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Immigrant's journey takes her to college

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SUMMARY: At 46, a Ukrainian mom of six defies custom as she pursues a path out of poverty

SERIES: YEAR OF CHANGE (Second of four parts)

"Mr. Rikli, Mr. Rikli!" the woman coming out of the bookstore yells in a giddy voice. An instructor crossing the courtyard at Mt. Hood Community College's Gresham campus turns his head.

Marina Nita waves frantically. With her ankle-length black skirt billowing under a long coat, her Mennonite-style cap ruffled by the wind, the 46-year-old rushes like a schoolgirl toward her speech teacher, Perry Rikli.

"Good morning? How are you?" she pronounces the words perfectly, tugging behind her a suitcase heavy with books. English is Nita's fourth language, after Ukrainian, Russian and Romanian.

It's the first week of December, it's cold, but Nita smiles broadly, maybe because she can hardly believe that she --an immigrant, a mother of six, a woman with a strong traditional Christian faith --is again a full-time student.

A year ago, she was cleaning houses. Scrubbing, washing, dusting. On Christmas Eve, as she exchanged gifts with an employer, the woman asked her: "Why don't you go back to school?"

"Me, with my age? Come on!" Nita remembers her own surprise.

"But you must," said her employer and pressed a piece of paper with a phone number into her hand.

So last Christmas, Nita wrestled with the idea. How could she make it work while still taking care of her husband and children? Losing her crucial part-time income? Breaking with the custom of her close-knit, conservative Slavic community that prized devotion to family?

Yet at the same time, she needed another outlet: She was outgoing. She volunteered with the parent-teacher association, she was a classroom assistant, and she donated time as a translator at schools, offices and local food banks.

Nita, who became a U.S. citizen in 2002, realized going to college would be a ticket out of poverty, out of menial jobs.

"It was the first step for me to find who I am and what I want," she says. "If I find good job, I have more possibilities for me and my family. I will catch my spot in society."

Right after the holidays, she picked up the phone and dialed the number on the piece of paper. She reached Transitions, a Mt. Hood program for minority and immigrant women that helps develop strategies to go back to school.

Nita made an appointment for the first week in January, right before the program was to start, even though she still was scared that her English wasn't good enough.

A risk taker

The leap of faith wasn't out of character for Nita, who grew up in Chahor, a small village in Ukraine on the border of Romania and Moldova, and dreamed of becoming a teacher like her aunt.

As an only child raised by a single-parent mom with a heart condition, Nita worked around the house and on the kolhoz, a type of collective farm. Three times a day, she carried two buckets of water from a well near the house. She finished high school, then went to work in a space electronics factory as a technician. Ukraine was then part of the Soviet Union.

One day she received a letter from a man she didn't know. His name was Ioan Nita, a Christian refugee from Romania who was living in the United States. A family friend had passed her name and address to him.

They started to exchange letters. Marina Nita knew Romanian because her grandmother had taught her the language. After seven months of letters and phone calls, Ioan asked her to marry him.

She flew to California from Ukraine to marry a man she had never seen. She was 32 years old. The couple got married in Reno the day after she arrived, and four months later moved to Portland, where Ioan's family lived.

Family must adjust

Marina Nita quit her cleaning job and entered the Transitions program. After three months, she took her first classes at the community college --a writing course and a college prep class. The next semester, she enrolled full time, taking speech, reading, calligraphy and physical education.

Her family has had to make adjustments. Husband Ioan works as a welder in Oregon City. All the children --ages 5 to 13 --attend Winterhaven School, a K-8 math and science magnet school in Portland.

Ioan now makes sure the kids do their homework in the evenings when his wife is in school. Esther, the oldest daughter, took over the cooking and serving of dinner. Each child must help clean the cramped two-bedroom house off Foster Road in Southeast Portland.

Despite the changes, both husband and children say they're proud of Marina Nita.

Esther, 12, says she doesn't mind doing more around the house. "Mom works really hard," Esther says. "She makes me work harder, too."

"She's just wonderful," Ioan says. "I like to have a smart wife, good knowledge with good English, and I think that children need to have their mom more educated, so that they can go to college and follow her path."

Despite her unbound enthusiasm, Nita has small moments when she admits things are sometimes tough at home, or that some people think she's stepping out of her place.

Every week, she attends a small prayer group in Vancouver, as well as a Romanian church in Southeast Portland. She's conscious that Eastern European women don't usually take up new careers so late in their lives. And in her religious community, raising a family always comes first.

"In our culture, women have the tendency to be a little more quiet, reserved, accepting their status as mothers and wives, taking care of the children," says Nita's pastor, Ioan Brisc of the Romanian Baptist Church of Portland. "Women are mostly home builders, home engineers."

But when they leave Ukraine --or Romania or Moldova --they see their circumstances change. Instead of making do with very little, they see opportunities abound in the United States and want to seize them, Brisc says.

"As I see Marina, I think she has the courage to take a step forward, to step out of the box, to show that even though she is the mother of a full house of children, she can put aside time for school and to pursue her knowledge and pursue a career," he says. "That suits her personality, fits her very well."

While most of her friends have supported her, some people have questioned her new career plans, Nita says. "But

without these people, you don't improve," she says. "If everyone just applauds you, that's sometimes dangerous."

Nita says she would keep going even if everyone turned against her. "If the dog is barking, you keep going," she says, translating a Romanian proverb.

The next step

Now, a year after she made the jump to college, she feels even more confident. She's started thinking in English. She can't wait until January, when her second semester of college starts. She's already reading Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," a requirement for one of her classes.

"You must have joy for this life," she says. "Thank God for everything."

For now, she hopes to get a Mt. Hood scholarship, which will allow her to continue studying.

In five years, she plans to earn at least an associate's degree in human services. She's even started thinking of getting a bachelor's or a master's degree. She hopes one day to get a good job in the medical field to help her family.

With a degree and a new job, she may be able to buy a piano for her oldest son, Daniel, and toys for the children instead of clothes for Christmas. Maybe the family can rent a bigger home.

Her dream? "To have a farm," she says. "Not just because I want my own garden, my own chickens. I want a good place for my children."

The struggles of the year were worth it.

"I encourage other women," she says. "If I do, they do."

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