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# Couple get angel of their own

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Even when the winter winds chill him to the core, Edmond Mikhail rises from his bed, grabs some clothes and sets out for a daily visit to his daughter's grave.

It's only after he arrives at the stone marking her death that he feels comfort in his life.

"If I could sleep there, I would," he said. "I will be grieving for life, even if I have 10 kids after her."

Hearts broken, Mikhail and his wife, Stella, were seeking ways to cope with the death of their only daughter, a sprite named Erika. She was their only child in 18 years of marriage.

They gave her their all. They worshipped her.

They did everything they could to find cures for her cancer. They lost.

Reeling in grief since Erika's death eight months ago, they pored over old photographs, praying for good memories, calling on a higher power to help them remember what her face looked like at every giggle and pout.

The answer to those fervent prayers -- and the beginning of the path to peace -- was found in an art studio in Utah.

Photographs fading, the Christian-Orthodox couple, who live in Morton Grove, Ill., started to think about commissioning a sculpture of their 10-year-old daughter's likeness to put next to her grave.

At first, friends and family frowned on the idea, largely because they didn't think a sculptor could capture Erika's essence without being able to look into her twinkling eyes. After an online search of artists, however, the Mikhails were taken with the work of Salt

Lake City-based Young Fine Arts Studio, who has done some 30 monuments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including Angel Moroni statues that have landed atop temple spires.

The Mikhails wanted Young to give them an angel of their own.

At the studio, Richard Young and Lena Toritch, anxious to test Toritch's Russian technique, set to work re-creating a life-size sculpture of the deceased child.

"I learned to tune into the energy of the child," Toritch said. "I tried to re-create her as best as I could."

Usually Toritch and Young like to meet their clients or have a lot of images to work with, but they only had a few photographs to work with this time.

Toritch sketched and designed a child holding the hand of an angel as they ascended into heaven. It worked.

Then came the tedious and demanding work of refining the images.

The majority of Young and Toritch's clients come in to view the sculpture before it is cast into bronze.

When members of the Mikhail family first walked into the studio on Feb. 29, they began to cry.

"I didn't expect (Edmond and Stella) to step out and say it looks just like Erika," Young said.

"I hadn't become emotionally involved until that moment. This is one of the most touching pieces I've ever done."

Stella Mikhail said the sculpture provides a way for her family to see Erika and her smile in a life-size image. "It's not just a sculpture; it's trying to bring Erika back," she said.

"My visit to Utah was very short, but I felt at peace and comfortable leaving; I know what's coming my way and what my end results will be. Now I can go and kiss her hand and caress her. The statue is the closest thing I have to her."

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