

# Woman helps young Ukrainian exit country

## K.G. resident escorts 16-year-old on flight

**CATHY DYSON**  
The Free Lance-Star

Jill Wine recently traveled more than 9,000 miles to help a teenager escape war-torn Ukraine, even though it meant a week of hectic schedules and missing Thanksgiving with her own family.

“It was quite an adventure to say the least, but I would do it 10 times over to get her to safety,” she said.

Wine, 56, is a speech pathologist and the coach of the girls’ volleyball team at King George High School. About six years ago, she and her family—husband, Drew, and daughters Jenna and Andi—hosted a foreign exchange student from Ukraine. That was Mariya (pronounced Maria).

“She became family and we just stayed in touch all through the years,” said Wine, who lives in King George. “We always call her our Ukrainian daughter and she calls us her American family.”

When Russia attacked Ukraine in February, the Wines were glued to the television. Their only comfort was know-



Ukrainian mom and daughter, Tatiana and Sofiia, enjoy dinner in downtown Warsaw before the teenager’s flight.

ing Mariya, now 23, had relocated to Canada. She’d had an internship there the previous summer and shares an apartment in Ottawa with three Ukrainian women.

However, the Wines worried about the rest of the family, whose last names aren’t being used for their protection. Mariya’s father and two older brothers support war-related efforts. They can’t leave the country and Mariya’s mother doesn’t want to leave them.

But as missile strikes crept closer to their home in Cherkasky, in the central portion of Ukraine, both families wondered if Sofiia, the youngest child, could get to safety. She recently turned 16 and has been spending most of her time in the basement. The sound of sirens warns her of air raids and she regularly checks a phone app for missile strikes.

Mariya’s parents wanted Sofia to go to Canada to be with her sister, but neither could leave Ukraine and didn’t feel comfortable letting her fly alone. When Wine heard about the plight, she offered to escort Sofia on the flight.

“I said I want to do this. I sit here and I pray and I want to help and there’s nothing else I can do,” Wine told them. “This is the one thing I can do for your family.”

Wine got on a plane the Sunday before Thanksgiving and flew about 4,500 miles to Warsaw, Poland, to meet Sofia and her mother, Tatiana. The two mothers hugged and cried at the first meeting, each not totally understanding the other, but basking in the emotions.

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# Ukraine

From A1

Because they weren't sure how long it would take the Ukrainians to make the bus trip across their country and over the border, the group ended up having some downtime in Poland's capital before their flight to Canada.

"We drank some cognac and ate Ukrainian chocolate, we laughed, we cried, we shared stories," Wine said. Mariya's mother "thanked me a thousand times."

Sofia speaks some English and regularly translated for the moms, but there were times when the depths of emotions and cultural differences couldn't be interpreted. The moms used Google Translate on their phones when Sofia needed a mental break, and Wine admits there was one time she faked not understanding what Tatiana was saying.

The Ukrainian family helped with the cost of Wine's flight and wanted to pay for all her travel expenses.

"I just ignored it like I didn't understand what she was saying," the King George woman said, adding she has no idea what the trip cost. "I'll look at all my receipts eventually."

She and Sofia bid a tearful farewell to Tatiana, then boarded a plane to Toronto, then on to Ottawa where there was another emotional reunion. The two sisters hugged and cried at the Canadian airport as Mariya presented her with flowers and held a sign to welcome her.

Wine spent some time in Ottawa, hearing about how hard the Ukrainian women, all in their 20s, are working to make a life for themselves. Each holds down

several jobs and lives so frugally, with little furniture or extras.

When Mariya asked Wine to make her a peanut butter pie—a favorite from her initial visit to King George—Wine had to take Mariya shopping for mixing bowls and a blender.

Wine also attended the showing of a new documentary, called "Freedom on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom." She described it as "everything you've seen on the news, and worse."

Before the film, the Ukrainian flag was raised and those in the audience sang the national anthem. It was the first time Mariya had heard her country's song performed, live, since she left Ukraine. She eventually became so overwhelmed with emotion, she couldn't sing.

Wine was moved, too, by the determination of those in the audience and pictured on the screen, that she lost all sense of time.

"I just felt honored to be in that auditorium with people who had lived in the war (that) I didn't even know it was Thanksgiving because my heart was with all these people," she said.

After she completed the final leg of the journey and made it back to King George, her husband and daughters, who live in Richmond and North Carolina, caught up on all the details.

Then, Jill Wine slept for the better part of two days before resuming her regular schedule the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Her family then peppered her with questions about the next holiday.

"They wanted to know what I want for Christmas and I said flights to Canada," she said.

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com



ERIC MARTIN

Artists and members of Fredericksburg's sister-city associations raised \$24,000 through the auction of donated artwork.

## Groups continue efforts for Ukraine

### Local organizations raise money, collect supplies for country

**CATHY DYSON**  
The Free Lance-Star

Two local groups have raised money for humanitarian needs and collected medical supplies, including ambulances, for the war-torn country of Ukraine.

While Fredericksburg's sister-city associations and local artists teamed up to raise \$24,000 for three charities working in Ukraine, LifeCare Medical Transports of Stafford County has been part of a nationwide effort to get ambulances and equipment

there. "It is truly a humbling experience to see so many agencies in our area and across the nation reaching out to help," said Kevin Dillard, LifeCare's president and CEO. "That is what EMS is all about. Helping those in need."

Craig Vasey chaired the Fredericksburg sister-city effort, known as FXBG4Ukraine, and noted the same spirit. His wife, Wendy, worked to coordinate the effort with Betsy Glassie, who had the idea to create a fundraiser with donated artwork.

Thirty artists from the region donated pieces for the online and live auctions while others contributed

food, time and financial support. The efforts raised \$24,000 which was split equally among Doctors without Borders, Save the Children and World Central Kitchen.

Because the funds were donated on "Giving Tuesday," Nov. 29, they were eligible for matching gifts from other sponsors. That resulted in the \$24,000 proceeds from Fredericksburg being turned into \$72,000 worth of donations.

"It was an extra bonus to our efforts and a thrilling opportunity," Craig Vasey said.

Meanwhile, LifeCare's Dillard and Chris Manson of OSF HealthCare have worked since March to

collect medical equipment for Ukraine, including three ambulances which LifeCare is donating.

LifeCare also has been the staging ground for other contributions. Colonial Beach Volunteer Rescue Squad donated medical supplies while Wintergreen Fire & Rescue and Stuarts Draft Fire Department gave an emergency department bed, 36 sets of firefighting turnout gear including safety air packs and 20 sets of new tire chains.

LifeCare continues to accept donations. For more information, contact kdillard@lifecare94.com.

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com



# CHARITY STARTS AT HOME, MAKES ITS WAY TO UKRAINE

## CHICK-FIL-A OPERATOR TRAVELS TO EDGE OF WAR

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

At first, when Tim Abbott looked around at the thousands of refugees in a Polish train station, he saw the mass of humanity through clinical eyes only, wondering what strategies he might put in place elsewhere to assist those who've fled war-torn Ukraine.

Abbott is the operator of the Celebrate Virginia Chick-fil-A on U.S. 17 in Stafford County and has long been a volunteer with its charity, Lifeshape. He was one of six volunteers who recently traveled to Poland, Slovakia and Romania—countries that border Ukraine—to see how they might help.

At one large bus and train station in Poland, Abbott watched as women and children lined up outside rooms and kiosks that used to sell refreshments or perhaps even souvenirs. In the wake of

SEE ABBOTT, A14



Tim Abbott (wearing hat) recently visited Eastern Europe.



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Joe McElroy and his wife Mary encourage residents of subdivisions like theirs to organize events to help the people of Ukraine. He organized a weekend fundraiser in Spotsylvania.

# Local relief efforts reveal generosity

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Fredericksburg-area residents are finding ways to help people in Ukraine, whether that's collecting new socks, donating entry fees from bridge tournaments or sponsoring contests for people to pick their favorite movies.

Joe McElroy asked his neighbors for checks made out to the American Red Cross for relief efforts. Last Sunday, during particularly blustery weather, he and other residents of the over-55 subdivision, Regency at Chancellorsville, set up a table outside the clubhouse. McElroy decorated it with small, blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flags.

SEE FUNDRAISING, A14



Jo Petranka of the Fredericksburg Duplicate Bridge Club participates in a fundraising event to aid Ukrainians.



## FUNDRAISING

## ▶ FROM A1

The retired Army colonel and Vietnam veteran was ecstatic, and slightly shellshocked, when the group raised \$7,000. So were his neighbors in the Spotsylvania County subdivision.

"They're stunned, almost like they're speechless for a moment and I'm the same way," he said. "We set a goal of \$5,000 and felt that was a stretch. To beat it by 40% tells me that Americans are incredibly generous."

McElroy would like to do more, but is limited at age 81, saying his health is just about gone. However, he would like to hold up his small, over-55 development as an example of what one group can do—and inspire others to match it.

For more than five weeks, Americans who have been inundated with images of war-torn cities in Ukraine and accounts of more than 4 million refugees seeking safety elsewhere in Europe may also have wondered how to help.

"I think there's such a general sense of sadness and also the hate of the violence that's going on, too," said Brenda Chase, a longtime parishioner, and vestry member at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg. "People feel helpless, but if we can give money to people over there on the scene, it makes us feel like we're contributing in some way."

Trinity is asking members to donate to the Episcopal Relief & Development Fund which assists refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan. It's one of several dozen churches and relief organizations, ranging from Catholic Relief Services to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to Action Against Hunger to World Vision, all accredited by the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance. The list is on the website, [give.org/Ukraine-charity-relieftips](http://give.org/Ukraine-charity-relieftips), along with other suggestions about the best ways Americans can help.

The BBB suggests givers consider charities that are experienced with emergency relief, especially those that had a presence in Ukraine before the invasion, said H. Art Taylor, president and CEO of the Wise Giving Alliance. That becomes even more vital as ports are blocked and roads within the country become impassable because of bombings.

As Chase sat amid lighted candles during a prayer vigil, she said it was "very sobering to think of all the lives being affected by this, and how the poor Ukrainians are suffering."

Jim Powell, owner of Powell's Furniture and Mattress in Spotsylvania, had the same thoughts.

"A little over a month ago, they were enjoying the basic necessities of life—their homes, their



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Stafford County resident Todd McLean is raising money for Ukraine through a movie-themed game he created. Players are asked to donate at least \$1.



Bridge players participate in a fundraiser at Calvary Chapel of Fredericksburg to aid Ukrainians.

jobs and going about their day-to-day activities just like you or I would do, and all of a sudden they have nothing, absolutely nothing," he said. "They've been invaded by a superpower that has one purpose and that is to destroy them."

Powell decided to donate a portion of sales from April 1-3, to the American Red Cross for Ukrainian relief. The company has done it at least six other times after hurricanes or other disasters hit, and each campaign usually raises about \$5,000.

"It's the least we can do," he said.

### 'PRETTY UNIFYING'

Jo Petranka of Stafford County played several hands of cards with the Fredericksburg Duplicate Bridge Club last week to help Ukrainians through the United Nations World Food Program. The American Contract Bridge League suggested its 3,000 clubs hold the special charity games and the Fredericksburg club was among those that followed suit.

"I'm glad we can do this to help them," Petranka said. "People seem like they really want to participate."

She said some members donated well above the entry fees, others who hadn't played in a while came out of semi-retirement and still others who no longer play to a trick or designate a trump suit still contributed money.

Todd McLean of North Stafford appealed to people's movie interests in his effort to help Ukraine. In 2007, the government contractor had an assign-

It's pretty cool to see across the country how much money people have contributed and it seems to be a pretty unifying thing.

—TODD McLEAN

ment there and spent two weeks in the capital city of Kyiv, where he was inspired by the spirit, resilience and independence he witnessed.

After Russia invaded, he created a Facebook challenge, #90sMoviesforUkraine, that asks people to pick their favorite movies from the 1990s among four spotlighted daily.

Participants are asked to give at least \$1, but most donated \$25 or \$50, said McLean, whose campaign topped \$2,000 last week. He lets people pick from 14 charities listed on the site or select their own.

"It's been a rough few years for all of us here, let alone for people in Ukraine," McLean said. "It's pretty cool to see across the country how much money people have contributed and it seems to be a pretty unifying thing, as divisive as things have been for a long time."

### 'THE LOVE OF JESUS'

Benchmark Baptist Fellowship in Spotsylvania has a small congregation—about 30 people—and a direct connection to Ukraine. One of Pastor Alan Schoeff's seminary instructors was Tony Hansen, who for more than 15 years has served as a missionary in Zhytomyr. That's a city in the north-

west of the country.

When the invasion began, Schoeff and his congregation followed the news of Hansen and took up a collection which the missionary will disperse to those in need. So far, Benchmark has raised about \$500, which is "fairly substantial for our little church," the pastor said, and will continue to collect funds through April 24.

"Tony still has internet connections with the church there in Zhytomyr and they are providing aid to citizens trying to get out of the county as well as food, transportation and shelter," Schoeff said. "He plans to return when borders open back up."

Donations can be made at the church, its website or by mail at 10510 Benchmark Rd., Fredericksburg, VA 22408.

At Tabernacle United Methodist Church in Spotsylvania, members made donations to the denomination's national relief effort, but "our church family wanted to do more," said Judy Schrader, who chairs the missions committee. The group had learned about the Northern Virginia Regional Commission's plan to collect new or gently used coats and new blankets, heavy socks and gloves.

The commission consists of 13 governments and has drop-off points through Northern Virginia listed on its website. The Tabernacle group decided on a Thursday to join the effort and by Sunday, members were going through their closets for used coats, buying everything they could find in local stores and ordering even more from Amazon, Schrader said.

Tabernacle will collect items from the community on Saturday. From 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., residents can take their donations to Tabernacle UMC, 7310 Old Plank Road #A. Members hope the Ukrainians who receive the items will be warmed by them, according to a church announcement, and "feel the love of Jesus through our donations."

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com

## ABBOTT

## ▶ FROM A1

the Russian invasion, more than 4 million Ukrainians have sought refuge in similar places all over Eastern Europe. Outside one room in the station, they lined up for diapers and baby food. At others, they ate meals from soup kitchens or received boxes of non-perishable items for the next leg of their journey.

Through an interpreter, Abbott talked with a group of refugees who were assigned to Norway, another 24 hours by bus and a ferry ride from Estonia. As they shared details of how far they'd come and the husbands and sons they'd left behind, they were obviously shell-shocked, Abbott said. Still, as people offered them food and money, and candy for their children, they wept in gratitude.

And that's when things got personal for Abbott.

"These are real people, real lives that have been totally uprooted," Abbott said, apologizing as he started crying.

"That's when it hit me that this could be me, this could be me and my family. Could you imagine if I'd left my country and I'm in Mexico or Canada, and I'm told I'm being sent to a whole other country, a whole different culture and language, and I don't know how long I'm going to be there or when I will see my family again?"

Abbott had to walk out of the train station. As he later recounted the story, he said the full impact of what he saw has hit home since he returned to the United States on Tuesday night. He and other volunteers with Lifeshape were "in country" eight to nine days, delivering food at border drop-offs and assessing what the charity will do next.

Lifeshape is one of hundreds of nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, that already had a presence in Ukraine. Lifeshape began more than 17 years ago—and Abbott has been a part from the start—and it's established relationships with churches in Ukraine, helping with English-speaking programs, orphanages or infrastructure, such as digging wells.

"We have natural built-in distribution systems already," he said.

Abbott and others tapped into that system during their visit. Each of the six volunteers filled suitcases with up to 70 pounds—the allowable weight—with medical supplies and dried food such as pasta and beans. After they arrived at countries that bordered Ukraine, they bought more food and water, packing large vans—similar to what Amazon uses—with up to \$10,000 in goods per vehicle.

Then, they drove to the borders and met their partners, who then filled their vehicles with the goods for distribution.

"Some of our partners have had to leave Kyiv and the largest cities in the east and flee to the west," Abbott said. "They're setting up organizations in small towns along the border and getting warehouses, and people like us are flying in and getting food for them on the border."

While it was "chaos in many ways," he was inspired to see churches of all denominations in western Ukraine turn their facilities into refugee centers.

Abbott has talked with other Lifeshape officials since his return and the group is developing a strategy. He believes their efforts, and others like them, will make the difference.

"The only way Ukraine is going to survive is from the NGOs bringing in food, medical supplies and even gas," he said. "We are not designed for this, but it doesn't matter. We've been called to support our friends and our community and it's going to take everybody."

Through another project with Lifeshape, Abbott is working to bring young people from various European countries, including Ukraine, to America this summer. Six will come to the Fredericksburg area. Anyone interested in hosting a visitor or helping with Chick-fil-A's efforts can contact him at [Timpas24444@gmail.com](mailto:Timpas24444@gmail.com).

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com



Workers with Chick-fil-A's charity, Lifeshape, unloaded vehicles at the Ukrainian border.



# City company helps supply Ukrainians

BY CATHY JETT

FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As Russian bombs pounded Ukraine, a friend reached out to a Fredericksburg company for help.

“Please, do something,” the woman texted Abbas Haider, CEO of Aspetto. “My hometown is completely destroyed.”

Haider has contacts in Ukraine because his company has supplied the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs with hard armor plates, ballistic shields and other equipment.

On Friday, he boarded a chartered cargo plane to fly thousands of head lamps, hand warmers, cold weather gear and other equipment to Rzeszów–Jasionka Airport in southeastern Poland. It’s the shipment hub Ukraine’s allies are using to resupply the war-shattered country.

The flight is one of several Aspetto will charter to help fulfill the \$4.2 million contract it was recently awarded by the U.S. Department of State to provide medical and specialized equipment to Ukraine. Haider said he wanted to go on this flight to see how things are operating on the



**Abbas Haider is CEO of Aspetto, a Fredericksburg business that was awarded a \$4.2 million contract to provide gear to Ukraine.**

ground near Ukraine.

“I want to make sure that if there’s anything we can do to help them, I want to do that. I want to be there for them,” he said. “And second, I know that the Department of State is short staffed over there, so if there’s anything that they need, even if it’s transport or anything, I got my international driver’s permit.”

He said working on this contract is personal because he has spent time in Ukraine and has made good friends.

“Anything we can do, we’re going to do our best to do it,” Haider said. “The entire office feels this way, not just me. When this opportunity came up to help them out, I told them, ‘This is what it feels like, or what it looks

**SEE ASPETTO, A10**

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like, to make an impact. We actually are involved in getting the products out there.”

Aspetto, which Haider and fellow University of Mary Washington graduate Robert Davis founded in 2008, made its mark initially by making custom men’s suits and then bullet-resistant clothing. It has since branched out to include tactical gear, logistics, IT and systems engineering, digital media and, within a few weeks, cybersecurity.

“We are not actually doing body armor for this contract, at least not yet, I should say, because it is not just a done deal,” Haider said. “It does have the ability to add more products and more dollars to this contract as their demands and requirements change.”

Aspetto also sells over 20,000 products from various suppliers to the government. Haider and his team at Aspetto began reaching out to some of them for products for its latest contract before the ink was even dry. Everything needed to be in stock and ready to ship because there was no time to wait for things to be manufactured.

“Aspetto almost sounded like a New York Stock Exchange trading floor because we had to get them real-time inventory,” said Haider, who was facing competition from other offices, governments and nongovernmental agencies. “Every second, things were changing.”

Several companies held items for him until the contract was finalized—including 2,000 headlamps, 10,000 pieces of cold-weather gear and 250,000 hand warmers—for which he said he was grateful. Aspetto was also able to source thousands of other items, including uniforms, medical kits, tourniquets, backpacks, hydration packs, boots, batteries and ready-to-



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

**Aspetto contract administrator Blayne Stine maneuvers a pallet stacked with cold-weather equipment and other gear intended to help war-torn Ukraine.**

eat meals.

To get the supplies to Poland, the State Department asked Aspetto to charter its own cargo planes. Shortages and soaring gas prices soon sent the company’s \$250,000 contracted quote for this skyrocketing to actual expenses of from \$500,000 to \$600,000.

“Those costs went out the window so we were working very closely with the Department of State and sharing planes,” Haider said.

The \$4.2 million contract to help supply Ukraine is one of several Aspetto has been awarded or is bidding on this year. Haider said he expects the company’s revenues will be about \$30 million for 2022, a growth rate of more than 100 percent over 2021. He attributed that to both diversification and Aspetto being good at what it does.

Forbes magazine, among others, has taken notice. It named Aspetto in the top 20 percent of the fastest-growing companies in America for 2021, and included Haider and Davis in its Forbes 30 Under 30 Class of 2018 list. That list features 600 visionaries under the age of 30 in 20 different industries.

“Every industry we have gone into, we have learned

what everyone else is doing and then we’ve made a difference. For example, we got into the suit business, right? What did we do? We did what everyone else did, and then we created America’s first bullet-resistant clothing line,” Haider said.

“Then we got into the tactical industry, which is tactical gear. What did we do? We created a patented quick-release system that allows the user to quickly put on or take off their tactical vest, and that component took off like wildfire, where the biggest body armor company in the world has that component on their vests as a standard feature,” he added.

Aspetto’s most recent acquisition is Pop Smoke Media, which has almost 1 million Department of Defense, veteran and first responder followers on social media, as well as a popular podcast. Among its duties will be enlivening what Haider called a “boring” approach to recruitment by injecting wit and humor in its podcasts and online newspaper.

Pop Smoke is also helping the company give back to its target audience. Last month, it selected and paid for 10 service members to get help creating their résumés. This month, it picked five and paid their past-due bills.

Haider says his and Davis’ time at UMW helped hone their ability to diversify. As liberal arts students, they didn’t have to concentrate on one subject. Instead, they were able to take everything from acting and art classes to biology and computer science.

“We know a little bit about so many different things,” Haider said. “When someone from, let’s say, the biotech side, starts talking to us and starts dropping certain terms, we can follow along.”

He said that he and his cofounder plan to continue growing their company, and added Greg Dyer as chief of strategy and technical growth in 2020. Prior to joining Aspetto, Dyer helped develop and lead Spinvi Consulting’s growth from \$3 million to \$115 million in annual revenue over a three-year period.

“We’re not looking to sell. We’re having too much fun,” Haider said. “This is exciting to me. Professional growth is important to me, but personal growth is almost more important than professional growth. One thing that I love in what we do, and the freedom to do what we do, is that we can diversify, we can learn about different things.”

# Ukrainian crisis underscores need for sister city partnerships

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues, René Pörtl says it's never been more crucial for people from different parts of the world to continue their partnerships with fellow cities—and their friendship with one other.

Pörtl was among 15 visitors from Schwetzingen, Fredericksburg's sister city in southwestern Germany, near the borders of Switzerland and France. Pörtl is both mayor and manager of the city, known for its castle and gardens.

"In my opinion, it was always important, but maybe



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

**Visitors from Schwetzingen, Germany, and their local hosts chat as they walk across Caroline Street.**

it's much more important to stay together now," Pörtl said. "That not only means our presidents and

our politicians, it means the people should stay together ... to talk about the

**SEE GERMANS, A6**

## LOCAL MEDICAL SUPPLIES DESTINED FOR UKRAINE

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Eric Barnes runs a warehouse that's filled to the rafters with crutches and piled to the ceiling with aluminum walkers.

When he heard about a partnership that will send some of the items to people in Ukraine who have been injured in the war, he was

thrilled. Barnes is the administrator for the Equipment Connection, the arm of the disability Resource Center in Fredericksburg that collects, then gives out for free, various types of equipment.

People who need crutches or canes for a limited time pass them along to the

**SEE EQUIPMENT, A6**



# GERMANS

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topics and to exchange thoughts.”

What’s happening in Ukraine was at the forefront of discussions between the German visitors and their Fredericksburg-area hosts. Pörtl described how his city of 22,000 residents has helped the 500 refugees who’ve relocated there and how the actions of President Vladimir Putin have struck fear into Germans, particularly the young people.

“This is the first war we have [had] next to us in decades. Our children, the young people, they fear because they didn’t realize that something like this could happen in their world,” he said. “I mean, it’s 400 miles away by car.”

His 17-year-old daughter shares concerns about climate change and COVID-19 as well as war-time atrocities shown on the nightly news.

“She says, why have we to grow up in such a world?” he said to his American visitors. “I have no good answer. What should I tell her?”

While Pörtl may struggle to answer those questions, he’s had to come up with a plan to help the Ukrainians, just as his city did in 2015 and 2016 when refugees from Afghanistan and Syria relocated there.

“And some of them are still there,” said Cindie Kelly, a Fredericksburg resident who’s part of the sister city group. “For you to take even more when you already have so much room taken up...”

“It’s difficult at the mo-



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

## Rene Pörtl, mayor of Schwetzingen in Germany, talks to Doris Mullis during a downtown stroll.

ment,” Pörtl agreed.

“But you do it,” Kelly said.

“Oh yeah, of course,” the German mayor answered. “We have to do it. No question about it.”

He said refugees receive money from the state so they’re able to have some semblance of a normal life, then noted that Ukrainian women, who are extremely grateful for help, immediately ask what they can do.

“They want to work, they want to earn their own money,” he said, adding that their children are uncharacteristically quiet. “Some of them don’t speak anymore. Then it takes two or three days and then it changes, they feel safer. It’s not [like] coming home, but they have a good situation [in Germany].”

Some of the refugees are placed in homes; others stay in hotels or sports halls. Countries throughout the European Union have pledged to take in Ukrainians although it’s not always clear how many may be coming to a particular area—until they arrive, Pörtl said.

Schwetzingen and Fredericksburg have had an informal relationship since 2009, then made the arrangement formal 10 years ago.

As the Germans and Americans talked during this visit—which also included visits to Washington, Mount Vernon, Jamestown and Colonial Williamsburg—they realized how many connections they have with each other and beyond.

For instance, Doris Mullis grew up in Germa-

ny, met her husband when he was stationed there and now lives in Spotsylvania County. She returns to Germany once a year to visit family.

In addition, her son, Chris, is an Army major who was sent to Poland when Russia’s invasion began.

“I have family in Germany who are extremely worried and for me, it is very personal,” she said, noting her son’s proximity to the fighting. “All we can do is hope.”

Kelly once hosted an exchange student from Ukraine, and she’s been able to check on the woman and her family over the internet. Like Mullis, Kelly has a son in the military, although she doesn’t know his location.

“It’s such a mix of emotions that you experience,” she said. “It’s hard to put into words, you know? It’s just horrific what’s happening.”

Kelly said that as she’s talked with their guests, she was struck in particular by one comment. A German woman said she and her countrymen have come to realize “the United States cannot do everything for us” in terms of being the only one to respond to global conflicts, and that individual countries have to be prepared on their own.

The Germans and Americans agreed the war had brought countries across the world together to stand as one against Russia.

“It really has united us,” Kelly said, “and that has been a good thing.”

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com

# EQUIPMENT

► FROM A1

DRC when they get better with the hopes someone else can use them.

“We have so much equipment, we’re literally bursting at the seam,” Barnes said, noting that he might get six or seven pairs of crutches a week and only hand out two or three sets a month.

When he saw footage of soldiers and civilians injured in the Ukrainian war fashioning crutches out of sticks or other pieces of rubble, he was glad to learn the DRC could help. Debra Fults, its executive director, worked out a partnership with Embrace Foundation in Newport News. The group is collecting crutches, walkers, canes and diapers to share with Samaritan’s Purse, a Christian humanitarian aid organization which will ship the items to Europe.

“This was a perfect opportunity to get them the things they needed,” Fults said, without having to incur expensive shipping costs.

Barnes, an Army veteran who was exposed to chemical agents during the first Gulf War, is thrilled that equipment from the



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

## Eric Barnes finishes inspecting a recently donated wheelchair at the disAbility Resource Center in Fredericksburg on Friday.

Fredericksburg area “can make a difference to help someone stay on their feet” after being injured in the Ukrainian war.

“It’s a matter of being a good steward and sharing what the good Lord has sent us,” he said.

Barnes will load a rental truck Sunday with the equipment, in-

cluding diapers for children and adults, then head to Newport News on Monday. Someone from the North Carolina branch of Samaritan’s Purse is scheduled to pick up the goods on Tuesday and get them shipped to Europe, the DRC said.

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com



# Local art auction to benefit Ukraine

Sister city group and artists join forces to help war-torn country

**CATHY DYSON**  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Fredericksburg Sister City Association is teaming with local artists from varied backgrounds to create what seems like the picture-perfect fundraiser for Ukrainian people devastated by war.

For the first time, those who partner with other cities across the globe are focusing their efforts on the same charitable event: an art auction and reception to help provide assistance for those in the war-torn country.

“The spirit of the sister cities has always been one of embracing other cultures and other nations and this is one to the max,” said Collette Caprara, a Fredericksburg writer



Collette Caprara’s “Sunflower Symphony” is one of several pieces in the fundraiser featuring Ukraine’s national flower.

and artist.

She and her husband, David, are founding members of the Fredericksburg-Kathmandu sister city group, formed in 2015 after earthquakes in Nepal killed almost 9,000 people. Caprara saw then how people

in the Fredericksburg area responded to the tragedy—and organizers of the “FXB-G4UKRAINE” event have seen the same willingness to help.

“It’s wonderful to live in a community that says yes,” said Betsy Glassie.

Motivated by “the terrible devastation caused by the war,” she and fellow Liberty Town artist Wendy Atwell-Vasey talked about some sort of city-wide art exhibit. Atwell-Vasey mentioned the discussion to her husband, Craig, who’s president of the Fredericksburg Sister City Association, and he brought up the idea to the general membership.

“The whole group responded enthusiastically,” he said.

When he described the event at a sister-city potluck a few weeks later, people volunteered to help with the planning, secure donations and

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do anything else they could, said Vasey, who is chairing the event.

So many artists offered numerous pieces that organizers had to limit the auction to about 30 selections, including photographs and oil paintings, collages, sculptures and wooden pieces. Their estimated value ranges from \$100 to \$1,200, and there's a recommended starting bid attached to each piece.

Sunflowers have become one of the ways people across the globe have shown their support for Ukraine, and the country's national flower is well-represented in the donated artwork. Examples range from Caprara's "Sunflower Symphony," which has single flower heads reaching up to a blue sky, to Elizabeth Seaver's "Green Thumb," a whimsical cat with a seed packet in its bib overalls and a sunflower looming over it.

Some paint a picture of the city sponsoring the event or represent the countries that are part of the sister-city partnership.

"Fredericksburg Sunset" by Laurie Watkins includes familiar downtown scenes, including the spire of St. George's Episcopal Church, and pink-tinged clouds in the sky. Atwell-Vasey's "Snowfall" shows Fredericksburg rooftops under a light dusting of snow.

Paula Raudenbush's "A Window in France" is a graphic sketch that shows "the romance of that ancient wall, the weathered shut-



Ukraine-born artist Ganna Anya Kadnikova's "Tree of Life" will be auctioned during the event in Fredericksburg.

ters, the subtle balance of just enough tone," according to a review by Kathryn Willis.

The mural that Cathy Herndon painted near the Fredericksburg train station and on a wall in the Italian sister city of Este, shows a dove with outstretched wings. She's adapted the work, called "Columbia for All," on canvas and has added even more international touches: words on slips of paper that float around the dove. There's the Ukrainian word for hope, imagine in French, share in German, grow in Italian and learn in Nepali.

The reception also will include work from Ukrainian artists and musicians. Traditional foods from Ukraine will be served along with samples from some of the sister cities in addition to wine and beverages.

All funds raised will be divided



"Fredericksburg Sunset" by Laurie Watkins is one of several works in the benefit auction that depicts local scenes and landscapes.

among World Central Kitchen, Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders, groups helping with humanitarian needs in Ukraine.

Olga Bilyk is of Ukrainian heritage and said it's been "extremely painful to watch" what's happened in the birthplace of her parents. She's also been touched by the efforts of fellow residents of Fredericksburg.

"It's amazing that the mayor and the Sister City Association have taken it upon themselves to help to whatever degree they can the Ukrainians who have been displaced through no fault of their own," she said. "We thought we had evolved into more peaceful and different times but apparently not."

The current war is painfully similar to what her parents went through in the early 1930s when



PHOTOS PROVIDED

A replica of the well-known icon, "Of The Three Hands," showing an Eastern Orthodox Madonna and Child, is part of the auction.

they fled dictator Joseph Stalin's regime. He created a famine in an attempt to wipe out small farmers in the fertile country and about 4 million people starved to death.

"We understand the trauma that millions of displaced Ukrainians are going through right now," she wrote in an email about her and her husband. "Our parents went through much the same when they immigrated to America to escape Stalin's wrath. We share in their proverbial Trail of Tears."

After the online silent auction, there will be a live auction at the reception for other works, including ones donated by Tetiana Kadnikova, who continues to paint and sell her wares at an "Alley of Artists" event in Ukraine. Her daughter, Ganna Anya Kadnikova, also studied art and has worked in fashion but never lost

her love for painting, according to Willis, who provided commentary about the two.

Ganna Kadnikova is married to an American diplomat and when the war started, she convinced her mother to come from her home, in Dnipro, eastern Ukraine, to eastern Europe with them. She stayed a while, but when the daughter and husband returned to the United States, the elder Kadnikova went back to her homeland and resumed her painting.

Ganna Kadnikova brought 33 of her mother's works with her, and after she heard from her brother-in-law about the Fredericksburg event to help Ukraine, donated two of them, as well as one of her own paintings.

After resettling in Dnipro, her mother has joined with other retirees to support friends whose family members are fighting for Ukraine, and to help refugees whose homes have been destroyed.

She's also "thrown herself into her art," Willis wrote, focusing with a new passion on Ukrainian culture and displaying her work under the constant threat of bombs.

"We need to show the Russians that we are not afraid to continue to lead our lives, our Ukrainian lives," Tetiana Kadnikova said to Willis.

More information about the event and artists featured is available online at [fxbg4ukraine.org](http://fxbg4ukraine.org).

Cathy Dyson: 540.374-5425  
[cdyson@freelancestar.com](mailto:cdyson@freelancestar.com)



# Online movie matchup raises funds for Ukraine

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

A North Stafford man has launched an online movie-themed fundraiser to help provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine.

Todd McLean, who works as a government contractor, said the daily challenge he created on Facebook (#90sMoviesforUkraine) asks people to pick their favorite 1990s movie out of four head-to-head matchups and then make at least a \$1 donation to one of several nongovernmental organizations that are providing direct assistance to Ukrainians.

McLean said the contest will run until an ultimate winning movie is determined out of the 256 possible movies he has in the rotation.

One of the recent movie challenges pitted “Anaconda” against “Trainspotting,” “Heat” against “Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace,” “Any Given Sunday” against “Braveheart” and “Addams Family Values” against “A League of Their

Own.”

McLean said he hopes the daily challenge will not only help the people of Ukraine, but will also give people a few minutes of relaxation and fun each day. He compares the effort to Wordle, a popular online game where there’s a new word to decipher every 24 hours.

“It’s just something for people to look forward to for

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a couple of minutes each day,” McLean said.

McLean said people can choose a movie every day for the duration of the tournament or simply cast a vote whenever they have time. But McLean urges people who participate in the voting to donate at least \$1 toward one of the 14 charities he has listed, or he said people can choose their own organization.

“The whole idea is to give money to humanitarian causes,” McLean said. “I don’t want [the money] to come to me. People make their donations directly to the organizations.”

After a contribution is made, McLean asks donors to leave a comment on his social media page or communicate to him directly to report their donated amount and the charity they donated to. McLean keeps a running total and said in just over one week since the challenge began, more than \$1,300 for 17 different charities has been raised.

“I was hoping we could get to \$100 and we did that in a day,” McLean said. “I was hoping we’d get to \$500, we did that in three days. I was hoping we could do \$1,000, we did that in five days.”

In 2007, McLean was part of a Washington-based international development contract team that



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

**Stafford County resident Todd McLean is raising money for Ukraine through an online 1990s-movie-themed game he created. Players are asked to make at least a \$1 donation to one of several nongovernmental organizations that are providing direct assistance to Ukrainians. With McLean, holding decorative Ukrainian bulavas, are his daughters Lydia (left) and Abbie.**

was working primarily in Ukraine and the Balkans. During that time, he spent two weeks in the capital city of Kyiv.

“It immediately fascinated me,” McLean said. “The pride, the excitement on their faces ... it was very inspirational.”

During his time there, McLean said he immersed himself in the city, its people and their culture. On Aug. 24, 2007, he helped celebrate the country’s 15th Independence Day from the Soviet Union.

“The people there are so resilient, they’re so proud

of their independence,” McLean said.

After he returned to the United States from that trip 14 years ago, McLean remained fascinated with Ukraine, staying abreast of events there over the years, including the buildup of Soviet troops along its borders in January and what’s happening there now. McLean believes since the beginning of the Soviet invasion Feb. 22, the people of the world have come to know, support and respect Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the mil-

lions of people fighting for their lives in that war-torn country.

“There’s no reason for this to be happening,” McLean said. “They’re good people and they deserve anything any one of us can give to help them.”

The movie fundraiser asks people to contribute to UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross and a dozen other organizations McLean has posted at his social media hashtag.

“The reason I ask for a dollar is because I figure everyone can give a dol-

lar,” McLean said. “I’ve had people give from \$5 to \$200. Whatever they can give, fantastic.”

Jenny Morotini, an eighth grade teacher from Gloucester County, has known McLean for more than two decades and although she was generally familiar with his global travels as a government contractor, she didn’t realize McLean had a connection to Ukraine.

“He lifts up people around him, whether its these [tournaments] online or coaching or helping the people he works with,” Morotini said. “He’s always been such a good guy, so it doesn’t shock me at all that he would take the knowledge he has and spin it in a way that can benefit other people.”

Morotini said she donated because she wanted to help the people of Ukraine in some way, but didn’t know how she could effectively do that in rural Virginia until the movie tournament began last week. Since then, she has shared McLean’s link with her coworkers at school in hopes they will contribute \$1 or more.

“It’s reaching people that he doesn’t even know and that’s the awesome part of it,” Morotini said. “Every little bit helps and that turns into big help for the Ukrainians and it’s so great that I can be part of it. I feel like I’m helping in some way.”

McLean organized eight similar online events during the coronavirus pan-

demic with his own social media contacts to help take their minds off the hardships associated with the pandemic. Although he wasn’t seeking donations for any particular cause during those contests, his previous challenges asked his followers to pick their favorite animated movies, songs, desserts or summer Olympic event in Tokyo. During the same time, McLean, who has coached youth soccer in Stafford for years, also organized a tournament for kids based on Harry Potter.

“It was just something positive to bring people together in the crazy, difficult two years we’ve had,” McLean said.

Shelley Chaput of Fort Collins, Colo., has also known McLean for over 20 years and participated in many of McLean’s online tournaments during the pandemic.

“He did all of the matchups through the whole entire COVID [pandemic] and it was just a fun way to not think about all that was happening,” Chaput said.

McLean said this time he chose movies from the 1990s “for no particular reason, other than movies have a broad appeal to just about everyone.”

“It’s not divisive, it’s something we can all come together on,” McLean said. “I don’t want to exclude anyone. If it brings some positivity, I’m all for that.”

James Scott Baron: 540/374-5438  
jbaron@freelancestar.com