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After Finding a Home in South Florida, Thanks to a Local Lawyer, This Ukrainian Family Still Faces an Uncertain Future

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In the first months of 2022, Dasha Shareyko Dagayeva and her mother Vita Dagayeva escaped the chaos that was unfolding in their hometown of Kyiv, Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's invasion. Over two years later of arriving to the U.S., the pair have made South Florida their home, in part thanks to a local lawyer who offered his home to them.

In the early days of the war, the Dagayevas fled from Kyiv to Istanbul and made plans to fly into South Florida where an online acquaintance promised to find them a home to stay in. But after buying plane tickets to Miami, the acquaintance stopped responding and they scrambled to find a plan B. That's when they met Meland Budwick partner James Moon and his husband Robert Moon, who offered their Wilton Manors home to the Dagayevas.

Once they set up in South Florida, the mother and daughter found a sense of community almost immediately. The community was so welcoming even James Moon was surprised.

> "I was very impressed with how the community, at least my friends and family, wanted to step up and help," he said. "It's kind of a story about how, at least our community, is welcoming of people."

That same community helped contribute to a GoFundMe that was able to raise over $12,000 to help the Dagayevas get settled.

But even with the support they received, the Dagayevas have proven to be quick at adapting.

Although finding an initial place to stay helped them get on their feet, the Dagayevas found another couple, originally from Moscow, who had a spare apartment for them to stay in. Within three months of arriving to the U.S., they moved into that small apartment in Miami Gardens.

Fast forward to March 2024, and the Dagayevas are moving back into Wilton Manors, but this time they're renting their own two-bedroom home with a backyard and a river view.

Although moving into a new country can be daunting, specifically a corner of the country experiencing an affordable housing crisis that's pushing even longtime locals out, the Dagayevas have worked hard to realize their goals.

Dasha works from home as a writer for a marketing company while her mother works as a food manager making dumplings and selling them online.

> " works so hard. I mean, can you imagine starting over with your entire life in your 50s?" Moon said. "It's just insane how much she works. I don't know how she does it frankly."

About a year ago, Dasha also adopted a Boston Terrier she named Dream, who helps Dasha through the isolation of working from home.

"I definitely needed a friend because socializing here is a little bit different," Dasha said. "He actually eats dumplings as well. He's begging my mom for, not only meat, but just dough. A very Ukrainian dog although he's the only American in the family."

But even more pressing than finding friends in their new home, the Dagayevas also had to figure out their immigration status. When they first arrived, Dasha was working as a freelance writer, which didn't afford her a work visa.

Originally, the U.S. set up a temporary protected status for Ukrainian refugees that was set to last until October 2023. In August, the federal government extended the status to last until April 2025.

The uncertainty of their status in the U.S. has caused some headaches for the family, according to Dasha.

“It’s obviously upsetting because you have to rely, obviously, on the government, which don’t have any guarantees,” she said. “You don’t know what’s going to happen next, and it’s always a waiting game … We have all the official documents, but in 2025, they might take it away.”

On top of waiting to see if the government will let them stay, it’s also an expensive process, Dasha said.

“It costs, obviously, a lot of money. Even if you take a different route like employment authorization, you still have to hire a lawyer. And—no offense, James—but you lawyers are very expensive,” she said with James Moon on the phone.

Although they still aren’t sure what will happen after April of next year, the Dagayevas are sure they want to stay in South Florida.

“If we can, we’ll obviously stay because, at this point, coming to the U.S. is like starting a second life because everything we had was abandoned. But if we ever make a decision to go back, that will be a decision to end everything that we have here and start a third life. I don’t know a lot of people who would be willing to do that,” Dasha said. “My home is where my mom is and she’s currently here, and also we’ve got a second family here. Can you imagine leaving the Moon family? Who’s going to bake for them? They’re going to lose so many pounds without me.”

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