

## HIGH FIVE

## TREATMENT

High Five is a story of international adoption unlike any other. We first meet Cathy and Martin Ward from Surrey, BC, childless after 15 years of marriage, at the moment they are about to make a momentous decision: to adopt 5 biological brothers and sisters – ages 6 through 19 – from an orphanage in the village of Gorodnya, in Ukraine.

At the age of 42, ten years after she sustained a serious back injury, Cathy is unable to have children. This inability is constantly on her mind and it is starting to affect her marriage.

Martin finds a different way to deal with this absence in his life. He signs on as a medic for an aviation company in Iqaluit, Nunavut, performing miracles in this remote part of the world. Being so close with the Inuit communities has given him a different outlook on what caring for family means. These lessons have prepared him for the next chapter of his and Cathy's life but at this moment he has no idea he may someday become a father of five.

Like many childless Canadian couples, Martin and Cathy are looking to adopt a very young baby from somewhere overseas. While waiting for this miracle to occur, they begin their long journey to parenthood by bringing a "summer child" from an orphanage half-a-world away. It's the summer of 2006. Seven-year-old Alyona from Ukraine is supposed to be just a temporary guest in their home but the bonding between a quiet Ukrainian girl and a Canadian couple makes Cathy and Martin realize they are ready to adopt Alyona, no matter how old she is. When the fact emerges during the summer that the girl has a nine-year-old sister, Snezhana, this excites Cathy and Martin even more, and they decide to welcome both to their family.

Of course as it happens, as it meant to happen, several months into the adoption process they find out that the two girls have one more sister, Yulia, and two brothers, Sasha and Sergey, living at the same orphanage! Yulia is fifteen, Sergey is seventeen and Sasha is four. Unlike most couples, who may reconsider their plan of action after learning the reality of the situation, the Wards are not scared off by neither the age of older siblings, nor by Sergey's possible health issues: at the age of 17, Sergey's height is that of a six-year-old.

Cathy and Martin turn into "adoption warriors" and make a decision to adopt all five siblings. They know nothing about the children's past, they don't know what the kids remember about the violence they might have witnessed before they were placed in an orphanage. And they are definitely unable to predict how the past will affect their new family after the children are adopted.

The Wards' decision has huge financial implications. They sell their comfortable downtown Vancouver home and move to a new, large house in suburban Surrey. With Cathy unable to work, Martin takes on overtime at the hospital and more assignments in the Arctic. The adoption will cost tens of thousands of dollars.

In the fall of 2007, Cathy and Martin travel to the remote village of Gorodnya in rural Ukraine to try and adopt the five children. Unfortunately, at first, the Wards

are only able to adopt the two girls, Alyona and Snezhana. In the orphanage, when the Wards are leaving with only two sisters, the camera witnesses the despair of adoptive parents and of the three children who have to stay behind.

Almost a year later the adoption of three remaining children is still not completed. Cathy and Martin refuse to leave the other children in the orphanage for long, and, in the summer of 2008, they bring Sasha, Yulia and Sergey to Canada for a three-month-long summer-stay. It is a period of both tenderness and tension, conflict and discovery. Only then the adoptive parents find out about the abuse by the kids' birth father, his violence toward his children and his wife. Cathy and Martin have to accept that memories, losses, and wounds deeply affect any orphan but especially an older one.

As the summer progresses and the children slowly become accustomed to this new family life, a tragedy strikes. Martin is struck down by a virulent cellulites infection, which threatens to turn into a flesh-eating disease. Martin ends up at the hospital in Kelowna, BC. Stuck in a motel room, Cathy and the children visit him daily until Martin finally starts feeling a bit better.

Soon enough Martin acts for the kids like he is back to normal and the same as usual but unfortunately it's not true. It takes many months to recover from such an ordeal. He often feels faint and tired. He is unable to work; he has to cancel well-paying assignments in the Arctic and borrow money from his parents.

In August, the summer stay is over and Yulia, Sergey and Sasha are to return to the orphanage in Ukraine. One would think that this separation will once again be a hard, tearful experience but in reality the three kids treat their life in Ukraine as a temporary stay now. They know they will return to their mother and father in Canada who are just waiting to get all the paperwork in order.

Finally, in November 2008, the Wards returned to Ukraine to finalize the adoption and Yulia, Sergey, and Sasha became their children forever.

The camera is staying with the family, capturing the emotional journey and the adjustment of the non-English speaking teenagers in school, in the society and with the adoptive parents.

The progress of the kids in Canada sheds some light on adoption in general and how enormously difficult it is to create a bond with the children, especially the older ones. Is unconditional love and multitude of presents enough? How does Cathy deal with Yulia, now seventeen, adoring Martin and giving her a cold shoulder? How easier is life for Sergey, soon nineteen and 4.5 feet in height as he learns his new surroundings and language? What will it take to help little Sasha forget his early memories of the father in Ukraine attacking the mother with an axe? How can Martin financially support such a large family on his own, while he is still recovering? And the most important question, will Cathy and Martin be able to parent five children who have lived through abandonment, separation, tragedy and violence?