

WAR IN UKRAINE HITS HOME

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began on Feb. 24, the Niemela's have remained in contact with Moiseenko. They have even offered to have her family stay with them in NY Mills, should they decide to leave Ukraine as the violence continues to mount in their home country.

"It's been pretty emotional for us. If we don't hear from her in a couple of days we message her to check," said Brenda Niemela.

Moiseenko said it has been nice staying in touch with her NY Mills family and friends over the years. However, the one-time foreign exchange student has not taken up the Niemela's offer to come to America during the war, instead opting to stay in her home country to help with the war effort. Nonetheless, she appreciated the kind offer to have her family to once again make NY Mills their home.

War in Ukraine

On Feb. 24 Russian tanks and fighters entered the country of Ukraine as part of an invasion. Ukraine was part of the former Soviet Union that gained its independence in 1991. Since that time, Ukraine has been an independent country with a democratically elected President and government.

The invasion ended weeks of speculation and troop build up along the Ukrainian border with Russia and even Belarus. The military build up dated back to late 2021 and included Russian President Vladimir Putin recognizing the independence of two pro-Russian breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine.

Shortly after leaving their hometown of Sumy, Moiseenko and her family left to go to a neighboring community approximately 100 miles away. While they wanted to get the rest of their family to the new village, they quickly realized they would not be able to do so safely. Moiseenko said the Russian soldiers were shooting at civilians and not just military targets.

As food ran out in the town and the nearby community of Trostyanets was quickly taken over by the Russian army, the family did everything they could to help their native Ukraine against the invasion of Russian troops. Even though the Russians destroyed the hospital in the town, set up a camp, pummeled architectural monuments, an important railway station and factory, the family never lost hope.

"Once trapped we thanked God that we were alive. But we asked Him for help, because these were new circumstances and we did not know how to cope with them," said Moiseenko. "We slept in the underground vegetable cellar, but it was very cold to do it every night, so we later began to sleep in the house. But in order to have time to escape to the cellar in the event of an air attack, we took turns on duty outside at night."

Since the weather in that part of Ukraine was similar to the weather in Minnesota, many people in her family caught colds from the chilling temperatures and lack of sleep.

After 10 days of war, the family once again collected all of their things and tried to leave. They were able to cover just 150 miles in six hours and were forced to



Contributed photos

Above: Tanya Moiseenko and her husband Ruslan have helped with the war effort in Ukraine by delivering necessary supplies to families in need. Below: A before and after picture shows the destruction left by Russian bombings and shellings in Ukraine. Numerous buildings have been completely destroyed during the war in Ukraine.

avoid both the constant onslaught of bombings and Russian soldiers along the way.

The family eventually arrived in Poltava in the central part of Ukraine, where they continued to help with the war effort. While they didn't have any close relatives in the community, the family turned to their faith and church to help them find safety during the war.

"They placed us in the church, fed us, provided a shower and warm clothes," said Moiseenko. "Our condition was depressed, but they were very supportive of us."

After two days in the church, a group of volunteers offered the family a free place to stay. The family stayed in Poltava for 10 days as Moiseenko's husband helped with the territorial defense. Moiseenko turned her attention to humanitarian aid as her mother and her served in the church to assist with new refugees.

"Our whole family really wanted to be useful. We weaved camouflage nets, fed the needy and were glad they we could comfort others," said Moiseenko.

The family learned that the residents of their city were evacuated to the western part of Ukraine and Europe. There was also very little food left and that help was more important in other parts of the country.

They joined several cars of humanitarian cargo and drove to Sumy. The journey took almost two days. The trip was unlike anything they have ever encountered before as their beautiful countryside was littered with abandoned tanks, mines left by Russian soldiers and remnants of a war that just a few weeks earlier seemed like it would only happen in the movies.

"Everywhere along the way we saw broken tanks. On the side of the road there were signs 'beware of mines,'" said Moiseenko. "Arriving home, my husband immediately went to the territorial defense of the city and since he is a professional MMA athlete, European champion and world silver champion, he is very useful in this area for our dear Ukraine."

While she is proud of the fact her family and the rest of her country is fighting so

hard to stave off the Russian invasion, Moiseenko said she is still worried about the safety of her husband and family.

"I am very worried about him, but I know God has put us in this place for a reason," she said.

Prior to the war, Sumy had a population of about 300,000 people. Today, just 30 percent of all of the stores and pharmacies are open.

In addition to the refugees who have left the country in the wake of war, Ukrainian people are just beginning to uncover the path of destruction left by the Russian army as they scale back their assault on places like the capital city of Kyiv. A mass grave was uncovered with hundreds of people in a suburb of Kyiv and bodies of dead Ukrainian residents can be spotted in the middle of streets, that doesn't include the report of assaults on residents of Ukraine by Russian soldiers.

Attempting to get back to life

Moiseenko's daughter is currently enrolled in an online school, choir and karate lessons, but nothing is the same as just one month ago.

"We do not sit at home. Sometimes we clear the rubble, sometimes we feed the people and we help in the church," said Moiseenko. "Every Ukrainian has a special application on the phone. You indicate the region where you are and the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine gives a signal if a bomb flies in your city so that you have time to hide."

Moiseenko said there are 3-4 alarms that go off on her phone each day, which indicate bombs will go off in the area. Across the country of Ukraine, bombings are being reported at everything from hospitals to public buildings, apartment buildings and community gathering locations.

The constant barrage of bombings is something Moiseenko said no one has been able to get used to over the past month. The worrying about where the bombs and shellings will strike make going on with life difficult, even though Ukrainians are doing their best to not only fight off the Russian army, but get back to their day-to-day lives.

"During the month of war, about 1,500 bombs and shells were dropped on Ukraine, which hit houses, schools, hospitals and so many more the same, which did not hit the target. That is, the bombing goes on constantly," said Moiseenko. "It's impossible to get used to it."

After stopping the Russian invasion from quickly overtaking the capital city of Kyiv the Ukrainian people as a whole have met the challenge of defending their country against a much larger country and military. Their solidarity has staved off what could have been a quick war to overturn the government of Ukraine by their neighbors to the east.

That solidarity in the



face of tragedy is something Moiseenko said she has been most moved by so far during the war. People are willing to do just about anything to help one another, whether that is helping a family get food or warm clothing, or having the men join the front lines of fighting and acting as look outs for possible future attacks.

"I want to say that I did not expect such solidarity from people. The Ukrainian people are very friendly, everyone helps each other, everyone is in a hurry to help. They give the last, although they themselves are in need," said Moiseenko.

As the fighting moves to the eastern part of the country, Moiseenko said she has been thankful for all of the well wishes and support she has received from her American friends and family. Countless people have reached out to offer their support in any way possible.

Living in NY Mills

Moiseenko attended NY Mills School from 2008-09 and quickly felt at home in the community. She had lived with another family for about a month, before the Niemela's were approached about hosting an exchange student from Ukraine.

"She was in a home in Sebekia when we were approached and we thought why not. She quickly became part of our family," said Niemela. "She did everything with us. She went hunting and four-wheeling."

Moiseenko said the time she spent in NY Mills was among the most memorable and brightest times of her life.

"As soon as I came to them they surrounded me with great care and love. The year of living with them was the brightest and most unforgettable. I am really grateful to this family, because they taught me a lot and even though 13 years have passed since I left, I often remember different stories associated with these wonderful people with their children and their home," said Moiseenko. "The New York Mills School also had a very big influence on me and the teachers and my classmates are just incredibly cool people. On my first day at school I remember how girls came up to me and started talking, joking and telling stories and showing me the school."

Some of her friends included Kristen Perala, Kendall Stevenson, Katelynn Procenko, Andrea Tougas and Lauren McDonough, who all introduced their new friend to their families.

Moiseenko also left a mark on the mini golf course that was behind the Niemela family business, Mike's Plumbing and Heating in NY Mills. She painted some of the items like the flowers and farm animals at the mini golf course. One of the most memorable times of her visit to NY Mills was when her mom visited the community.

"Her mom gave us the most beautiful complement to us about the United States. Her mom said you live the most peaceful life here," said Niemela. "It was such a complement back then and now I think it really pulls at my heart."

While Moiseenko graduated from NY Mills in 2009, the Niemela's and their exchange student stayed in touch over Facebook and Messenger over the years. This past year the Niemela's received a fabric comforter and a taste of Ukraine package for Christmas.

"It is so nice with them kind of tools. You don't have to call and spend \$30 just to say hello," said Niemela.



Above: Destruction from bombings by Russian soldiers can be seen in the streets of Ukraine. Right: Some of the bombings in Ukraine have resulted in large craters in the middle of town.

