

The love that defies infection (October 2008)

The first impression of the family in this dull, gray rental complex on the outskirts of Kiev is the strong love and warmth flowing between mother, father and three adorable children. The next realization is that the mother – Natasha, 28 years old and gravely ill with AIDS – will most likely soon succumb. For 2009 Cramo decided to extend the sponsorship to include also the SOS family support program in Admiralteisky, St. Petersburg. "St. Petersburg has been vital, when expanding our operations into Russia. Thus it felt natural to support this project".



She's not a prostitute, intravenous drug user or convict. Nor did she grow up as a child on the streets. On the contrary, raised in a strict religious home, she developed a strong moral conscience with her mother's milk. She's also well educated, articulate and speaks fluent English, which is somewhat unusual in Ukraine. She's open, positive and tells her story matter-of-factly, without an ounce of self-pity.

A STORY WITHOUT A HAPPY ENDING

Just like so many other completely normal girls, Natasha met a young man when she was around 20. They fell in love, got married and had a son, Alexander. The story could finish there, with a happy ending, if it hadn't been for the fact that Natasha's husband was HIV-positive. When they got the diagnosis, Natasha was already infected.

"We were living with my in-laws, who are also very religious. When they found out we were infected, they threw us out," she recalls.

At that point, she had just given birth to another child, a daughter, who was christened Elena. At the same time, her husband was gravely ill in the last stage of AIDS. He died shortly after that – and Natasha was all alone, destitute, without a home and without support from her family.

"I turned to the authorities for help, but they were totally uninterested. I was so desperate that I appealed to a few volunteer organizations," she says.

STRONG FAITH

Natasha soon got in touch with the Catholic charity organization Caritas, which gave her work and thus the ability to support herself, Elena and Alexander. Through Caritas, she also met her new husband, Igor, who likewise works for the organization. "He's an angel," she says and looks tenderly at her husband, who is sitting with the child they've had together, their one-year-old son Andriy, in his lap.

Both Natasha and Igor are ardent believers – which may explain why they risked having a child together, despite her illness, something that, to an outside observer, seems like a gamble with stakes that are exceedingly high. And both Igor and the children have been lucky – none of them are infected.

Over time, the disease has taken an increasingly stronger hold over Natasha, who according to her doctors has entered the final stage of AIDS. Three years ago, she became so ill that she hovered between life and death at times. After that, she was in and out of the hospital.

"The authorities in Ukraine don't pay for the cost of anti-retroviral medicines. And given that a daily dose costs about 200 dollars here, few who are infected can afford to pay themselves. I think the authorities want us to die as quickly as possible, without making a big fuss of us," she says, sounding bitter for the first time.

SUPPORT FROM SOS-CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

Natasha reiterates that all the help for her family has come from relief organizations. The family got in touch with SOS-Children's Villages relatively recently. Today, representatives from SOS-Children's Villages keep a watchful eye on the family and help with money for food and heating, among other things. Natasha has had to stop working at Caritas because of her illness – and Igor makes far too little money to provide everything for the family.

"One thing the disease has brought with it which has been incredibly positive is that we've made many friends because of it," says Natasha – and looks happy.

"It's not just the economic help we get, but also that people actually care about how things are for us," she adds.

Source: SOS-Barnbyar magazine, Sweden

