

Written Testimony of

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**“National Adoption Month: Stories of Success and Meeting the Challenges of
International Adoptions”**
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Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning. My name is Katie Horton, and I am a Research Professor at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University. More importantly, I am the mom of a wonderful nine-year old little girl named Emma who I adopted from Russia in 2008. I am incredibly blessed to have her in my life. With Emma’s permission, I’d like to share our story with you.

Families pursue international adoption for many different reasons. For me, I’d been involved early on in my career with international health in developing countries and saw first-hand the significant needs of many children in other countries. To be perfectly honest, I also found it difficult as a single woman to adopt domestically.

After much thought and consultation with family and friends, I decided to pursue international adoption in hopes of finding a child in Russia. I’d had several friends adopt successfully from Russia and was encouraged by the wonderful children who had found permanent and loving homes here in the U.S.

I always tell people that international adoption is not for the faint of heart. The requirements and paperwork involved are incredibly extensive. In my experience, I relied on adoption agencies that were over-stretched and understaffed. The costs are high, and I was asked to pay additional fees along the way with little explanation. In most cases, a family is required to travel several times to the country to bond with the child, fulfill required wait times and submit to additional medical and psychological tests once

in-country. I can't imagine a family fulfilling these requirements for any reason other than sincerely wanting and loving the child they meet.

After many months of waiting, I was matched with Emma who was located in a baby home in Samara, Russia. I do believe that God had a hand in matching this amazing little girl with me. The second I saw her picture, I knew she was meant to join my family. I was given little information about Emma other than she was born very prematurely to a birth mother who was quite ill, she had been in the orphanage for 14 months, and had been labeled "Failure to Thrive."

I secured my visa and booked a flight as quickly as allowed. When I reached the orphanage, I was interviewed by the orphanage director and the physician and was asked many questions about my reasons for wanting to adopt Emma. The orphanage provided basic information about Emma's birth family and her health since coming to the orphanage shortly after her birth.

When I was finally allowed to meet Emma, they brought her into a small playroom where my sister and I waited, and I instantly fell in love. Despite bruises on her head and face, she was beautiful. She had that special twinkle in her eye that seemed to say even though she didn't have enough food to eat or a family to put her to bed at night, she would survive and overcome any difficult situation she faced in life.

She was bundled in wool tights and sweaters even though the summer temperature was very hot, and we played on the floor together for hours. She was incredibly small for her age and pale from little time spent outside, but she was feisty, funny and loving. I knew instantly she would join my family.

Emma was 22 months old when she and I arrived back in the U.S. We arrived home from Russia on my birthday—August 1—and we were greeted by many family and friends holding welcome signs at the airport in the middle of the night. The love was palpable. It was surely the most special birthday I will ever have in my life.

There have certainly been challenges and adjustments along the way—as there are with any family. Not having a pair of shoes in the orphanage, when we got home, she chose to sleep each night with her shoes on—a pair of bright pink sandals. This continued until she just couldn't fit into them anymore, at about age four. She wouldn't leave the house each morning until every baby doll in the house had been kissed and tucked in bed. You see, she was so small in the orphanage that she was placed with the young infants to help care for them.

There is no doubt the orphanage had a tremendous impact on Emma. But despite Emma's difficult start to life in an orphanage, she is thriving today. She is loving,

spunky, fiercely independent and strong in faith. She is currently enjoying third grade in a private school near our home and doing very well socially and academically. True to her Russian heritage, Emma excels at ballet and gymnastics. She will be performing next month in the Washington Ballet's Nutcracker at the Warner Theater as a Snow Angel. She loves all animals, especially our dog and cat and the pony she rides weekly named Anya. Emma has more family, friends and neighbors than I can count—each of whom loves her with all their heart.

I don't know if our story is an international adoption "success" story. How do you measure success? By having one less child in an orphanage? By having one more child adjust well in a permanent, loving forever home regardless of the country that home is in?

I am not so naive to believe that our family's challenges are all behind us—I am certain they are not. Like any family, we will have our ups and downs—and I will reach out for help and support when needed. What I do know is that Emma is a kind and loving little girl who has adjusted beautifully to life in the U.S. She is happy, and she is loved more than she will ever know.

The Russian Adoption Ban

I'd like to share a second part of my international adoption story with you—one that does not have a happy ending. Encouraged by Emma's adjustment in the U.S., and enjoying motherhood more than I could have ever imagined, I once again started the international adoption process in 2010. In early 2012, after the long and difficult process of once again fulfilling both countries' requirements for international adoption, I was matched with a beautiful, six month-old little girl named Polina Ostapova in Apatity, Murmansk, an area in Northern Russia above the Arctic Circle.

I traveled to Russia and spent many days with Polina, bonding and imagining the wonderful life ahead for my family with the addition of this little girl. I thought about how much my siblings mean to me and how grateful I was that Emma would know the same love with a sibling. I signed the notarized Russian petition to adopt and other commitment papers declaring my intent to adopt Polina and returned to the US. I was told a court date would be sent to me shortly and that Polina would likely be home with my family for Christmas.

In December 2012, Congress passed the "Magnitsky law," a law intending to punish Russian officials responsible for the death of a Russian lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, in a Moscow prison. Shortly after, the Russian parliament passed a bill which was widely regarded as retaliation for the Magnitsky law. This law banned all Americans from adopting Russian children.

At this point, the tension between the United States and Russia became very personal to approximately 230 American families and 300 Russian orphans. We were told by Russia that all of our adoptions had been terminated, leaving little hope for many of these children to ever find a loving and permanent home. Many of our adoption agencies closed with as little as 48-hours' notice to the families.

For the families involved, in our hearts, these children were already our sons and daughters. We had bonded with these wonderful children and made promises to them that we would be back to get them. They had been abandoned once by their birth parents and now they were being abandoned again. These were children without parents, families, or homes. Many were in need of urgent medical care. The Russian adoption ban added yet another trauma to their young lives.

The 230 families involved in the Russian adoption ban had a sincere desire to resolve concerns expressed by the Russian government about the adoption of Russian children in America. We pledged to work with the State Department and the Russian government to address the concerns of the Russian government and to resolve this very difficult situation. Most importantly, we wanted to ensure the safety and welfare of the Russian children we were hoping to adopt. We wanted our children home.

The families fought valiantly to complete their adoptions. The families met with their Senators and Representatives and stayed in constant contact hoping for progress. We met several times with the Department of State and even the Russian Ambassador here in Washington, D.C. We wrote letters to President Putin, President Obama, Secretary Kerry, Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton, Ambassador McFaul, among others. We held press conferences and reached out to the press to help tell our stories. Frustrated by the State Department's lack of progress, we even wrote our own agreement to address the Russian government's concerns and personally presented it to the Russian Ambassador.

As you know, our efforts were not successful. It is heartbreaking—most of these children remain in an orphanage today. We know this from personal reports of individuals the families have worked with for years. Many of these children are older and with special needs, with little hope of ever being adopted. According to reports from colleagues in Russia, at least three children have died while we wait for resolution of the adoption ban.

Some families have been fortunate enough to have found children and have adopted domestically or from a country other than Russia. Other families continue to track their children and support them in any way possible—food, clothing and money. All of these families live with the pain of remembering a child that they thought would be a part of their family forever.

And what happened to Polina? For about a year after the ban, I tried to check in on her frequently. I asked people in Russia for updates—for any word at all about her well-

being. As time continued, it became very clear that it was getting more and more difficult—and even dangerous—for people in Russia to share information about the children caught in the adoption ban. In early 2014, I was told that Polina had been moved from her orphanage but not yet adopted. To this day, I cannot find her.

Final Thoughts

We know from years of study that an orphanage is no place for a child to be raised. Evidence shows that children who grow up in institutional care are more likely to suffer from poor health and physical underdevelopment. They often experience developmental delays and other attachment issues. Every day that a child spends in an orphanage is one day too many—it denies that child a life in a family and the opportunity to grow up to be a healthy and happy individual.

Supporters of the Russian adoption ban bring up a number of concerns regarding international adoption, some of them very valid. But the Russian adoption ban does not address these problems—it simply denies children the opportunity to find a loving and permanent home. It is a blunt instrument that leaves thousands of children stranded in an orphanage without love and other support needed to grow into a healthy adult.

I am blessed beyond words to have Emma in my life. I love Emma at her best and worst moments. I tell her every day how much she is loved and that no matter what she does and no matter what happens, I will always be her mom and will love her forever.

I will forever be grateful to Russia for giving me the most precious thing in my life, Emma. But I am angry and frustrated at Russia's leaders—and frankly many in our own country—for not being able to find a way to bring these children home. It is inexcusable that some sort of humanitarian solution could not be reached for these children, including Polina. We should be actively exploring ways to facilitate support from health and social services for adoptive families in the US and to strengthen communication with Russia about the status of adopted children here in our country.

There is no doubt that it is possible to provide a loving and permanent home for children in need, regardless of their country of origin—there are thousands of stories about US families adopting successfully from other countries and raising happy, healthy and well-adjusted children. Being born in one country should not limit a child's right to a safe and permanent home.

Emma knows her adoption story and has known it from the time she could walk. She is proud of her Russian Heritage—and she is equally proud of her American citizenship. We talk about her birth parents, her family back in Russia and often read about Russia and its culture. We praise her birth mom for having the courage to allow another family

to raise Emma when she could not. We send letters and pictures regularly to her grandparents and brother back in Russia (unfortunately, both of Emma's birth parents have passed away now). We meet socially with other families who have adopted children from Russia. I want Emma to know where she came from and that her birth family will forever be an important part of who she is.

I am blessed to have a wonderful home, a supportive family, many friends as a strong support system, and the resources to give a child every opportunity in life. I am especially blessed to have one gifted daughter. But, I will never understand why politics prevented Polina from joining my family. I will forever pray that Polina is safe and happy somewhere, even if she cannot be here with my family now.

Thank you for the privilege of testifying before this Committee.