

Hello: I'll acquaint you with our family. My name is Ludmila. I'm a mother and a wife. Our family was created in November 1982. Since then, it gradually has increased. At present time, the family consists of a father (Valeriy Alekseevich), a mother (Ludmila Evgenevna), an eldest daughter (Vitalina), & a youngest daughter (Irina), and our cat, Niki. The primary similarity in our family's masks is the shiny sun, a symbol of hope and bright and warm relations.



The most important thing for our cat is that we all stay at home. She is bored when alone. And when we return home in the evening, Niki, with relief, stretches herself on the threshold. In the summer, she likes to spend time at the dacha. Here is for her: the sun, open space, hunting, & mice.

Irina has other interests. She does not catch mice. She makes toy mice from fabric at hobby group "Soft Toy". Irina also studies in music school. She plays piano, mainly classical music. She also sings in a chorus. During the year, her chorus performs in our native St. Petersburg, and recently they have performed in an Old Russian town, Novgorod. Irina wants to speak English; therefore she attends advanced courses in the English language. Now Irina studies at 8th form of an art-aesthetic school. We are pleased with her marks and, fortunately, she does her homework by herself.





Vitalina, the eldest daughter, finished school this year. It was a specialized school for children who have health problems. Now Vitalina stays at home. She often is alone with the cat. She does not have friends. She usually reads, watches TV, does something around the house, and waits for our family to gather together in the evening. Vitalina likes walking tours and going to the theatre. She likes receiving guests. But the greatest pleasure for her is a circus. She never misses a new performance. She collects circus performance programs, and books & videocassettes about the circus.

In 1999, Vitalina and I took part in a pilot Russian-Finnish project of social action for disabled kids. I was a volunteer and supervised the action on the stage. We had different activities: drawing & discussions. We celebrated birthdays and calendar holidays: New Year, Easter, & Spring Festival. Roles were allocated among participants. As a rule our whole family joined the festival. Our father played the role of Santa Claus, Irina played Snowflake and Bag of Presents, Vitalina played Malvina and Swallow, and I played Spring and Skomorokh. The work was very active, but the project was over in two years, and our meetings stopped.



But now, not less interesting meetings have occurred. This is our musical studio: "It's Fun to Walk Together," under the direction of Aleksandr Arkadevich Ivanov and Olga Vasilevna Rudashevskaya, remarkable and great pedagogues.



For a whole year they have warmed us by their attention, care, and warm heart. Vitalina studies the ABC's of music; she learns to see and to hear the world in a different light. We listen to the music of different composers such as Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Beethoven, and sounds of the melodies fill us. Each of us has his own emotional experience and his own understanding of the musical composition. We get absorbed into the world of music and draw it. On the paper each of us gets his own music, his own lines of confession and revelation. Our whole family has visited this fairy music world, and we all become members of the family-studio "It's Fun to Walk Together."



Our father, Valeriy Alekseevich, is a very busy man. We don't bother him on trifles, and only when we desperately need something, we notify him long in advance of the beginning of the event. He doesn't like surprises. He doesn't agree at once, but he yields to our pressure then. Sometimes he participates with us, and then on completion, he is proud of himself and glad for our sake.



And at last, about me. From my childhood, I liked teaching younger children. I was a school worker. Now I work as a teacher/speech therapist in a school for children who have problems in development. They are children with serious abnormalities in development. But they astonish me by their "professorial" remarks and "adult" compliments; they also teach, gladden and even support me in my hours of need. At my work I also participate in different events.

I'm different in my life: cheery,
sad and sometimes angry. But out-
siders see me often smiling.
However I'm just wearing a mask.

My mask is almost an exact
copy of my world.

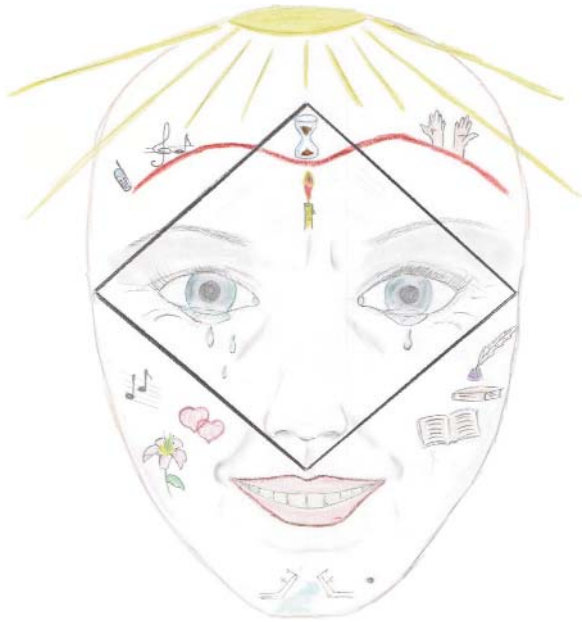
My child's problem is my pain,
my suffering, and impossible to
humble with a fortunate blow. Now
I cry less, and only, when nobody
sees. It is a rare person that can
fully understand this grief.

The untimely death of my par-
ents still lives in my eternal memo-
ry. But as the saying goes, "Time
heals spiritual wounds." And I'm
waiting patiently.

It seems to me that I look at the
world through a black sorrowful
square, the symbol of another
dimension. There, behind the
square, is another course of reality,
and I see it staying in my life.

I always smile outdoors. And no
one guesses what I feel and what I
live with in reality.

Everything below the square is
what supports me in my life. I teach
children at school and they please
me, no matter who they are. My
treatment is music, nature, beauty,
and the hearts of a few remarkable
and sensitive people. I live in the-
beautiful city of St. Petersburg. One
of the city's main symbols is the
drawbridge. My bridge with the city
is separated too. The city doesn't
pay much attention to the young
people who have problems in devel-
opment. My daughter sits alone at
home and the city does not care.
Therefore I have a long wrinkle
going across my forehead that con-
tains two problems. The first one is
where to find those kind and caring
hands which will accompany my
daughter in life. The second is worry
for my youngest daughter.



I want her to find her place in the world, become happy; and I hope that my connection with her is never suddenly cut short.

I hope my kids will be happy, and the sun will always shine over all children; and therefore I simply like summer and the sun.

I don't want to search for a beautiful confluence of words
In those cases of fate, when sorrow, death and tears are.
It's impossible to express in words "the embraces" of those
"shackles"
Which thrust into the soul as splinters.

Therefore in the morning I put on a mask,
And perceive the world watching through the square.
But outwardly everything is OK, I favor everybody with a
smile,
And the day begins its living parade.

I'm pouring out my soul to you with tears.
Why? Why did you decide to unmask me?
And what can I cover my nudity with now?
Yes... I need a new mask promptly.



Clown mask from Vitalina

I like the circus very much. I visit different circus performances. I like cheery clowns; and therefore I want to see my mask in the form of a clown. I'd like to work in a circus. I dedicate my mask to the circus. It would be great if my mask performs in a circus ring. I'd like that it is always merry and gay in a circus; that all people are cheerful and feel well. And, most important, that everybody has a merry mood. Therefore, I want to be something to be proud of. This is our St. Petersburg's State Circus. Our Russian circus is beautiful, both outside and inside. And outstanding Russian artist and director, Mstislav Zapashnyy has created the worldwide star performance where tigers are on the mirror--like balls on the ground and in the air.

Petropavlovskaya Fortress is a historical monument in St. Petersburg. Therefore I depicted it on my mask. I want the sun to shine brightly all over the country.

Yours Sincerely, Vitalina.

Irina's mask

The passion of music is an important part of my life. I attend not only a school of general education but also a music school. I perceive the surrounding world through the music mask. Therefore, I depicted treble clefs on my mask. The architecture of the wonderful city St. Petersburg, where I live, also is depicted on my mask. I depicted Rostralnaya Column, a symbol of victory, with bows of trophy battleships. Rostralnaya Column for me is not only an architectural and historical monument, but also a symbol of the victories, which I want to reach in my life. Now I study at school. That's why my attained victories connect with my studies.



The father's mask

My mask is a reflection of my internal condition. I feel myself to be a support for my family, and at the same time, its guardian angel. Therefore in the left part of my mask, closer to the heart, Alexandrian Column is depicted as a symbol of well-being and stability in the family. Both the Alexandrian Column and I are held up in life by our own weight. In other words, we rely only on ourselves. Alexandrian Column covers the right eye because men should not cry, even in the most hopeless situations. And if you can't suppress a tear then nobody should see this.

As the fates decree, I live and work under the Russian flag. Here also my hobby was formed: an active connection, of which bees' honeycombs are a symbol.

The primary similarity in our family's masks is the shiny sun, a symbol of hope and bright and warm relations.







So we have made the acquaintance. If anyone wants to be friends with us he can dial 7 812 590-2849 or 7 921 745-3935.

He can also write a letter to this address: Stepanez Ludmila, Grazdanskiy Avenue -121/100, apt.232, Saint Petersburg 195299, Russia. Or e-mail address: laplas@mail.ru



Valeriy



Ludmila



Irina



Vitalina



Hello, my name is Julia Stepanova. I am a junior at the Pedagogical College II. Last year I took part in Mark Scheflen's project called "My Life - My City". This year I've also taken part in his new project. There were families with the challenged children participating in it. When I saw the Stepanets' family for the first time, I liked them very much. First I met Ludmila Evgenievna and Vitalina at the presentation of the project. I chose them from all the other families because I had an impression of them being strong, happy, and friendly family. Despite all the misfortunes and unhappiness that fell to their lot, they hold onto their will power and did not become aggressive towards the outside world. Vitalina is a very interesting and mysterious individual. I enjoyed working with her very much. We found some common grounds and became friends very soon. After work with this family, yet another time, I saw for myself that all the people are the same, and we should not divide our society to normal and not normal people. These children are the same as we are, and we should help them instead of forgetting about their existence. This project has helped me to find the methods of communications to the challenged children. And I am glad I had taken part in it.

Hello, my name is Helen Krupenina. I was one of the participants of "My Life...My City" project, St. Petersburg, 2002 (fall). And, now, I am taking part in a new project of Mark Scheflen and Alevtina Kuzuv. We work with families where one of the children is developmentally challenged. With them as with us last year, masks of each family member, a book (one per family), and a video interview were made. But here, we, the students of the Pedagogical College, have played the roles of the supervisors. And now I would like to share my impressions on a family my friend Julia and I worked with.

I can hardly find any words to be able to express how remarkable this family is! I worked with a different family before, and my impressions were completely the opposite. There was something special about the atmosphere in "our" family. There was a pleasant and positive aura, which irradiated positive energy. Every time we came, we were always warm-welcomed. Usually, the head of the family, Valeriy Alexeyevich, a very attentive and nice man, let us in with his greetings. And, of course, the house's hearth keeper, mother -- Ludmila Evgenievna -- was always friendly and amazed us with her openness. It was very important for us that this project would somehow affect these people. It is obvious "our" parents have two incredible children - the elder daughter -- Vitalina, and the younger daughter - Irina. We really liked Irina who is a very sweet, polite girl. Vitalina, on the other hand, with her hard fate, made us happy in many ways.

Listening to the story of Ludmila Evgenievna, and reading their book, I started to share her pain and felt deeply for her eldest child. This was very touching. Nevertheless, I think their sufferings bring them together.

Working with this family was a great pleasure for me. I would like to thank them for their collaboration.