

“My father stayed back to support us financially, because obviously, my mother would have been unemployed,” Dervil says. The once well-to-do family wound up in public housing.

When her grandmother, who lived alone in Randolph, suffered three incapacitating strokes, they moved into her apartment so Dervil’s mother could fill the role of patient care assistant. “My uncle took care of us during that time,” Dervil adds.

That was only the first adjustment she’d have to make. “The main struggle was establishing what I wanted,” Dervil says. In Haiti, she’d been active in sports and dance classes, but here it was “very hard learning English and juggling schoolwork and wanting to participate in more.

“I always sort of knew English and could’ve worked my way around a conversation, but it was very hard for people to understand me. My accent was very heavy. People would just be like, ‘Hey, what? Can you repeat that?’ And it was very intimidating, so I refused to speak to people.”

For years, she remained withdrawn. “I was very afraid of what people would think of me, and I didn’t dress the best in middle school, so it was very frustrating,” she recalls.

By the time she started high school, the student was excited about moving to Brockton, “because then that would give me a second opportunity to grow and be out of my shell,” she says. “And when I went to CTE school, I kind of was like, ‘Hey, this is my opportunity to not be afraid’ — and I definitely had that.”

At Southeastern Regional Vocational Technical High School, in South Easton, Dervil studied medical assisting and joined SkillsUSA. Now, as a senior, she’s overcome her shyness and serves as state president of SkillsUSA Massachusetts. She plans to go to college for a physician’s assistant degree.

Sadly, Dervil says her father, who retired but remained in Haiti, died on the first day of her senior year. “The rest of my family and I are working hard to pick up the pieces.” Once again. ●



A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

Once Alone and Starving, She’s Hungry for Education

By Ann P. Schreiber

When she was born, Maria Olney weighed 5 pounds, 5 ounces. One year later, the Russian orphan was still only 11 pounds.

“You could see in pictures of me, I had a bloated stomach. You could see the bones in my hands. It was horrible,” Olney says. “Actually, a couple weeks after I was adopted, there were some kids that didn’t make it in the orphanage because they were starved.

“[The orphanage staff] especially didn’t like me because I had brown eyes and brown hair, and I wasn’t like all the other Russian kids there who had blue eyes and blonde hair. Those orphans were fed first.”

Her younger adopted sister was in a better orphanage in Russia but, due to

a disability, was about to be moved to a facility with unthinkable conditions.

“My sister Kasenia was about to be sent to one of these places, and my mom was like, ‘No, I’m going to take her home,’” Olney says. “Even the people in Russia were like, ‘Oh, no, you don’t want her. You want a nice, healthy kid,’ and she was like, ‘No, I want her.’

“Yeah, it’s horrible. It’s just terrible,” the Maryland student adds. “There’s still 2 million kids in orphanages in Russia.”

Despite her challenging entry into the world, Olney is now truly American. Her only desire to return to Russia would be to help children in orphanages.

Her mother, an attorney, ran an adoption agency. Through travels to help families adopt, Lisa Olney and her husband, David, located their own children.



Photo: Ann P. Schreiber

“I feel like if I work hard, no matter what the outcome is, eventually, I’ll be successful somewhere.”

Maria is one of four they adopted: two from Russia, one from India and one from Vietnam. She, her sisters Kasenia and Emily were 18 months or younger when adopted; her brother, Shawn, was 8 years old.

Diversity, understanding, education

Being surrounded by such diversity helps Olney keep an open mind.

“I’ve always learned to never judge a book by its cover, no matter what someone looks like, or where they’re from or anything. I won’t decide how I feel about them until I get to know them,” she says.

“I’m very blessed every day that I’ve been given a second chance. I’ve been brought into a family that’s good, and we have the resources that we need.”

Olney’s also grateful for the opportunity to have an education: “There are places around the world where girls are in fields, and they would do anything for the education that we have.”

Her appreciation for education led Olney to the Frederick (Md.) Career and Technology Center’s television/multi-media production program. She learned about SkillsUSA through its Broadcast

News Production contest, twice competing on teams that made it to nationals. In 2014, her team placed 10th; the next year, they placed 11th.

During a dinner for the SkillsUSA Maryland delegation, Olney watched the state officers and decided to pursue a leadership role. When a slot opened in her school chapter, she filled that, then ran for a state office and was elected reporter.

Before SkillsUSA, “I used to be really shy as a kid. I didn’t like going up to people and talking. I stayed in my comfort zone just like any other teenager,” she says.

“SkillsUSA definitely brought me out of my shell. I can go up to somebody and shake hands and introduce myself, and do that in a professional setting. That’s what it really focused on ... being yourself, and giving off a professional vibe, that’s a big thing it taught me.”

Starting as a high-school freshman, the three-season varsity athlete also ran cross-country indoor track, then outdoor track. Her love of running crossed into her career path. She worked for a company to get still photos and footage of students competing in track meets.

Because the meets went on for hours, she’d often spend her day on shoots,

then go home to edit and upload her images. Olney also worked as a waitress at her parents’ restaurant in nearby Shepherdstown, W.Va.

After graduating high school with honors last year, she volunteered as a social-media ambassador at SkillsUSA’s national conference and later interned with its communications office.

Now a Towson (Md.) University freshman, Olney isn’t sure what keeps her motivated other than an innate sense that she can always learn and do more.

“My dad says success takes hard work, but hard work doesn’t guarantee success,” she says. “I feel like if I work hard, no matter what the outcome is, eventually, I’ll be successful somewhere.”

“I don’t think there’s necessarily an end to being successful. I mean, I think some people have the mentality that, ‘Oh, I get this amazing job and then I’m done,’ but success is never-ending.”

Her quest for continuous improvement includes surrounding herself with good people, a quality of a true leader.

“You are who you surround yourself with,” she explains. “I definitely try to surround myself with good friends and good family members, and I just learn in the process.” ●



Maria Olney’s family (left to right) comes from all over the world: older sister Emily (Hyderabad, India); younger sister Kasenia (Samara, Russia); Maria (Tver, Russia); older brother Shawn (Bac Ninh, Vietnam); her mother, Lisa, and father, David (both born in the United States).