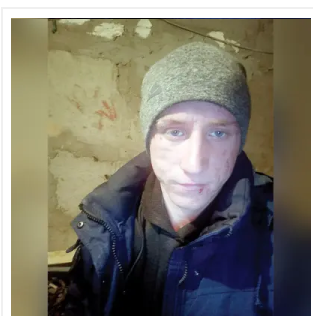


South Boston family agonizes over loved one trapped in Ukraine

IN FEAR OF A 'HOT MASSACRE,' FAR AWAY

March 03, 2022

Tom McLaughlin News & Record



Vitaliy

Each day this past week, Judith Burton of South Boston has stared at screens in the early morning hours, toggling between her cell phone and CNN. Watching TV, she keeps up with the latest news from Ukraine. On her cell phone, she waits for messages to arrive from an extended member of the family who is trapped in the war zone.

“Hello Judith,” read a message that came over Friday. “I’m safe. We had a very hot massacre today. There were 2 streaks tonight.”

The message, rendered into English by Google Translate, is choppy, but the meaning was unmistakable — the streaks were air strikes. “Those who hit me literally 200-300 [meters] from me, the first whistle hit buildings 33 square meters, the second, I can’t say exactly where he hit

“I’m safe. I love you,” the message ended.

The sender was her beloved Vitaliy, a 21-year-old Ukrainian. (The Burtons asked that Vitaliy’s last name not be used in this story for his own safety.) He is a resident of the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv (pronounced nick-uh-lah-yuhf), not far from the Crimea Peninsula that has been under Russian control since 2014. Near Mykolaiv lies Kherson, a strategically vital port city that, depending on the source, may have fallen to the Russian army on Wednesday.

The war in Ukraine has become a living nightmare for the Burton family — Judith, husband Brian, their 17-year-old son Alexander — as they hang on every word, each new communication from Vitaliy. He is Alexander’s 21-year-old biological brother, who the Burtons have embraced as their own.



The photo of explosions outside his apartment in Ukraine was shared by Judith Burton of South Boston.

“I don’t know what I’ll do if something happens to [Vitaliy],” said Judith Burton. “I’ll become a complete basket case. He’s a loved one. He is like a son. And he refers to Brian and me as his mom and dad. He’s a very loving person.”

The story of how Vitaliy became part of the Burton family has many chapters, going back to the surprising news five years ago that their son Alexander had an older brother living in Ukraine who was visiting the United States at the

time. That introduction was followed by a week-long visit to South Carolina to meet Vitaliy, then 16, who had arrived in the U.S. through a mission exchange program for orphaned children.

When the Burtons visited with Vitaliy and his host family at their home near Clemson University, the two boys — Alexander and Vitaliy — formed an instant bond, which would widen to include the entire family. Over time, the bonds deepened, and Vitaliy would learn about America through visits with his newfound family in South Boston.

Now the Burtons worry about Vitaliy. And wait. As the violence intensifies and Ukrainian cities come under siege, their worry turns to rage.

“First it was [thoughts of Vitaliy’s] safety, then Judith and I went to anger,” said Brian Burton. “Now this is panic mode. What they’re getting ready to do is going to be nasty — guerilla warfare in the streets. That’s what going to happen

“This is Putin’s war, not a Russian war,” Brian said. “The Russian people have nothing to gain from this — nothing.”



The family visiting the nation’s capital: Judith, Alexander, Vitaliy and Brian Burton.

The Burtons’ connection to Ukraine goes back to 2008, when they traveled to the eastern European nation to complete the adoption process of their son, Alexander, a three-year-old toddler at the time. They spent three weeks in Ukraine — flying into Kyiv, taking in the sights and culture of the medieval city,

then making the 12-hour train trip to Mykolaiv, Alexander’s hometown as very young child. In between, they learned much about a nation and a society that dates back to the 10th century, reigning as the heart of Slavic Christianity.

Expecting to find a drab country upon their arrival — the Burtons had been told to bring clothes in muted tones — they instead encountered a place of abundant culture and surpassing beauty, lush with evergreen and sycamore trees and dotted by breathtaking cathedrals and buildings. The Ukrainian people were a revelation, too.

“The people were very, very kind to us — most of the people we encountered,” said Judith. “They are very resilient. They are strong, upbeat, and they have a good sense of humor, too. We fell in love with the people and the culture.”

The Ukrainian people they encountered on that visit in 2008 were endlessly curious about America, Judith continued, to the point where women would come up to her to ask what it was like to live in the United States. The questioning was so persistent that Judith found herself being scolded by their guide for being too willing to answer questions: “Our facilitator said to us, ‘Will you please stop attracting all these weirdos?’” Judith recalled with a laugh.

Now she wonders what will happen to the Ukrainian people and their culture built over a

millennium.

“I just hope they don’t completely ruin the whole entire country. It just makes no sense that Putin said they [Ukraine] had no identity of their own, because boy, they do have such a wonderful identify, and great traditions. The culture is so fascinating,” said Judith.

“It just breaks my heart.”

Okay, I'll go to the bank when it's safe! Today it is very quiet in our city, but Russian equipment comes between the villages of Snigurevka and Bashtanki. I will be safe all the time! I love you and I want to get to you as soon as possible!

— Vitaliy in a message to his family in South Boston, via Google Translate

Vitaliy, who speaks Russian and Ukrainian but not English, has been holed up in his apartment in Mykolaiv since the fighting started. The worst day came on Friday when two bombing shells landed near his building. Other times, artillery fire and gun battles have erupted in the streets below. He has been forced to take cover underground, where he has fashioned a makeshift bed inches above the dirt floor.

“The siren has already worked for us and I immediately packed my things and went down to the basement,” he wrote Judith one night when the shelling started up.

His messages usually arrive in the wee hours of the morning, with time in Ukraine running seven hours ahead. “I have not slept well for a whole week now,” said Judith. “The peak times when he talks is between 2-4 in the morning, and I’m glued to CNN.” One night, Vitaliy shared a video via Facebook Messenger that showed gunfire erupting in the parking lot of his apartment. He has managed to stay safe so far, but the sense of dread eats away at Judith and Brian, and it’s only getting worse.

When Vitaliy communicated the news of the nearby air strike, Judith’s “frantic and panicky” emotions darkened: “It started turning to anger. I started thinking, Putin is targeting civilians ... When I knew [Vitaliy] was down in the basement, sleeping down there, it just made me so upset,” she said.

The Burtons had urged Vitaliy to get out of the country before Russian troops invaded. Along with Alexander, Vitaliy has another brother, Igor, a 29-year-old living in Poland. After graduating from high school, Vitaliy had gotten a job in Poland, working with his brother in the construction field. As Putin’s intentions for Ukraine ahead of the invasion grew more ominous, the Burtons’ messages to Vitaliy grew more alarmed.

“Get the hell on a train and get back to Poland — right now,” Brian told him.

Judith added, “When tensions started rising between Russia and Ukraine, Brian and I felt like he was going to be okay because he was in Poland, and I kept saying, ‘You need to stay in Poland!’”



Two weeks after that exchange, however, the Burtons learned that Vitaliy had returned to Mykolaiv to go apartment-hunting. The quality of government housing in the city was poor, and Vitaliy would send photos of one rental property after another that made their hearts sink. He finally found an apartment that all involved agreed would be a suitable to live. But mostly, Brian and Judith just wanted him to get out.

“Let’s not think about apartments right now, we can get to that later,” Brian recalled telling Vitaliy. “Right now you have to get out of Ukraine and get to Poland because this is really, really serious.”

The message came back from Vitaliy: “Oh, I’m secure, I’m fine, I’m scheduled to go

Wednesday.”

It was too late. His bus trip was canceled by Russian bombing near the bus route. Vitaliy then purchased a train ticket, but Russian troops moved into Ukraine Thursday, Feb. 24. It was too late.

“That’s when it was mandatory that anybody 18 to 60 could not leave the country,” said Brian.

Stuck in Mykolaiv, Vitaliy has endeavored to steer clear of war for the past week, venturing out only in daytime, when all seems safe and he can make a quick trip to the grocery store. With no organized resistance in evidence in his area, he has huddled in his apartment and in the basement. “I just do not want to encourage him to go out and be brave and fight. I think the concentration right now is in Kyiv,” said Judith. Added Brian: “In Kyiv they were handing out rifles. But I don’t think they have the same armaments in these other cities to hand out.”

As the Russians intensify the attack on Ukraine following a sluggish start, the Burtons know that Vitaliy could become caught up in urban warfare. He and his neighbors are learning how to make Molotov cocktails. Everyone understands that conditions are likely to only worsen from here.

“You’ve got two choices right now. You either surrender, or fight and die. It’s no different than if somebody invaded our country,” said Brian.

“There is such a fear, what is going to happen next,” added Judith.

The 2016 phone call from South Carolina came out of the blue: Vitaliy’s host family looked up the Burtons after their young orphan visitor from Ukraine told them that he had a little brother who had been adopted by a Virginia family more than a decade ago. Brian and Judith with Alexander in tow, arranged to visit the family on New Year’s Day 2017.

The week in South Carolina went so well that the Burtons applied to be host family for Vitaliy that summer. He would go on to spend almost three months in South Boston, from early June to late August, doing everything together with his host family — camping, fishing, going to Buggs Island Lake, visiting Washington, D.C., and traveling to Nag’s Head, where he saw the ocean for the first time. Some of his most joyous moments came in South Boston; one highlight was the high school girls soccer team inviting Vitaliy to take part in summer practice.

“A lot of people got to meet Vitaliy through the community and the church and in the neighborhood, and Vitaliy just loved everyone he met here,” said Judith.

After that long summer visit, Vitaliy returned again in the winter of 2018, this time experiencing the thrill of snow skiing with the Burtons. “He picked that up really, really quickly,” said Brian. “He’s a good athlete.”

Before returning home, Vitaliy confided his plans with the Burtons, Brian explained: “He wanted to spend that last year and a half with friends in Ukraine to finish out high school, and then after that, there was work, whether it was in Ukraine or Poland, because a lot of Ukrainians go to Poland to seek out work.”

With his older brother Igor working in construction in Poland, Vitaliy’s path seemed set. But the Burtons wanted to explore the idea of bringing him to the U.S. Prior to Vitaliy turning 21 this January, Brian said he talked with immigration lawyers and officials about obtaining a work visa for Vitaliy.

“Once you become 21, unless you have a work visa, or you speak the English language,

you have to prove to our government officials why you're going to come from a foreign country to take away a U.S. citizen's job," Brian said.

"Everybody I talked to — I talked to international lawyers — said right now, it's just not going to happen."

Vitaliy grew up in the central Ukrainian city of Pervomaisk, about two hours north of Mykolaiv, where he now lives (it's the same home of Alexander as a toddler.) For both brothers, Russian is their native tongue. (When the Burtons brought Alexander home to South Boston at age three and a half, "he definitely soaked up the English language like a sponge," said Judith.)

Pervomaisk, Mykolaiv and other areas in southern and eastern Ukraine are culturally Russian, yet like most of his countrymen, Vitaliy holds Ukraine's larger and more powerful eastern neighbor in low regard.

The history between Russia and Ukraine is complicated and often brutal, never more so than during the Stalin era, when the Soviet Union collectivized Ukraine's fertile farmlands and created famine conditions that killed millions of people. Most of the current generations are long removed from the cruelty of Stalinist rule, but memories linger.

Whenever the subject of Russia comes up with Vitaliy, he'll shake his head, according to the Burtons, even though he generally has no interest in politics. "No Russia, no Russia," said Judith, describing his reaction. "He is very quick to let you know that he's not Russian, he is definitely Ukraine."

Before launching the invasion, Putin argued that there is no historical or cultural basis to say Ukraine exists outside of Russia. For Brian Burton, there came a moment during his and Judith's 2008 trip to Ukraine that put Putin's lie to rest.

It was a comment made by the mother of the Burtons' Ukrainian lawyer, overseeing the adoption process. The woman, in her early 60s at the time, took on a side job as the Burtons' cook during their visit. When talk turned to Russia, the woman told the Burtons, "If anything ever happens, I'll burn my house down before I'll let a Russian occupy my house."

Brian continues to marvel at the moment, emblematic of the fierceness of the Ukrainian people.

"I don't know if [Putin] thought he was going to be the next liberator, he'd just march in there and everybody would throw their arms down, but that ain't gonna happen."

Under Stalin, Russia sought to erase the identity of Ukraine as a separate culture apart

from Russian society, to the point of enforcing the act of speaking Russian in much of the country. In Judith Burton's eyes, Putin is attempting the same with Ukraine all over again. "It's just so strange — they've got families [together] with Russians, with Ukrainians, and they're killing one another? I honestly wonder what is going on in the Russian soldiers' minds," she said.

"The Ukrainian people are so proud of their independence."

As destruction rains down on cities and neighborhoods, and the world seeks to pressure Russia to stop the bloodshed, the Burtons are often asked by friends what they think. "I was at an event the other night and someone said, what could I pray for," Brian recalled. "I said, 'Pray for the Russian citizens to have an uprising and overthrow their own government.'"

He draws encouragement from Europe's collective response to Putin's aggression, the first land invasion on the continent since World War II. "The miscalculation with Putin's war, he has rallied NATO, he has rallied the world around Ukraine, and sending a strong message of unity."

Brian expressed confidence that economic sanctions will wreck the Russian economy, but whether that will change Putin's behavior is much less certain. For that reason, he advocates going after Russia's oil wealth, the foundation of Putin's government. "We've got to suck it up. For another year or two, we can be somewhat independent on oil and gas," he said. "We've got to send a statement to these guys, these thugs, we've to come down on them so damn hard, the world says, 'Oh my gosh.'"

Until such time, the Burtons are turning their efforts to promoting the cause of the Ukrainian people, with Brian spending time this week crafting yellow-and-blue buttons to give out to people, and Judith making crafts with the same color scheme. She also keeps her wide circle of friends up to date with posts on Facebook. Waiting for what comes next is excruciating, but it is also impossible to turn away from.

"[Alexander] said to me, 'Why do you keep watching [the news]? It just gets you upset, Mom. Why do you keep watching?'" said Judith, recalling a conversation this week with her son. Alexander, she said, has been texting back and forth with Vitaliy, sending messages of love and support to his brother, but otherwise he "is real quiet about it," said his mother.

"Right now, prayers are about all we can do. Pray for the wonderful people of Ukraine. And Vitaliy, I just pray he can get with his brother in Poland," Judith said. She has been

adamant that she must hear from Vitaliy every day: “He has promised me he will tell me every day how he is He says I’m safe, and that’s what makes me get through the day — knowing he’s safe.”

As her mind races at night, consumed with fear and worry and waiting for messages from Vitaliy to pop up on her cell phone, she has let her thoughts roam into the future, as the world prepares for a refugee crisis that has already developed from the Russian invasion.

“This is what hope would be — that Vitaliy, after there’s not a threat of being shot if you go out in the streets, if he and a group of friends somehow could get to Poland or Romania or Moldova,” she said. “That’s my hope, that he can get to one of those countries, and then somehow we can try to get him as a refugee here, back in America.”

Related Stories by SoVaNOW: Home of The News & Record and The Mecklenburg Sun

Go To The
Featured
Section



Essential tasks

By now most readers will have heard about the latest atrocities in Ukraine: with the pullback of Russian forces from...



Small prices to pay

Obviously I can’t speak for anyone else — except to observe that no one can exactly be happy about rising...

NEWS
& RECORD

SOUTH BOSTON • HALLIFAX COUNTY VA

The Mecklenburg
Sun

SOUTH HILL • CLARKSVILLE • CHASE CITY VA

SoVaNOW.com

Funding sought to boost youth outlook

Tri-County Community Action Agency is seeking \$1.5 million in grant funding to provide education, job training and employment services...

Load More