



Saved

Nikolas' Story

By Michael Monroe

“Why do you want to adopt?” I asked Joanie and Don innocently enough. It’s a question we ask virtually everyone at some point as they open up to us about wanting to pursue adoption. She replied, “Because there are so many kids out there who need a home and a family. I think we can save one.” Her response struck a chord in me.

An Incomplete Motivation

If we’re honest what Joanie expressed has probably occurred to each of us in some way or another. As we listen to the heartbreaking stories of orphans and waiting children or see firsthand the realities of hopelessness and despair in orphanages, this simple, yet deeply compassionate notion of rescuing a child with a difficult past and an uncertain future likely floods our hearts and minds. And yet, this heartfelt sentiment is at best an incomplete motivation for deciding to travel the adoption journey.

Joanie and Don discovered this as their adoption unfolded. Joanie worked for a medical organization in Dallas, Texas, that specialized in helping children with severe facial and cranial deformities. Not long after they began considering adoption, Joanie met a woman who was seeking help for a little boy in an orphanage half a world away. As she gazed into the face of that little boy in the picture, her eyes did not fix upon the severe double cleft palate and lip that prominently marked his smile. Instead, she saw what — and more precisely who — she had been called to, and shortly thereafter she and Don began the process to adopt little Nikolos.

Only a few months later Joanie was on her way to Russia to meet her son for the first time. Shortly after she returned with Don to finalize the adoption and bring Nikolos home, but even before they had made it home they discovered that Nikolos’ condition and his needs went far beyond what was visible. On their return in the London airport Nikolos had a seizure and had to be hospitalized. Days later they made it home, but Nikolos’ health problems persisted in addition to the prospect of the many surgeries that were in store to repair his face.

Our Calling Re-Defined

It had become clear to Joanie and Don that the happy ending they had dreamed of would only come after a long and likely difficult road. Yet Joanie and Don, together with their friends and family, were beginning to learn what it meant to fully embrace this little boy as their own. They discovered and had come to accept that “saving” Nikolos would require them to go far beyond merely rescuing him from his previous situation and circumstances — it meant they had to be willing to enter into his world and provide him everything he needed to heal and become whole.

Joanie and Don’s desire to “save” Nikolos had not changed — but they now understood more fully what that meant and what it would require. They did not see themselves as saints nor had they given into the temptation of the “savior mentality” that subtly communicates “we have saved you from a horrible life and now you should be grateful.” Instead, they realized that adoption had allowed them to be a blessing and to be blessed, both in equal parts.

Like Joanie and Don, many adoptive parents have discovered that “saving” a child makes for a far better reality than a motivation. To arrive at this reality we, as parents, must be willing to give our children what they need, not just what we have. With an undying commitment to give away our unconditional love as the primary motivation at each step of the journey, we must move away from the sentiment of saving a child “from” something to the reality of saving them “to” something. As such, our focus should be on providing them not only with an abundance of things, experiences and opportunities, but also with an overflowing abundance of care, love, time and patience. We must commit to help them heal and grow in order to allow them to become whole.

This is what Joanie and Don ultimately realized Nikolos needed most, and they understood that this is the only way in which it could ever be said that they “saved” him — if that was even the right word for it. For them, he was simply their son and this is what loving and committed parents do.

Even as their days were filled with countless doctor visits and multiple surgeries, Nikolos grew in every way as his family showered him with love and cared for him through the joyous times as well as the challenging adjustments. The transformation most visible in his face was actually taking place throughout his entire life as he began to blossom and develop, experiencing so many firsts.

Tragically, Nikolos’ story ended far too soon. On the Saturday after his first Halloween in America little Nikolos died unexpectedly at home from what was later determined to

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be a rare viral infection in his heart. Yet, he had already experienced more love, care and compassion than many people know in a lifetime. Nikolas was part of a family, and in the end Nikolas had indeed been “saved” — not because Joanie and Don set out to rescue him out of a life in an orphanage, but because they committed to love and care for him as their son each and every day they were given.

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On Nov. 8, 2008, friends and family gathered to celebrate Nikolas' life. Below is an excerpt of what I shared at his memorial service:

“I remember vividly the excitement of the family and friends that had gathered at the airport to celebrate Nikolas' homecoming. Less than a year after his homecoming we gather here today to celebrate Nikolas' life in the wake of his home-going. Like you, I much prefer the celebration of Nikolas' homecoming, but we have all been blessed by the gift of Nikolas and even through our pain and tears we celebrate Nikolas' all too short time here on earth and the love story that God has written with his life . . .

Even as we mourn, however, we cannot but celebrate Nikolas' life. Nikolas was born Victor Nikolayevich Gladilin on May 2, 2006, in Penza, Russia, but he spent his last days on earth as Nikolas Victor Saynor, living just a short distance from here, among wealth, prosperity and comfort the likes of which most people in the world can only dream of. Nikolas was born weighing just a little more than two pounds and spent the first four months of his life in intensive care. After that, Nikolas was placed in an orphanage and came to be counted among the world's millions of orphans. Nikolas spent his last moments on earth, however, not as an orphan, but in the loving arms of a mom and dad. And Nikolas had come to experience what every child should experience — Nikolas was part of a loving, forever family. At his birth it was obvious that Nikolas' face had not fully formed — his palette and lip had failed to close — yet Nikolas was in every way “beautifully and wonderfully made.” Those of you who saw Nikolas recently know well that, with the help of modern medicine and the determination and love of his family, Nikolas' true beauty had come to be more fully revealed in his physical appearance than ever before.

So what was it that caused these remarkable changes in Nikolas' life — what caused his name to change, his living conditions to change, his status, his appearance, his present and his future . . . all to change. What caused everything in Nikolas' life to change? I count it as nothing less than a miracle — I know his mom and dad do as well . . . a miracle that many here today have been forever touched and changed by. I am speaking, of course, of the miracle and the wonder of adoption . . .

First, Nikolas' life reveals and illustrates well that our brokenness — that is, our imperfect physical, emotional and spiritual condition — can become beauty when it encounters and is redeemed and forever changed by love. In Nikolas' case, his brokenness was most visible in his face. But it was into that same face that Joanie and Don looked and saw not an undersized boy with a malformed mouth . . . instead they saw a son — their son . . .

But not only that — Nikolas' story also reminds us that we are all born as orphans . . . but we are not destined to remain as orphans. Speaking of our spiritual condition, Jesus assured us that He would not leave us as orphans, and indeed because of His love and grace he has made a way for us to be adopted into the family of God through faith. While the vast majority of the orphans in our world today will never experience the transforming and redeeming miracle of adoption as Nikolas did, in Christ adoption is available to all . . . and as we see so beautifully illustrated in Nikolas' adoption here on earth, our adoption as sons and daughters of God changes everything.