

# From Russia, with love: Adopted teen learns much from farm life

BY DENISE PORTER

davdenporter@oregoncoast.com

BEAVER—Perhaps the reason Valery Silva feels at home in a dairy cattle show ring is because it was here that he started his new life.

Less than 24 hours after arriving in Beaver from Russia, Valery boarded yet another plane and landed in Louisville, Ky. among the country's most elite Jersey cattle. He was 9 and didn't know a lick of English.

He did remember the enormous show ring — inside Louisville's Freedom Hall — and the thousands of glossy show cows. And he remembered falling in love with the ceremony and excitement.

Valery had a new family and a new passion, yet it all could have been so different.

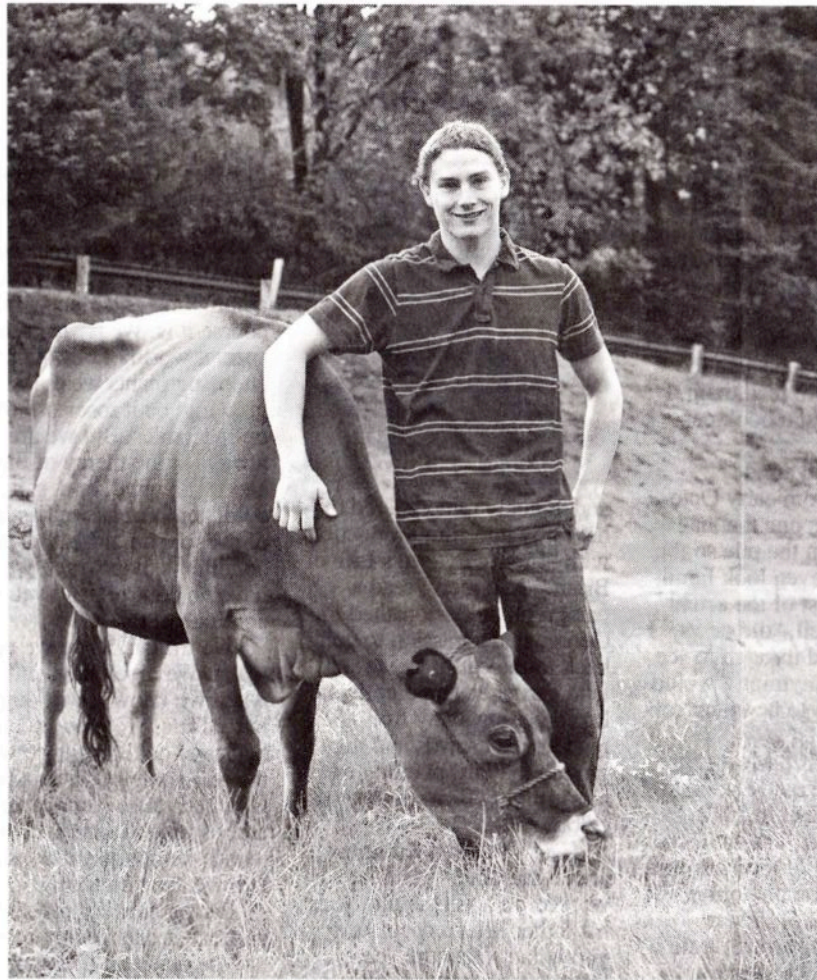
Nine years ago, Valery was a small, scrappy bundle of energy looking for a place to call home. Born in Russia, Valery only has fleeting memories of his parents—and those memories aren't good. He ran away at the age of 5, was found by the police and taken to an orphanage in St Petersburg.

"I don't really have too many memories. When you tend not to focus on something it doesn't become real anymore," he said.

He does remember the orphanage. "It had good food, good schooling. I had freedom. We had a summer and winter camp we went to." The 90 boys were grouped in a family setting with some older and some younger children, all together in "houses" under the direction of a "house mother."

The director, a woman named Lubov, opened a private school within the orphanage. That meant Valery was given the best schooling. The life there wasn't bad, he remembered. In a city of 5 million people, Valery saw much culture.

The orphans' good life changed when they turned 18. Those who were



COURTESY PHOTO

**Valery Silva, 18, of Beaver, was a Russian orphan until he was adopted by Eric Silva and Paula Wolf. On Silva and Wolf's dairy farm the teen says he has learned much about family, farming and competition.**

good students and had high grades went to college. Those who didn't either had to face the streets and try their luck at finding a job or face enrollment in the Russian Army.

Valery knew where he was headed. "School? I sucked at it. I was in third grade, I didn't care and you know, there aren't too many young kids really dialed into school."

But Lubov saw something in the boy. She arranged for him to travel to the United States as a potential adoption candidate.

## Meeting Eric and Paula

When Eric Silva married Paula Wolf, she was eight years his senior and had two children, Nathan and

Molly. The couple loved dairy farming and has a unique herd of genetically elite Jersey dairy cows. They travel the world promoting their farm.

"It took us 10 years to come to a decision to adopt," Paula remembered. "Eric had trouble with the idea because he wanted his own kids. But I was old; I'd gone through breast cancer... It wasn't possible."

Eric finally decided adoption was the right choice. And after speaking with fellow dairy farmer Tony Hurliman about the Russian child the Hurlimans had adopted, Eric and Paula began the process of starting their six-week home study.

Then four days later, a phone call came from Seattle.

"There was a kid from a Russian orphanage who was here for a visit with potential families. He'd already gotten in a fight and ticked off two families and couldn't stay with them. It was totally out of protocol, but they wanted to know if we'd house him for a visit."

Paula remembers that "'Eric the Impulsive' took the call. I was milking the cows and he told me, 'We're going to the Portland Airport tomorrow. There's a kid who needs a home really bad.'

"The next morning we saw this scrawny little kid. He got his backpack, shook our hands and hopped in the car. He was ready to go."

Valery stayed four days with Eric and Paula. He immediately took to the farm, the four-wheeler, Nathan and his truck and a kitten named Grey Puddy.

"It was the environment. I loved the freedom. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. And there were people who got it and who cared," Valery recalled.

It took six months for the adoption papers to be finalized. After two trips to Russia, Eric and Paula had their boy—and two more.

Sons Sam and Dima were 11 and 13 at the time they came to the U.S. Eric was drawn to the boys on his vis-

its and could not leave them, Paula said.

## The Russian Assault Rifle

Nine years later, Valery is a Nestucca High School senior and loves three things: his family, his cows and wrestling. His friends on the wrestling team call him the Russian Assault Rifle. At 119 pounds, he's quick, lithe and a three-time district wrestling champ that has twice finished second at state. This year, he's hungry for a state title.

In 2008, Valery was a National Wrestling Team member. He's traveled to Fargo, N.D. to compete in freestyle Greco. He has dreams of attending Arizona's Grand Canyon University to be a member the NCAA wrestling powerhouse's team. But it won't be an athletic scholarship that gets him there. GCU only allots academic scholarships. For a teen who's been speaking English a mere nine years, that's a tall order.

"He's got two choices and both will take a lot of work. He can take the SAT test or raise his grade point average. Let's face it, the kid couldn't even read English nine years ago," said Paula. "But Nestucca High School and everyone in the school district and the community is behind this kid. They're helping him study."

Valery credits the dairy showing with honing his competitiveness on the wrestling mat. He began showing the farm's animals "about 10 minutes after he got here," Paula said.

"I love the environment, the competition. I'm pretty competitive," he said. Just last month, one of his young animals won junior champion at the World Dairy Expo in Madison, WI.

Valery is excited about the win. "I like showing cows because you have to bring something to the table. Sometimes I think other kids don't understand that here. Winning a cow show feels a lot better when you know you've worked so hard for it."