

AUGUST 10TH, 2006

Olena Nyzhnykevych, active fundraiser, inspired traveler



(Konstantin Klimenko)

By David Peluchette

Greeting me at the front door of her apartment, what strikes you first about Olena Nyzhnykevych is her effervescent smile. I was welcomed in her home, but I had to be a little quiet as her adorable 14 month old daughter Maya was sleeping on the sofa. It was going to be interesting to see how long we could keep our voices down, but still be loud enough to be recorded, while little Maya caught a few extra winks. However, Olena assured me not to worry as the baby had already been sleeping for over an hour.

Olena Nyzhnykevych first came to Ukraine in the summer of 1998 as an intern for Radio Liberty and she knew right then that she wanted to move to Ukraine.

"I realized that summer that I could really do something positive in Ukraine because I not only spoke the language, but I also knew a lot about the history," Nyzhnykevych explained.

After finishing Penn State University, she returned back to her native New Jersey and went to work for what was then known as the Children of Chernobyl Relief Fund. After several trips back and forth from the States to Ukraine for conferences and to deliver airlifts of humanitarian aid sent by CCRF to Ukraine, she received a Fulbright Grant in 2002 for researching practical ways of removing radioactive nuclear content from agricul-

tural products. After her research ended, she resumed working for what has been renamed the Children of Chernobyl Relief and Development Fund (CCRDF) in Kyiv, where she worked as Country Director until May 2005.

From Ukraine to U.S. and back

Olena Nyzhnykevych's grandparents had emigrated from Ukraine after World War Two, with both of her parents being born along the way, as the grandparents traveled from country to country until finally reaching the U.S. Her father was born in Belgium and had grown up in Canada since he was three years old, while her mother was born in Germany, and has lived in the USA from the age of 4.

"This is the story of a lot of people from the Ukrainian Diaspora community," Olena noted.

Her parents met in the 70's at a hunger strike for imprisoned Ukrainian dissident Valentyn Moroz, where they fell in love and eventually married. The family settled in New Jersey, first in Newark then Orange until they finally moved their way up to Bergen Heights. Nyzhnykevych remarked that she didn't learn English until kindergarten.

"I grew up speaking Ukrainian, just like Maya's going to do" she told me.

The adventurous Nyzhnykevych did a lot of traveling before she finally made it to Ukraine.

"I just loved to travel before coming to Ukraine. I spent two months backpacking around Europe, saw 12 countries, started on a budget of \$35 a day, but ended up down to a budget of \$15 a day," she said.

It was on one of her trips to Kyiv, before she received her Fulbright grant, that Olena met her husband Yuriy.

"When I first met him, I didn't realize that he was actually a Ukrainian from Ivano-Frankivsk," she said.

The work/life balance

When asked what she likes most about living in Ukraine, to my surprise she replied:

"Parking on the sidewalks. But I always leave enough room for pedestrians," she added.

She also likes the great food here. Not only traditional Ukrainian dishes, but ethnic cuisines here as well. When I asked her about her most unusual experience in Ukraine, she described her visits to orphanages for the disabled as a very sad one.

"A lot of these children could be more mobile if they just had the right equipment and had been given therapy sooner. I met one little girl who could not use her hands and drew using a crayon with only her mouth. If only they received more attention and relief from their overcrowded conditions, it would make such a difference in the quality of their lives," Nyzhnykevych concluded.

Talking about her hobbies she said that she was an avid snowboarder before becoming pregnant with Maya. She also loves yoga, but it's difficult for her to find good yoga classes in Kyiv and she's definitely into backpacking. As a matter of fact she along with her husband Yuriy and Maya, went backpacking for two weeks in the Black Mountains in the Carpathians.

"I love roughing it and Maya was a real trooper, she just loved the farm animals," she said, laughing.

What Olena misses most about the USA, is of course her parents and the friendly people there.

"I just miss the baby friendly atmosphere, like being able to walk down sidewalks with a stroller and not having to lift it over some big curb, the baby culture here is just different. In the States you can move around practically everywhere with a baby, whereas in Ukraine people will give you strange stares if you go to certain places or even put your newborn in a car seat," she said. However, what she misses least is the expensiveness, like mortgages and car payments, "life is just cheaper here," she observed.

Charity efforts

Although, she is no longer Country Director for CCRDF, Olena Nyzhnykevych still volunteers for the organization - planning fundraisers,

organizing conferences, finding corporate sponsors for CCRDF's work in Ukraine.

Just before Nyzhnykevych stepped down from her position as Country Director, Ruslana Lyzhynchko, pop-star and people's deputy, gave a VIP charitable concert during the Eurovision-2005 finals in Ukraine, organized by CCRDF in cooperation with Ruslana and her husbands, with all the proceeds going to CCRDF's medical programs.

"There's a lot of potential here," she added. Thanks to help of the Board of Directors in Ukraine, half ex-pat and half Ukrainian, the organization has actually been able to raise more money here than in the States. They have more than tripled their annual income from fundraising efforts in Ukraine.

"They have been very active in brainstorming creative ways of attracting attention to the organization and to the important causes they represent," Nyzhnykevych said. "These funds are being used to purchase new equipment for regional hospitals and new natal intensive care in both maternity hospitals and children's hospitals," she pointed out.

When I asked about her plans for the future, Olena admits: "I'm not really sure, I would like to eventually move back to the States, but I'm not certain".

"Who knows, for many of us Ukraine seems more and more difficult to leave the longer we stay," she added.

7 способів
ИСПОЛЬЗОВАТЬ

Афиша card календарь www.afisha.ua

каждую неделю побеждай в конкурсах
получай скидки выигрывай билеты

Want to advertise in

The Guide ?

Please contact
Isidora Tepavcevic
at 496-1111
or e-mail:
tepavcevic@kppublications.com

Ukraine's best pizza



Vesuvio Pizza:
Shevchenko, 2
Reyfarska, 25
Now offering WiFi

For home and office delivery:
235-6681, 234-5268, 278-3028

PRESENT THIS COUPON AND RECEIVE
10% DISCOUNT
www.pizza.com.ua

