset I would have if we hadn’t adopt them.” •



Ruslan arriving home from Ukraine after his adoption was finalized.