



Etsky Consulting
43 Pinewood Road, Bolton, MA 01740
978.779.6078

A Call for Critical Review of Artyom Savelyev & Torry Hansen's Case

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In the two days since his adoptive mother, Torry Hansen, sent Artyom Savelyev back to his native Russia, the story has been featured in every major news outlet in the US and the subject of great attention in Russia and throughout the world. Commentators and bloggers have vilified Ms. Hansen, Russia has suspended the license of WACAP, the placing agency, a spokesperson says the State Department is "obviously very troubled" by the case, and Lisa Belkin of the NY Times Motherlode Blog predicted that her readers would want to tar and feather Ms. Hansen with even greater passion than was demonstrated in the recent dissolution of a US adoption. While strong opinions abound, the facts to support them are still largely unknown. Nowhere have I seen or heard a call for a careful, critical review of this incredibly sad case.

Nothing can justify sending an adopted child back to Russia alone; however, I believe that before anyone can point fingers and lay blame exclusively with Ms. Hansen, we need a thorough review of the case to determine what went so terribly wrong and how to prevent such problems in the future. The case record documents should be reviewed in detail, and everyone who provided services in the case should be interviewed. WACAP and the home study provider in Tennessee that approved Ms. Hansen as an adoptive parent (and presumably was providing the required post-adoption visits and reports) should assemble their collective information and together review everything they know about Artyom Savelyev, and Torry Hansen. If necessary, they should bring in an objective third party to help them complete a Critical Case Review.

At minimum, this review should explore Ms Hansen's process from her consideration of adoption and decision to pursue adoption from Russia, to her home study process and her pre-adoption preparation, as well as everything known about Artyom himself - from his birth until his one-way trip back to Russia.

Here are some questions whose answers would help to identify how this tragic outcome might have been averted:

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- What was Ms. Hansen's motivation to adopt?
- What education and training did she receive?
- What were the qualifications of the home study worker? How many home study visits and meetings occurred? What questions were asked and issues explored? Were any difficulties identified?
- What did Ms. Hansen understand about the inherent risks of adopting an older child? Did she understand the challenges of being a single adoptive mother?
- What was her understanding of the losses that a child of Artyom's age experiences when leaving his country of birth and everything familiar to him? What did her placement agency and home study provider teach her about the expected adjustment difficulties a child would experience and what she could do to mitigate them?
- What information did Ms. Hansen receive about Artyom? Was the information honest and complete? Was there a history of abuse? Did she have ample time to consider the referral? Did she have the opportunity to seek consultation with medical and mental health professionals about the referral?
- Did Ms. Hansen have plans for support and for seeking assistance, if needed, after placement?
- Did she understand cultural identity? Did she understand the ramifications of changing Artyom's name? Were translators available during Artyom's first months in the US? What opportunities did he have to be with Russian speakers and role models?
- What was the nature of the post-adoption visit in January? What questions were asked? What supports were offered? Did Ms. Hansen have an opportunity to discuss concerns and ask questions? Did the worker meet with Artyom alone? Was there any indication during that visit that things were not going well?
- What were the first signs of difficulties? When did they occur? To whom, if anyone, did Ms. Hansen reach out for assistance? What did she do to try to avoid dissolution of the adoption?

These are just a few of the questions that must be answered.

Only when everyone involved in the case has taken a long, hard look at what happened, can anyone know what might have been done differently. The sad truth is that some of life's greatest lessons are learned from mistakes. The best outcome of this tragic case would be that adoption professionals and prospective adopters learn from it, so that other children and families can be spared similar dismal outcomes.