

Journey of Two Ukrainian Families From Chernihiv to Sebastopol, Lisbon too

This past year, my husband and I have been sponsors to two Ukrainian families through the federal program Uniting for Ukraine. When the war first broke out in the spring of 2022, we had wanted to help the refugees and be of service in some way. A Ukrainian colleague of my husband connected us to a family he knew. The mother was then living in Lisbon, Portugal with her two young daughters while her husband remained in Kiev. It became apparent after several zoom calls, that the mother would not be able to travel to the U.S. until her husband could join her. We continued to keep in touch with her until they could come over all together.

Meanwhile, a friend connected us to the Lone Pine Ukrainian Family Aid (LPUFA), a local group of neighbors and friends in Sebastopol. They had already helped four families settle in our area and had just learned of another Ukrainian family from the city of Chernihiv ready to leave. Soon we applied through Homeland Security to be their sponsors.

Things moved fast after this. Amazingly the sponsor forms required of us and the family by Homeland Security were processed within about two weeks. The family would now have the necessary papers to travel. We went to meet them on December 29th, 2022, at SFO in the late afternoon. Our welcoming committee of six included the mother's best friend and her daughter (settled in Rohnert Park thru LPUFA). A suspenseful hour passed before they emerged from customs, and suddenly we were face to face. I remember how the six-year-old was all smiles and energy, giving us high fives, and the parents relieved and weary. The older son, fluent in English, quickly stepped into the role of translator for his parents. The family was thrilled to be reunified with their good friend; their happiness palpable. They each had one suitcase and a backpack, all that was permitted to bring.

The first few days were busy as they settled into our guesthouse. The essentials were all in place—furniture, bed linens, towels, kitchenware, the refrigerator stocked. Unforeseen though was the heater that kept turning off, right when the nights couldn't be colder or darker. It would take several service trips for repair. We found a space heater, along with other needed things; a sewing kit, adapters, cables for phones, and a washer and dryer. Next it was clear the whole family needed to shop for raincoats. The rain was nonstop.

The following two weeks, there were a number of appointments, first with the County to sign up for Calworks and CalFresh for food and income monthly support. Next were the applications for healthcare through Medical, Social Security cards, and enrolling the two sons in school. All these services were available to them through the Uniting for Ukraine program. However, like everyone else, they had to wait several months for their first patient appointments with a doctor. Immediately, however, the two boys needed additional shots required by the schools for enrollment. Luckily, we were able to connect with a doctor at Urgent Care for this.

Over the next few weeks, we learned bits and pieces of their experience. The family had fled their home one week after the outbreak of war on February 24, 2022 when the Russians first attacked Chernihiv and other nearby villages. Chernihiv is located only 20 kilometers from

Belarus and 50 kilometers from Russia. At the time of the attack, there was little information available to Chernihiv residents about the bombings or damage happening around them. From their apartment, they could hear missiles exploding nearby. It became too dangerous to stay. Packing their car with their belongings and two sons, they joined a caravan of other residents fleeing the city.

It would take the caravan five days to arrive in Lviv, located in the western part of Ukraine, a trip that usually took nine hours. There, they stayed at an uncle's old farmhouse for three weeks and then left for Poland. From Poland they would follow the mother's best friend to a refugee camp in Dusseldorf, Germany and remain there for several months. Next, they moved to a small town further north near Cologne and stayed in an old schoolhouse converted for refugees. By the time they arrived in San Francisco they had been refugees for ten months.

Fast forward, it has now been close to a year since the family first arrived. They have adapted to everyday life here, to the many cultural differences. Since arriving, both the mother and father have been taking English classes at the SRJC and now have some basic speaking skills. Both have found parttime jobs, and the mother volunteers for her son's first grade class. They have a new puppy. There is even a certain sense of normalcy; a summer vacation to Lake Tahoe, excursions such as to the San Francisco Zoo, concerts of popular Ukrainian performers, and gatherings of other Ukrainian refugees in the North Bay. However, their everyday reality also includes constant news reports from a Ukrainian tv channel and concerns for a brother in the military, as well as the family and friends they left behind. So much remains uncertain for their future, when and if they will be able to return to Ukraine or need to remain here.

In our role as sponsors, I have felt as if we're seeing a whole other side of our community, one that is generous and warm and personable. There's Food for Thought, with their expanded service of monthly food deliveries to immigrants and expectant mothers. Librarians and staff at the schools go out of their way to help. Hairdressers offer their services, a friend donates a sofa, a plumber refuses to charge. An ESL teacher spends one Saturday morning playing games with the younger son. There's a special boat excursion arranged from Bodega to spot the whales, and a party held for this new and expanding group of sponsors and Ukrainians.

Last year as we were studying the Heart Sutra, I remember the emotion that I felt before the family arrived. How could we respond to ease their pain and loss? What would the situation ask of us? I felt in many ways overwhelmed. After the family's arrival though, I began to see their strength and resiliency and understood our role differently. It was not about us or our capabilities to help, but more about our relationship with them. I could not have foreseen how much we would care about them and their well-being. At a recent fundraiser, John Namkung, founder of LPUFA, said simply, "They were leading a regular life, and then the next day their world was upside down. They are very brave people. Here, they're safe, they're loved."

My gratitude to our Sangha and Chris,
Nancy C. Dougherty

Postscript

At the end of August, the second family arrived. Within a month, they had found an Airbnb, and toured several schools for their 5th grade daughter. Both parents speak English fluently and have traveled to the U.S. before. The father has been able to continue his job remotely. Mostly, we've helped them in the first weeks with applying for county services and getting settled. We enjoy their friendship and treasure the bond between our families. We have learned so much from them about Ukraine and their culture, and the hardships they and their friends have endured from the war.

Lone Pine Ukrainian Family Aid (LPUFA)

This local organization was formed in 2022 by a group of neighbors and friends to sponsor and support a Ukrainian family to live in Sonoma County for up to two years under the government's Uniting for Ukraine program. There are now at least 35 Ukrainians who fled their country and currently live in Sonoma County. The LPUFA supports many of them with information, advice, and consultation. Funds also help several of the families with rent, utilities, gas, insurance, education, health care, and other basics.

Donations to LPUFA

Donations are gratefully accepted by the Lone Pine Ukrainian Family Aid (LPUFA). The Redwood Lions Memorial Foundation is the fiscal sponsor for the LPUFA program, and a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Their Tax ID is 94-2831601; all donations are eligible for a tax deduction. Checks can be written to LPUFA and mailed to John Namkung at 1287 Bing Tree Way, Sebastopol, CA.

Links

- 1) "Sebastopol neighbors went extra miles to help Ukrainian refugees,"
Press Democrat, April 23, 2023; about our local heroes John Namkung and David Schneider:
<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/sebastopol-neighbors-went-extra-miles-to-help-ukrainian-refugees/>
- 2) Uniting for Ukraine program: <https://www.dhs.gov/ukraine>
- 3) Welcome.US (connects sponsors to beneficiaries): <https://welcomeus.service-now.com/>