

Showing kindness to the stranger

Forced to flee their homes, refugees find compassion, assistance from social worker

Julia (Howard) Verdanidze spent the first 16 years of her life in an orphanage in Russia. But unlike the majority of girls who age out, Julia was adopted by a widowed mother in Dallas through Buckner International, and suddenly found herself in America.

"It was a huge change," recalls Julia, "but I had a lot of people to help me make that transition – the church community, the school I attended, the Buckner staff, and my new family itself."

When she came to Baylor University as a freshman in 2000, she thought her future would be in politics, and she earned her bachelor's degree in international studies. She made two trips to Russia with Buckner while an undergraduate, visiting orphanages, delivering humanitarian aid and leading Vacation Bible Schools.

"I think I realized on those trips that I wanted to work more closely with people than I could in politics. I wanted to be involved in the humanitarian side," she says.

Julia decided on social work for her graduate degree but she struggled with trying to understand how the principles she was learning would apply internationally. A trip she took with the School of Social Work to Moldova in 2005 answered that question.

"I couldn't figure out how to apply the social work skills we were learning to people from different cultures, who spoke different languages, but Moldova provided a hands-on opportunity to do that," says Julia, who speaks Russian and conversational French. In her final internship in the degree program, she served with a resettlement program in Fort Worth, Texas, through Catholic Charities.

She moved to Philadelphia, PA, in May 2006 to work as a case manager for a small, nonprofit refugee resettlement agency, Nationalities Service Center, affiliated with the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

"From helping individuals find a home, to showing them how to use a stove, to connecting them to the correct resources, I loved everything about it."

Especially rewarding for Julia was the diversity she encountered. While at the agency, she worked with refugees from Burma, the Ukraine, Russia, West Africa, Iraq, Iran, Moldova, Ethiopia and Vietnam. "I had constant contact with different cultures, and it was a constant challenge to apply social work skills to these different cultures and languages. I loved that. Every day brought something different. It was



challenging but also very rewarding."

Now married and with infant daughter, Liliya, Julia works as a quality assurance supervisor for data analysis for JEVS Human Services' Northeast EARN Center, a welfare-to-work program.

"Social work gives you the tools you need to work with refugee communities to help them transition, and helping someone transition from one culture to another has always appealed to me," she says. — Vicki Marsh Kabat