

# Lilia Bensonoff: Courage in action

## Getting to Know You

A monthly feature about the people in your  
On Top of the World community

by John Koning

Ancient Chinese philosopher, Laozi, wrote, "Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage."

It was that kind of love and courage that brought Lila Bensonoff and her family from Russia to America and, finally, to On Top of the World.

In 1980, Lilia and her husband, Michael, were residents of the city of Minsk, near the Soviet border with Poland. They were both highly educated as engineers and proud parents.

Their life was acceptable by Russian standards, but there were storm clouds on the horizon. They, along with millions of other Russians, were not realizing their potential, but merely surviving under an oppressive regime. They realized that the only way to improve their family's destiny was to leave.

Lilia had a brother already living in Schenectady, NY, so the decision of where to go was simple.

On the other hand, the decision to leave their beloved motherland took all the courage Lilia and Michael could muster because the ramifications of their decision would be far reaching and devastating.

Lilia's son, Leon, was 11 years old, and her older son, Mark, was 23 at decision time. While both embraced the idea of leaving the Soviet Union, Mark was married with a child, and neither his wife nor his father-in-law, a military man, approved of the idea. So, the first casualty of Lilia's and Michael's decision to leave was the fracture of their family unit.

Lilia and Michael were forced to accept the fact that they might never

see Mark and his family again. They left the only home they had ever known with only two suitcases each, some gold and silver trinkets, \$240 between them both and only one of their two precious sons.

That first hurdle on their sprint toward freedom was followed by many others. They found themselves in a strange land with a foreign language, a new culture and no friends.

While the matter of friends would soon sort itself out, these two engineers faced another challenge of converting from the metric system of measurement to the cumbersome imperial system.

Another hurdle was language. While Lilia had learned some English in college, Michael had studied German instead, so he started his new life virtually incommunicado.

Lilia and Michael were prepared to work hard to forge a new life in America. Their solid Russian education, their impressive skill sets and their penchant for life-long learning helped them gradually claw their way up the economic ladder, but their ultimate dream was not yet realized.

That dream was to be reunited with Mark and his family, so they sent an invitation to them to come and visit America. Mark and his wife were granted visas to visit, but their children remained in the Soviet Union as collateral.

During the month when Mark and his wife visited, Lilia and Michael showed them an honest profile of their new country, from the slums of Harlem to the millionaire who worked in the office with Lilia. Their strategy was simple – to show their son and



Lilia Bensonoff teaches a circle dance in the EAC auditorium.  
(OTOW News photo by John Koning)

his wife the true face of America, and trust them to make their own decision.

While we all know that this country is not perfect, the decision for Mark and his family was a no-brainer. After some family reflection back home, they wrote and asked mom and dad to invite them to immigrate to America. A few hurdles later, thanks in part to social reformer Mikhail Gorbachev, the whole family now calls the United States of America home. Yes, even Mark's father-in-law lives here.

These days, Lilia is more than an example of courage. She also teach-

es the advanced line dancers of the OTOW Line Dance Club in the East Activity Center on Saturday mornings and Tuesday afternoons.

When Lilia pauses from her busy American life and looks back on her courageous journey, she feels grateful to the many new friends who opened their homes, their hearts and their wallets to welcome the new Russian immigrants. When she hears people lamenting the small stuff, she says, "Stop complaining and appreciate what you have... and God bless America!"

## OTOW-TV SPECIAL PROGRAM SCHEDULE

\* all shows

start about

8 p.m.

\*\* OTOW-TV

Debut)

Aug. 1 - The Jesters 2006 Show \*\*

Aug. 8 - Chorus 2014 Spring Concert

Aug. 15 - St. Patrick's Day Parade 2014

Aug. 22 - One Day With The Baby Boomers

Aug. 29 - The Jesters 2006 Show \*\*

