For Russian immigrant, relentless work leads to SCF success

By Katy Bergen
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State Photo by Thomas Bender
State College of Florida student and Russian native Lidia O'Shields, 29, an Outstanding Graduate Award finalist.

Lidia O'Shields says it is hard for her to remember the beginning. The past year at State College of Florida has been a blur, impactful in ways that make it overwhelming for her to say where her story starts.

Maybe it is in the small Russian town of Balakovo, where O'Shields grew up with a fierce desire to learn other languages.

Maybe it is in Casco, Maine, where she traveled to teach Russian folk dance at a summer camp in 2006. She landed in New York City and took the bus to Portland. Little houses flashed by like a movie, her first images of America — a place to pursue dreams.

Or maybe it is on the SCF Venice campus, where O'Shields started classes last year surrounded by things she did not understand. She barely spoke English. When she could understand bits and pieces she was confused by what dominated her American classmates' conversations.

Who was Taylor Swift? She was ashamed to ask.

So she focused on her schoolwork. But as she became more involved on campus O'Shields slowly broke out of her shell, captivating professors and classmates with a relentless work ethic and subtle sense of humor.

“This experience at SCF impacted me so much, and so quickly,” O'Shields, 29, said. “I just started feeling comfortable this winter and now I am leaving.”
Each year SCF awards an Outstanding Graduate Award to one student from the associate and baccalaureate programs. O'Shields is one of six associate graduate finalists, the winner of which will be announced Saturday at the school's spring commencement ceremony. Last week O'Shields was awarded the college's Image Award, given to students who overcome barriers.

“I can't think of a more deserving student than Lidia,” said Kristen Zaborski, an SCF economics instructor who nominated O'Shields for the graduate award after advising her in the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. “She has so much drive and determination and sets the highest goals for herself.”

Coming to America

O'Shields grew up Lidia Litvinova in the Soviet Union as it transitioned into democratic Russia, a world very different from the American life she has come to know in Florida.

When the former government collapsed, O'Shields' family, like most in Russia, was left without much money.

Instead of salaries people got tickets for staples such as flour and milk. Her family took turns taking care of their own small piece of land, tending crops that had to last all winter.

“It was the age of the Soviet Union becoming democratic Russia,” Lidia says. “No rules. No laws.”

O'Shields taught herself French, Japanese and some English by listening to music and talking to tourists, because she could not afford to attend the university.

Later, she got the opportunity to travel to America to teach Russian folk dance at a Maine summer camp.

“It was hard. Even though I knew the language, I could not speak it,” Lidia said.

Here, she met Tom O'Shields, a seasonal chef, who knew four languages from serving in the Middle East in the Marine Corps. At the end of the summer, the couple married in a field of flowers in Casco, right down the road from the camp.

But O'Shields was not able to move permanently to the United States until May 2009.

Hard work

Tom O'Shields had worked in Boca Grande as a seasonal chef years before. Lidia wanted warmer weather. It took time for O'Shields to improve her English, learn to drive and get her residency. Then, she says, she focused on getting an education.

By spring 2012, she enrolled as a full-time student at the Venice campus.
She cried before her first day of class. The American students will not be afraid to speak, she told her husband.

O'Shields wrote out all the new words for her reading classes. She did not grow up with the Internet, so she had to be taught how to click, how to close.

She carried a dictionary around during her first days at SCF. Often, it took her the entire weekend to do her homework.

“It was taking her all night to read a chapter because she was looking every word up,” Tom O'Shields said with a laugh. “She's the hardest worker I know.”

Soon, O'Shields joined the history/political science club, the business club and excelled on the 2013 Academic First Team.

SCF political science professor Michael Rogers remembers when O'Shields walked into an officer meeting for the Phi Theta Kappa honors society last August and volunteered to be vice president.

“I was impressed with her willingness to lead the club,” said Rogers, who nominated her for the Image Award.

By this spring semester, O'Shields was president.

“When I first met her, she was hesitant to take on a public speaking role,” Rogers said. “This March she led the PTK induction ceremony and spoke in front of a large crowd for more than a hour.”

Next year, O'Shields will head to the University of Florida, where she plans to major in Russian and French studies and minor in math.

She has been awarded a $6,500 scholarship to study Chinese at Middlebury College in Vermont this summer.

O'Shields can apply for citizenship on June 6. She thinks the process might be finished by Christmas, since she is married to an American citizen.

Her mother, who lives in Russia, wants to move to the United States and perhaps pursue a career with an engineering degree that she has not really been able to use.

O'Shields knows what she will tell her.

“Don't be scared,” O'Shields says. “Take little steps at a time.”