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From Russian Orphan to The Baby Fold Board of Directors

NORMAL, IL. — After surviving abuse in a Russian orphanage and later finding a home at The Baby Fold, Elena Funk has come full circle. This July, she became the newest member of The Baby Fold's Board of Directors, bringing a perspective unlike any other—that of a child whose own life was transformed by the organization she now helps lead.

For the first eight years of her life, Funk knew only fear. She endured unimaginable abuse, neglect, and trauma while growing up in a Russian orphanage. When she was adopted by an American family and brought to the United States, she believed her life was finally changing. Instead, after another heartbreaking loss, she was abandoned once again.

With nowhere else to go, Elena came to The Baby Fold's former Residential Treatment Center.

There, she found safety for the first time. She found adults who understood her trauma and fear; and who believed in her before she believed in herself. Despite a physical impairment, they encouraged her to play sports, attend camp, explore new interests, and simply enjoy being a child. They refused to let her past define her future.

She also formed lifelong friendships with staff, including the maintenance supervisor. Afternoons helping with projects and trips to the hardware store became some of her favorite childhood memories.

Eventually, Elena was adopted by a Baby Fold employee, providing the permanence and family every child deserves. After graduating from college, she returned to The Baby Fold as a Residential Treatment Staff Specialist, helping care for children facing challenges similar to those she had once experienced herself.

Clete Winkelmann, President and CEO of The Baby Fold, said Elena's appointment represents a full-circle moment for the organization.

"For Elena to return today as a member of our Board of Directors is both deeply meaningful and incredibly inspiring," Winkelmann said. "She understands our mission in a way that cannot be taught. Her experiences, resilience, and unwavering belief in the potential of every child will strengthen our Board and help shape the future of our organization."

Today, Funk is a successful business owner, wife, and mother of two. Her appointment to the Board marks another chapter in a lifelong relationship with the organization that first gave her

safety and hope. The friendships she formed as a child have endured as well. The maintenance supervisor who once spent afternoons taking her to the hardware store and teaching her how to fix things later walked her down the aisle at her wedding and is now affectionately known as "Grandpa" to her two sons.

"I know firsthand what it feels like to wonder if anyone sees you or your potential," said Funk. "The Baby Fold didn't just give me a safe place to live. *They taught me how to give and accept love.* I wouldn't be the person I am today—or the mother I am—without The Baby Fold. Serving on the Board is my way of giving back so more children can experience that same hope."

Today, the room that once served as Elena's childhood bedroom at The Baby Fold is now the office of the organization's Vice President of Development & Public Relations, Sam Guillory—a powerful reminder of just how far her journey has come.

"Every time I walk into my office, I can't help but think about the little girl who once slept there. And today, she's helping lead the very organization that shaped her future. That's the kind of transformation every child deserves," said Guillory. "Elena's journey reminds us that the investment we make in children today will shape generations to come."

Funk's appointment reflects The Baby Fold's ongoing commitment to ensuring the voices of those with lived experience help inform its leadership and future direction.

[Click here](#) to watch Elena's testimony at the 2025 Festival of Trees Gala.

About The Baby Fold: Since 1902, The Baby Fold has been providing life-critical services to children and families throughout Central Illinois. The Baby Fold's healing-centered programs include foster care, adoption support, special education, autism programs, early childhood initiatives, crisis intervention, and more. The Baby Fold cares for our youngest citizens so they can be blessed with the loving homes, stable lives, and the futures they deserve.

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