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Rev. Sam Owens BF

RELIGION

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Journey of faith Local Christians help young singer realize dream

By Earl Vaughan Jr.

Religion writer

Svieta Kurs decided as a teen-ager she wanted to serve God by using her singing voice.

Her home country of Belarus in the former Soviet Union had other ideas. They wanted her to be a shoe technologist, a cobbler in American terms.

The state schools refused to fund a music education for Kurs to sing to a god the government didn't believe existed.

Thanks to the New South River Baptist Association, Kurs is pursuing her musical dream as a student at Methodist College.

Her journey from shoe repair to Christian musician started four years ago when the New South River association served as host to a group of children from Kurs' hometown of Mogilev.

The children were victims of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and came to this country for medical treatment and to get away from the harmful effects of the radiation still present in their homeland.

The following year, New South River sent a medical mission over to Belarus. One of the participants was the Rev. Sam Owens, pastor of Walstone Baptist Church.

While they were there, they heard a teen-age girl singing in her home church. It was Kurs.

Owens said the pastors were overwhelmed by the beauty of her untrained voice.

Kurs said she was raised in the

'I want to compose music, to conduct. I want to do my best.'

— Svieta Kurs

Baptist church in her native country, despite having to suffer persecution for being Christian.

"We were not allowed to go to church, especially children," she said of the days before the breakup of the Soviet Union.

"The police visited us and interrupted our services. My pastor was in prison for five years because he preached the gospel."

Her parents were also persecuted, fined large sums of money for practicing their Christian beliefs.

Kurs said things did not change very much for the church after the fall of communism. "I guess we don't have communism anymore, but people what work in the schools used to be communist," she said. "They didn't change."

But going to church changed Kurs. She didn't develop her love of music until after high school, and the church was the reason for it.

"I go to church and I hear other people sing," she said. "I want to sing myself. For that I have to have education. It's better to have education than sing without it."

She would spend up to three hours in worship services each week, often listening to as many as four pastors on one Sunday, sitting shoulder to shoulder on hard benches with no backs.

"We sing much more than you do here," she said. "We pray down on our knees."

None of that meant anything to government officials, who decided her future was as a shoe technologist, not a musician.

When the New South River ministers returned in 1997 for a second visit, Kurs had learned enough English to allow her to serve as their principal interpreter for the trip.

It was then they learned of her desire to study music, and the refusal of her country to offer an education to a Christian.

"We had to go through the entire admission process and get her accepted as a student at Methodist before we could bring her over," Owens said.

"She came on a student visa and got here 10 days before classes started."

Kurs said she is still adjusting to life in America and hasn't had time to be homesick yet.

"I want to compose music, to conduct," she said. "I want to do my best."

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Staff photo by Jay Capers

The Rev. Sam Owens, left, sees a brighter future for Svieta Kurs.