INTERfilm PRODUCTIONS

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a Splash of COLOR

PROJECT SUMMARY
by director Julia Ivanova

Fifty-year-old Olga from Sumy, Ukraine, has 27 children. Four of them, now adults, are her biological children, for the other 23 she has been adoptive or foster mother as long as they can remember. One might think that raising 23 children is a story like no other. In fact, the story is even more complex: Olga is raising SIXTEEN BLACK CHILDREN in a country where 99.9% of population is white and where race DOES mater. All kids were born and raised in Ukraine - their birth-mothers are unwed Ukrainian girls while fathers, in most cases, are students from Africa who came to Ukraine to study at universities and medical schools. Despite the fact that these kids see themselves as 100% Ukrainian and they don't know any other culture, they are seen as "different" by the outside world. As one neighbor points out, "mixing blood types is deadly, and here we have children that are born that way!" Does such attitude affect the way Olga's kids feel and behave? It sure does, but not in the way one would expect: no one carries race-related complexes in this household. It was Olga's idea – to raise many mixed-race children together so that they could support and protect one another.

Why are they seen as different? After all, multiculturalism and equality were declared to be the fundamental principles of the Soviet Union, as shown in Soviet propaganda footage of happy youth demonstrations and festivities. Since the Soviet Union included several Soviet republics in Asia, Asians were an integral part of the every day life in the country and there was not much racism against them. But blacks were a very foreign entity and there was a deep routed racism against them in all Soviet republics, including Ukraine. The first time people in the Soviet Union had a chance to personally interact with black people was in 1957, during the World Festival of Youth and Students. After the festival ended, the first bi-racial children were born in the maternity wards. Very few unwed mothers were keeping these children either back then, or later, when Soviet Union launched university programs for students from friendly pro-communist African countries. The destiny of thousands bi-racial children, whose fathers were African students and mothers Ukrainian or Russian unmarried girls, was tragic - unwanted and doomed to grow up in the orphanages. Not much has changed since then.

The reason I want to make this film is the topic of bi-racial children. These kids live in Eastern Europe where they are considered different from the rest of society. A year ago, when Olga and I started discussing over the phone the possibility of me filming, no one knew Barak Obama would become the President of the United States. These Ukrainian children happen to be bi-racial and their fathers' are from Africa. Just like the right wing tried to paint President Obama as not American enough, these children in Ukraine are not accepted as equal even though this is the only culture they know. Race and racism is definitely at the forefront of this film's narrative and I am sure it will be of interest to the US audience, who might not even be aware that there are black people in the former Soviet Union.

I feel that my experience in making documentaries about children will benefit the project. My very first documentary "From Russia, for Love" (2000) was about the adoption of older Russian children by two Canadian families. It has been televised in 26 countries, including the United States (PBS). My latest film "Fatherhood Dreams" is about gay fathers and their children. It has recently been nominated for a Canadian Film and Television Production Indie Award as the best documentary of last year.

I am also well aware of the rise of nationalism in post Soviet republics and its affect on ethnic minorities. My film "Moscow Freestyle" (2006) dealt with that issue. Myself being a minority – a Jew growing up in Soviet Union then moving to Canada as an immigrant with English as a Second Language – I feel a very strong personal connection to these children in Sumy, because they are "the most extreme minority" – a very visible minority.

Black children are abandoned in all of the former Soviet Republics. They grow up in the orphanages not knowing the concept of family, have no support after they leave the walls of the orphanage, and often lack self esteem to fight for themselves. Now, to make matters worse, everyone in the society around them treat them as 2nd grade citizens. This is where Olga Nenya's strength and determination come in. She does not want this happening to all the black Ukrainian children.

She has collected all such children from different orphanages and created a family, taught these children how to stand up for themselves, protect and care for one another like brothers and sisters. This family is not perfect but it is a family, and it allows these children to grow up and become who they want to be,

I feel the importance of making a film about a marginalized ethnic group whose story has never been told: not a single film has been made about black citizens of either Ukraine or Russia; not a single book is written about it. I am also proud to show these children's potential, their goodness, and how a family can help children to overcome the turbulent past and give strength for the future. Maybe this family will be able to go into the world and change the destinies of other black children and overcome the racism that surrounds them. The future is what you make it, but having a family to support you is so important. Olga Nenya is not a saint but she is changing the world one family at a time.

I am glad that I speak the same language as the children and their mother. Though they live in Ukraine, it is Eastern Ukraine where people traditionally speak either Russian or a mix of two languages – Ukrainian and Russian. I believe it's a great advantage when there is no cultural or language barrier between the director and the subjects of the documentary. I immigrated to Canada at the age of 30, so I grew up in the Soviet Union, in Moscow, but both my parents are from the Ukraine.

After I spent two weeks together with the family in Sumy in 2008, I felt a very strong attachment to the children, and I believe that we will stay connected for many years after the film is done.

I really hope that the film gains as much exposure as possible and this will ensure that none of Olga's children are taken away from the family and sent to an orphanage. I'm very happy that we were filming in the house when the Child Welfare Inspectors showed up. I hope the film will inspire Ukrainian authorities to assist Olga with basic necessities to help raise her bi-racial children and, failing that, maybe the West will.