

A Conversation With Akim And Valentyna Pikh

Ken Lee

Akim Pikh and his family moved to Seattle in July 2024. Akim quickly made his mark in the chess community, scoring impressive wins within two weeks of arriving in the Pacific Northwest.

Originally from Ukraine, Akim has relocated to three different countries in the last few years and has found that chess has enabled him to make friends no matter where he is in the world.

I sat down with Akim and his mother Valentyna to discuss his remarkable adventure.

Ken: Akim, when and where were you born?

Akim: I was born in 2014, in the city of Nova Kakhovka, Kherson region, which is located in the south of Ukraine.

Ken: When did you start playing chess?

Akim: I started playing chess when I was almost six years old. My mom taught me how the pieces moved and basic rules, and at first, I played at home with my family, just for fun. Then I joined the local chess club where my older brother was already playing.

Ken: Did you love chess right away?

Akim: Yes, I liked it, especially

playing in the club. I made many friends there. At that time, I was also super motivated to beat my brother, who kept teasing me that I'd never win against him. So beating him became my personal mission. We had this friendly rivalry going on, until, finally, I won.

Ken: Why did you move from Ukraine?

Akim: The war started in February 2022, and my family had no choice but to leave Ukraine. Our city has been occupied since the first day and is still under Russian control.

Ken: I'm so sorry Akim. What did your family do?

Akim: We first went to Estonia to stay with family friends, who helped us during the first months of the war. Then we decided to move to Ireland because they offered a lot of support to Ukrainian families who had lost their homes. It was also a wonderful opportunity for our family to start learning English before moving to the United States, since none of us spoke it at all.

Ken: Did you continue to play chess in Ireland?

Akim: Yes, I had my chess board with me on

the internet, and I kept playing with my mom and my brother. We found a few tournaments in Ireland that I could join, but it was not easy to get there since we lived in a remote village.

I did pretty well in those tournaments, played against some high-rated players, and it really helped me earn and improve my FIDE rating. At one of these tournaments, after winning a game, my opponent invited me to join his chess team! I played for his team once a month whenever I was in Ireland, and it was a lot of fun. I still play for his team in online tournaments on Lichess.com, which helps me keep improving and enjoy chess with other players.

Ken: When did you start working with a chess coach?

Akim: There were no chess clubs in the village we lived in, and my English was limited back then, so we decided to find a coach online from Ukraine. My family connected with IM Sergey Pavlov, and I've been working with him online ever since.

Ken: When did your family decide to move to the United States?

Akim: My parents made the decision to move to the United States because of my brother and me. Our home town was destroyed, and there was nowhere to go, not even in the future. So they thought the best thing to do was to build a better future here in the US.

*He
fights for
his own
“place in the
sun.”*



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Ken: How did they decide on Seattle?

Akim: My parents did research online, comparing experiences of other families from Ukraine who had already moved to the US. From the start, they were thinking about two states, Washington and Florida, and Washington seemed a lot better to us. That's why we chose Seattle.

Ken: Well, that's lucky for us! How did you find your first chess tournament in Seattle?

Akim: My mom just googled "chess clubs nearby," and the first thing that popped up was Orlov Chess Academy in Seattle. When we got there, kind of randomly, we found out a tournament was about to happen, hosted by the Seattle Chess Club, and they told us I could join right away. That's how I played my first chess tournament in Seattle!

Ken: How did you do?

Akim: I shared first place with another player, and thanks to that tournament, I got my first USCF rating.

Ken: That must have caught people's attention right away.

Akim: Yes. I think so. I also got to meet Josh Sinanan, the president of the Washington Chess Federation. Since then, he has really helped me a lot to take part in Washington Chess tournaments. I'm very thankful to him and the *Northwest Chess* team for all their support.

Ken: Have you found the chess community here to be welcoming?

Akim: Yes, I've met some really nice people. They have helped us navigate the tournament circuit, introduce us to new friends, and made us feel at home.

Ken: How has your mom helped you with your chess?

Akim: My mom doesn't play chess seriously, just for fun, so she can't really give me advice on my game. She takes me to all the tournaments, cheers me on when I lose, and helps me feel better after tough games.

Ken: What does she say?

Akim: She tells me "Sometimes you learn more from a loss than a win." She also reminds me of the motto from my first chess club: "Never give up, and you will see others surrender."

Ken: Does that make you feel better?



Akim Pikh. Photo courtesy of Valentyna Pikh.

Akim: Well, I get that, but I'd much rather win and skip the losing part.

Ken: Akim, last question for you today. What do you think is the biggest factor in your growth as a chess player?

Akim: Honestly, it is hard for me to talk about my strengths in chess, because I still have a lot to learn and improve. My coach, Sergey Pavlov, sees my strengths way better than I do, and he helps me get stronger and win more games. May I ask him to respond to that question?

Ken: Of course, that would be awesome.

Akim: Ok, here is how he responded:

"Akim calculates variations well and feels the dynamics of the game. He has natural intuition.

He is able to handle pressure and shows great patience. He can defend a worse position and develop a small advantage.

There is no doubt he has a bright mind. Moreover, at just 10 years old, Akim has already gone through difficulties that most children around him could never even imagine.

For him, chess is a form of compensation. In the game, he fights for his own "place in the sun."

Ken: Thank you. Check and mate.