

ROTARY DISTRICT 5370 AWARDS

ROTARY CLUB OF EDMONTON

RESPONSE TO UKRAINE CRISIS (APRIL 2022)

The unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has created a major humanitarian crisis in the heart of Europe that is impacting the lives of millions of people in Ukraine and beyond. The Rotary Club of Edmonton immediately responded to the needs of refugees fleeing to Poland with a unique connection on the ground in Warsaw. Anna Wieczorek, a 'virtual' member of the Rotary Club of Edmonton, is a resident of Warsaw. As soon as Anna saw refugees appearing in Warsaw she jumped into action and alerted the Edmonton Rotary Club of the need for support.

A Flood of Refugees

Within three days of the invasion of Ukraine, Anna began engaging with refugees pouring into Warsaw. On February 27th she took into her home four women from Kyiv along with their five children and one dog. She subsequently found a safe house for them and provided food and clothing.

In the days and weeks that followed, Anna's help was extended to numerous other individuals including three Nigerian university students who were studying in Ukraine; a lady from Kyiv who required medical aid; a multi-generational family of five needing housing; and a family of four (and one dog) from Mariupol who were seeking air transport assistance to Ireland.

Medical Supplies

Back in Edmonton, in late February, our Rotary Club was receiving offers of support from the public plus one very specific request for medical supplies originating with a senior manager for an electrical utility in Ukraine. This request came to us through a past member of our Club with ties to Ukraine. We saw the request as another way we could quickly translate Canadian dollars into direct support for this humanitarian crisis. Anna was put in contact with the utility manager from Ukraine to obtain the list of required medical supplies. Concurrently our Club transferred \$5000 to Anna for the purchases. Anna was able to negotiate a considerable discount from the medical suppliers, stretching our funds to a value of \$8,900!! On March 6th, with the aid of two young volunteers, Anna had the medical supplies transported to Chelm near the Polish border with Ukraine where the supplies were transferred to the Ukrainian recipients.

Funding

Prior to the end of February, the International Service Committee had committed a good portion of its budget to planned programs such as the Belize Literacy Program, Ghana School Sanitation project, UNICEF Vaccination Program and Shelterbox. However, there were still some uncommitted funds in the 2021-22 budget that could be used to cover the cost of the medical supplies.

It soon became apparent, however, through Anna's work, that much more could be done to provide support for the refugees streaming into Warsaw. An appeal for donations was sent out to our members and posted on social media. Donations were accepted on-line through ATB Cares:

(<https://atbcares.benevity.org/community/cause/124-888824448RR0001>). Approximately \$10,000 was

received in the month of March. In addition, the Edmonton Rotary Club Foundation contributed another \$5,000.

Food and Shelter

One of the major needs identified early on was temporary housing for the mass of humanity being funneled into Warsaw. Through collaboration with the Rotary Club of Warsaw City, Anna was able to direct refugees to a Catholic pilgrimage hostel outside of Warsaw in the Village of Ostrowek. Our Club provided \$5,000 in financial support to the Rotary Club of Warsaw City to help offset the cost of food, bedding, books and other expenses at the facility.

Suitcases

Through Anna's contact with refugees she observed that their personal belongings were often just crammed into plastic garbage bags. She could see the emotional impact stemming from a loss of dignity for these people and the hazard this presented to the last of their worldly possessions being highly susceptible to loss or damage. As a result, Anna proposed that our Club embark on a program of purchasing and distributing suitcases. This has been gratefully accepted by both refugees and the NGO's dealing with these people at the train stations. To date approximately \$2,000 has been spent on the purchasing of suitcases.

Work Shoes

More recently, Anna has responded to a specific need for refugees who are remaining in Warsaw and wishing to be employed. These are mostly women whose footwear is often not suitable for labour intensive jobs, so Anna is utilizing some of the funds we have raised to purchase work shoes.

Immigration Support

The partnering that takes place on International Rotary projects can sometimes result in lasting personal relationships. Such was the case with our Club's participation in a District 5370 Playground project in Ukraine.

The genesis of this project was a trip to Ukraine in 2017 by Michael Bull, a member of our Club. Through contacts Michael had in the YMCA he was introduced to Viktor Serbulov, the General Secretary of YMCA Ukraine. And through Viktor, Mike attended several Rotary meetings in Kyiv.

In 2018 Michael returned to Ukraine to volunteer in a YMCA sponsored summer school program. He reconnected with Viktor as well as the Rotarians he met the year before and mentioned the success of our District's Belize Playground program as a possible model for Ukrainian communities that had been settled by refugees from Russia's incursion into eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Upon Michael's return to Edmonton he brought the playground proposal to our club and the District Playground Committee. It was approved, and plans were set in motion to ship two playground structures to Ukraine and to have Rotarian volunteers travel from here to Ukraine in the summer of 2020 to construct the two playgrounds. Unfortunately, Spring 2020 brought COVID, and plans changed. Instead of paying to ship playground equipment from here the funds were used to purchase equipment in Ukraine and local volunteers from the YMCA and Rotary built the playgrounds in August 2020.

Fast forward to the end of February 2022 and Viktor along with his family is among the millions of people fleeing Ukraine. Through Michael's ongoing relationship with Viktor we have sourced immigration information and counselling to help facilitate travel to Canada for Viktor and his family. Similar help is being provided to the distant relatives of one other member of our Club.

Getting The Word Out With The Help of Radio and TV Coverage

Social media has been a very effective means of communicating the humanitarian needs of refugees from Ukraine. Updates from Warsaw have been provided almost daily by Anna and posted on our Club's website (<https://edmontonrotary.com/>) as well as on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/yegrotary>).

This drew the attention of CBC radio as well as Global TV. Our President, Jim Saunderson, along with Anna Wieczorek were interviewed by CBC Radio on April 6th. And the interview was subsequently posted on-line at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-rotary-club-poland-ukraine-1.6411027>. Following that, on April 14th, Jim and Anna were guests on Global TV's national program "The Morning Show". That interview was also posted on-line at <https://globalnews.ca/video/8760338/rotary-club-of-edmonton-helps-deliver-suitcases-to-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland/>.

As an example of how the media coverage has extended the reach of our support program, a lady in Calgary saw the Global TV interview and was so moved by our story that she contacted Anna and is going to fly over to Warsaw in May to volunteer with Anna for a period of time.

No End In Sight

As we approach the end of April, the war in Ukraine appears to be intensifying resulting in more Ukrainians being displaced from their homes and fleeing the country. Through Anna's heroic efforts in Warsaw our Club is continuing to provide support, making the best possible use of the limited funds we have available.