



She had a childhood out of Dickens and rose to be a world-class Paralympian. What propelled her to greatness?

By Katya Cengel

Photography by Simon Bruty

Oksana was a very bad little girl. The people who ran her orphanage in Ukraine told her so. She was certainly little for a girl who was almost 6, weighing maybe 30 pounds. As for being bad, well, that had more to do with survival than acting out of turn. She and her best friend, Lainy, were always hungry and cold, so they stole leftovers from the kitchen when no one was looking. Oksana was never really good at following directions. If someone said “No,” she didn’t think it applied to her. And when men came in at night (when she was supposed to be sleeping), hit her, and did bad things to her, she fought back. And then stopped fighting.

She wasn’t bad all the time. When she helped with the laundry she got sugar cubes as a reward. But one night, she and Lainy were sneaking food from the kitchen when they heard voices. While they were hiding under a table, Oksana accidentally bumped a chair, frightening Lainy, who darted out from the hiding place. Lainy ran right into three men, who hit her—and kept hitting her—as Oksana looked on in silence. The screaming finally stopped, and Oksana never saw her friend again.

Later that year, the director of the orphanage showed Oksana a picture of a woman with curly hair and a round, smiling face. She told Oksana that the woman would be her mother. Oksana was confused. She thought the woman who worked at the orphanage who sometimes took her home for the weekend might be her mother. But the woman in the photo looked nothing like her. The director also told Oksana that she was going to get new legs.

Oksana’s body was different. She lacked thumbs and had five webbed fingers. One leg was longer than the other, and they both hurt when she walked. At night the pain was so intense that she wanted to cry, but she knew crying would get her into trouble. *Maybe my parents left me here because of my legs*, she thought. *Or maybe it was because I was bad.*

So when Oksana found out someone was finally going to take her home for good, she was elated. She kept the copy of the woman’s passport photo on her nightstand. But when the woman didn’t come right away, and still hadn’t arrived a year later, the director said it was because Oksana was bad. Oksana turned 6, and then

7, before Gay Masters, the single, 43-year-old woman from Buffalo, New York, came to get her. She brought with her a doll, which she gave to Oksana. Oksana named it Lainy.

In America, Oksana called Gay “Mom” and learned to speak English. She would often give her toys to her friends and sneak food into her bedroom—Gay once caught her with a head of lettuce—and she needed to be bribed with French toast sticks to go to school. Walking on uneven legs had made them twist at odd angles, yet Oksana ran and played with the other kids just like any other first-grader would. But the pain continued to intensify, and doctors encouraged amputation. In May 1998, 15 months after Oksana arrived in the States, they took her left leg. Five years later, when she was 13, she lost her right one, too, and learned to get around on two prosthetics.

Gay Masters was an unmarried speech therapist with a Ph.D. in communicative disorders when she went to Ukraine to adopt Oksana. The youngest of three children, “I was always the good girl,” Gay says. For years she had longed for a child, but as a single woman she had been unsure of her options. Artificial insemination proved challenging, and Gay believed her unmarried status would place her at the bottom of the list for domestic adoptions. Then she met a woman who had adopted from Russia. She showed Gay pictures of two children in Ukraine who were available for adoption from the agency she had used. Gay spent the weekend staring at the photos. One was a baby boy; the other, a girl about to turn 6. The black-and-white photo showed Oksana standing next to a table, holding a stuffed bunny. She looked directly into the camera, as if she were saying to Gay, “I’m your daughter.”

Gay showed the photo to an orthopedic surgeon, who told her Oksana was missing the tibia, or shinbone, in each leg. He also said her legs would someday need to be amputated. Later, he called her just to make sure she understood.

“Yeah, I know that’s going to happen,” Gay replied softly.

“I knew we were meant to be together,” says Gay, sitting across from Oksana in Gay’s ranch-style home in Louisville, Kentucky, this past May. “I was just going to have to take whatever happened and help her through it.” Besides, Gay wasn’t as concerned about physical conditions as she was about emotional ones. What would happen if Oksana didn’t take to her?

And that was before she learned what Oksana had been through. Orphanages in post-Soviet Ukraine were notorious for their bad conditions. Alice Rampton, co-founder of the TOUCH (Take One Ukrainian Child’s Hand) Project, an American organization that aids Ukrainian orphans, says that in 1999 she saw three feet of sewage in the basement of one orphanage. Back then, disabled children were confined to special facilities with little trained supervision. Oksana doesn’t remember everything that happened at her orphanage. When she talks about it today she speaks without faltering, but her hands move constantly. As she twists her long hair and picks at her nails, the stubbiness and strange shape of her fingers contrasts with the beauty of her other features.

Oksana was hyper-vigilant when she came to America, Gay says. But while Gay had been ready for attachment disorder—a child’s inability to attach to a parent—it seemed the opposite was true. “It wasn’t that she didn’t attach to me; it’s that she never believed I attached to her. That’s always been the issue,” says Gay, as Oksana, 23, picks at the cheese and cookies her mother has laid out. “We’ve had quite a journey with trust.”

When the doctors removed Oksana’s legs, they took everything from the middle of the knee down. Afterward, Oksana would scream at Gay, “You didn’t like my legs, and you took them!” Oksana feels guilty about that today. “It had to have been really hard,” she says. “For her, she remembers it like it was yesterday. She heard me crying, and when there’s nothing you can do for your child it’s like the worst thing on Earth.”

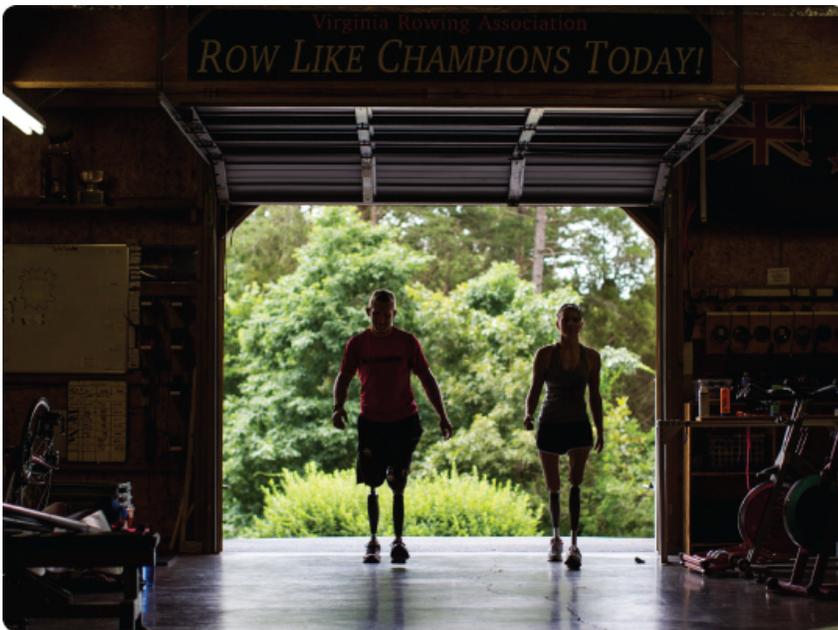
Still, young Oksana adapted well to her prosthetic legs and worked with them as if they were real. After the first amputation, she learned to ice skate. After the second, she rode rides at an amusement park, her legs held in place by a pair of tight jeans. But it was a physical education teacher at her middle school who introduced Oksana to adaptive rowing. At first the 13-year-old wanted nothing to do with the sport. She hated

the word “adaptive.” She wanted to do the “real” things. But the PE teacher, Randy Mills, and Gay managed to talk her into trying it, just once.

The experience was “incredible,” Oksana says. “It’s like when you swim. You’re in your own world underwater. The boat is like its own world. I love everything from the oars to the clicking of the oars when you feather and square, and the fact that it is something that’s so hard, but, when you look at it from afar, it is so elegant and so beautiful.”

To feather and square, the rower rotates each oar, turning the blade horizontal while it’s in the air, then turning it vertical before putting it back in the water. For a rower with perfect hands, it takes concentration and precise timing. Do it wrong and you crab—catch the blade in the water, applying a sudden brake to the boat and wrenching the oar of your teammate. Oksana doesn’t have perfect hands. Surgeons separated her fingers in Ukraine, but they remain short. Gripping the oars causes pain to shoot up her forearms. Sometimes her hands grow so numb she can’t grip anything—not even a water bottle—after practice.

In little more than a year after her first try at rowing, Oksana was winning races. In 2010 she set a world record at the C.R.A.S.H.-B. Sprints World Indoor Rowing Championship. That same year, she became the first adaptive sculler to compete in the Head of the Eagle, an end-of-season regatta hosted by the Indianapolis Rowing Club, where she won the women’s open single race. In 2011, she teamed up with adaptive rower Augusto “Goose” Perez for the Adaptive World Championships Trials, which determine which teams will represent the U.S. at the World Championships. They finished second—a triumph for anyone else, but devastating for Oksana.



“It made me realize how much I wanted to be on Team USA,” she says. In July 2011 she paired with another adaptive rower. Rob Jones was a combat engineer in Afghanistan in 2010 when a squad mate stepped on the blasting cap of an IED. It didn’t cause serious injury, but Rob’s job was to clear a path for the others in case it wasn’t the only IED. It wasn’t. He was sweeping with a metal detector when something exploded underfoot. Everyone else walked away without dramatic injury, but Rob lost both his legs. Five months after meeting, he and Oksana moved to Florida for the winter to train. This past March they won the Adaptive World Championships Trials in the “mixed trunk and arms double sculls” competition, a race that puts a man and a woman, neither using legs, in a boat with fixed seats. The win earned them a slot at the Final Paralympic Qualification Regatta in Belgrade, Serbia, in May. Again, they finished first, beating the runners-up by an astonishing 6.9 seconds in a race where finishes are measured in hundredths of a second.

A week after the Belgrade event, Oksana is back in Louisville and rowing on the Ohio River. Her coach, Bob Hurley, trails her in a powerboat, speaking to her in a soft drawl.

"Okiey," he says, calling her by her nickname, "watch your left blade. You're digging."

Brawny and tanned, looking straight back with an intense, unseeing stare, Oksana pulls. Her specially built seat holds her in place. She's breathing hard but otherwise silent. A large powerboat approaches, making the wake too rough to row. Hurley directs Oksana to turn back for the dock.

"My form didn't feel right," she complains.

"You were digging a little on your left side. Otherwise, you looked great," he counters.

She argues with him until he points out a duckling paddling nearby. "Ooooh!" She crumples adoringly.

"She never thinks she's good enough," Hurley says, adding that the win in Belgrade may instill some confidence.

But maybe it isn't confidence that wins her races. Maybe it's anger. Maybe it's the bad girl, the girl people did bad things to, fighting back. "You're putting so much force and effort into those oars, and you're just releasing all the stuff you have inside," Oksana says. "I dig down deep, into a really dark place."

Rob agrees that the past can offer strength. "When you've had difficult experiences, the mundane, day-to-day things don't seem as hard, and you're able to attack them easier," he says.

For Oksana, those "mundane" things include infected cysts on her back, blooming out of the constant chafing in the boat. They include the pain in her hands and arms, and in the sockets that secure her prosthetic legs to her thighs. Stairs are difficult; high heels, impossible.



And they include the positive things. Oksana has a boyfriend, 29-year-old Robbie Blevins, a former high school quarterback. A car accident left him in a wheelchair when he was still in his teens. As a couple, the two of them are as likely to go to the gym as to a movie. He taught her to play wheelchair basketball. Blevins says that when they first met, she hid her misshapen, discolored hands in the sleeves of long shirts. She doesn't do that anymore. They moved in together in Louisville in May 2011.

And then there's rowing. Oksana and Rob will represent the U.S. in the Paralympics in London on August 31. They are "going to be in the hunt" for the gold in London, says Matt Muffelman, high-performance adaptive coach at the Oklahoma City National High Performance Training Center, the national Olympic and Paralympic training site for rowing. He predicts they'll finish within the top six boats. "From there it's anybody's ball game," he adds. "But they've definitely got a shot."

And finally there is the feather and the square, the boat in its own little world, and the anger and the love working together like Oksana and Rob, breathing in and out: difficult yet wonderful, elegant, and beautiful.

Katya Cengel lives in California. Her first book, Bluegrass Baseball: A Year in the Minor League Life, will be published next month by the University of Nebraska Press.

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