



Edisheva and her son Ayub, 9, at the Church of the Holy Cross in Medford. They came to this country for his heart surgery. What they found was a church whose members opened their hearts.

AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer



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Deshi Edisheva is a Chechen Muslim being helped by an Orthodox parish.

A single nationality: Those who need a hand

A few days after writing about ethnic differences bringing out the worst in people in Riverside, I got an e-mail reminding me about "another side of human nature."

The note was from Father John Shimchick, an Orthodox priest at the Church of the Holy Cross in Medford. We'd been corresponding for a while about his parish's six-year humanitarian project: helping a Chechen woman win asylum in the United States.

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Commentary By *Monica Yant Kinney*

Parish blurs lines of religion

YANT KINNEY from B1
A friend who works with the charity contacted Shimchick, seeking translators to help Deshi communicate with doctors at St. Christopher's Hospital. Holy Cross parishioners wound up hosting Deshi and Ayub. When they returned in 2002 for more treatment, choir director Josef Gulka began researching what it would take to allow them to stay for good.

Praying for freedom

What it took, he said, was a commitment to support Deshi and Ayub "morally and financially."

What it took, Shimchick added, was a suburban parish asking itself such questions as: "What is the point of a church? Do we only help our own?"

And, can you ever help someone with no strings attached?

"We weren't trying to convert her," Shimchick insisted. The most they would do was embrace her.

Svitlana Lane, originally from Ukraine, offered her home, eas-

cow, putting them in harm's way.

"The checkpoints are incredibly scary," Isbell said. "Americans can't really comprehend the show of force the secret police with tanks and machine guns wield over people."

Deshi's case was denied in 2003, by Immigration Judge Donald Ferlise. If his name sounds familiar, it's because he was recently rebuked by a federal appeals panel for "bullying" asylum seekers and ignoring key evidence.

Isbell appealed, but two of the three judges on that panel sided with Ferlise. They didn't believe that Deshi faced persecution in Chechnya.

The attorney pressed on, hoping the courts would consider new research showing that rape at Chechen checkpoints is a military tactic designed to punish women like Deshi.

Her case was unexpectedly reopened in February. This month, government attorneys agreed that the new evidence proved Deshi's claim.

Her new family.

And when Deshi shows up for Mass at Holy Cross, they know she came because she wanted to see them, not because she owed them anything.

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**Monica
Yant
Kinney**

In Riverside, the locals have been battling Brazilians for a decade. Around the world, Christians and Muslims have been killing each other for centuries.

Yet in post 9/11 us-against-them America, here are 160 Orthodox churchgoers opening their hearts and wallets to Muslim mother Deshi

Edisheva, 42, and her son, Ayub, now 9.

In all the years of living with, and depending on, Holy Cross parishioners, Deshi said: "I never heard, 'You are a Muslim, we are Orthodox.' I never feel I am different. I was alone, but I became part of their family."

A mother's journey

Deshi didn't come to the United States for herself. She came for Ayub, born with heart defects that doctors back home failed to notice.

"He was blue," she recalls, of the day her 9-month-old had his first heart attack. "His nose, lips, all of him, blue."

Treatment in war-torn Chechnya was out of the question. To see specialists, she had to take Ayub to Moscow, a three-day trip through a gauntlet of military checkpoints.

Throughout the fighting in Chechnya, women have committed many violent terrorist acts. The sight of Deshi, traveling without a man, aroused suspicion.

"They kidnap. They kill," Deshi explains of the arbitrary brutality at the checkpoints. Sexual torture is an effective weapon because some Chechen women commit suicide out of shame.

"Rape is very stigmatized in Chechen culture," Deshi's attorney Alex Isbell, of Wayne, explained. "It's part of a very calculated plan to humiliate single Chechen women and prevent them from becoming terrorists."

In Moscow, doctors advised Deshi to take Ayub to America for surgery. They arrived in 2000 thanks to the Russian Gift of Life charity.

See **YANT KINNEY** on B8

ing their anxiety by speaking Russian.

Another host, Diana Pasca, drove Deshi to English classes and bought Ayub his first Game-boy. Maureen Sapnar helped Deshi — a pharmacist in Chechnya — study to become a pharmacy tech during the year she lived with the American family.

Gulka paid Deshi's legal fees in the beginning, and the church dedicated many offerings to the cause.

"We all discovered how easy it is to draw your boundaries too short," he explained. Helping Deshi gave them a way to make a new map.

Open, shut, open again

Deshi's case had it all. As a divorced single mother, she faced scorn in Chechnya. As a moderate Sunni Sufi Muslim, she drew the wrath of radical Islamic militants.

Her family's Chechen pride had already cost them: Deshi's father and two cousins were kidnapped by Russian soldiers. Ayub's condition required frequent emergency trips to Mos-

It was a remarkable reversal, considering that, nationally, only 40 percent of asylum seekers succeed. (In Philadelphia, Ferlise denied 87 percent of the cases he heard.)

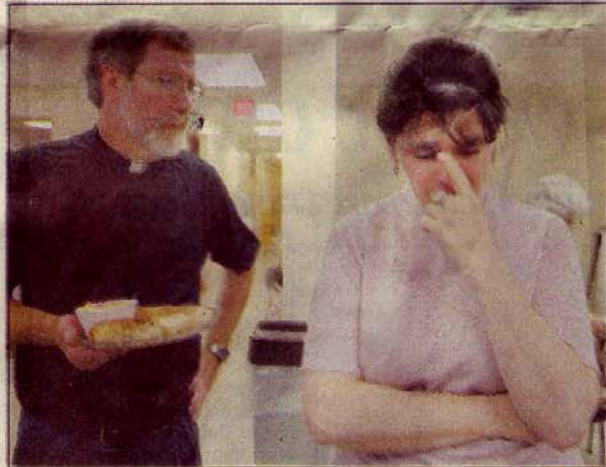
"Once you're out of immigration court for the first time with a 'No,'" Isbell said, "it's very difficult to get back there."

Now fluent in English, Ayub is an honor student heading into fourth grade. He loves science, but although generally healthy, tires easily in phys ed.

Mother and son live in an apartment in Cherry Hill. They enjoy American movies and not having to duck into bomb shelters every time they hear an airplane overhead. Ayub wants a dog. Deshi got him a fish.

Deshi works at both CVS and in a lab at Kennedy Hospital, sometimes overnight. She's getting close to being able to pay her \$800 rent, but for now, it's Shimchick's name on the lease.

When she needs a ride, a sitter for Ayub, or help navigating life in a new land, she calls Josef, Svitlana, Diana or Maureen.



Edisheva gets emotional while talking about the help she has received from the church. Says Father John Shimchick: "We all discovered how easy it is to draw your boundaries too short."