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Submitted photo

Forest Lake sophomore Aspen Blasko takes control of Olivia Sackor of Fridley in the 107-pound championship match at the inaugural girls state tournament sponsored by the MSHSL.

Blasko makes history for Forest Lake, girl wrestlers

Sophomore wins title at first-ever MSHSL state meet

John Wagner
Sports Editor

Forest Lake's Aspen Blasko took part in history on Saturday, March 5.

The sophomore also made history as she participated in the girls state wrestling tournament, the first sponsored by the Minnesota State High School League. Blasko will go into the record books as the second girl to ever win a state title thanks to her pin of Ol-

ivia Sackor of Fridley in the 107-pound championship bout.

Blasko said there was one big difference between the MSHSL state tournament, which took place at the Xcel Center in St. Paul on Saturday, March 5, and the event in previous years, which was sponsored by the state coaches' association.

"There were a lot of people in the stands here, and I'm not used to that," Blasko said. "But I told myself there were three other mats with great wrestlers, so not everyone is watching me."

"I see this as a tournament with

Blasko see page 14

'This is not just a country, this is people we know'

Willowbrook's partnership with Ukrainian pastor helps support the country during war

Natalie Ryder
Community Editor

Months ago, when tanks and Russian troops were assembling along the Ukrainian shared border, Willowbrook Community Church's pastor Brad Reis spoke with his dear friend Sergei Sergiienko, the pastor of a church in Ukraine which Reis and Willowbrook Church helped start. Sergiienko, who has visited Forest Lake on numerous occasions, was doubtful President Vladimir Putin would initiate the war that's now unfolding.

"[Sergiienko] said, 'It's Putin [flexing]. He ain't going to do anything. ... We've got a powerful army, we got the West's support; he would never be so stu-



Submitted photo

Sergei Sergiienko, left, was a Ukrainian youth minister when he met pastor Brad Reis of Willowbrook Community Church in 2006. The two have often traveled to each other's homes.

pid to do it," Reis said. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Forest Lake church raised more than \$17,000 to go to support its daughter church in the biggest ground war in Europe since World War II. But more, said Reis, they have the prayers and solidarity of their friends in the United States.

An unlikely friendship

What started as a mission trip to Ukraine in

2006 with Converge, a church planting and global missions ministry, became a life-changing experience for Reis.

"In 2006, I couldn't tell you where it was located. And now, now I've been there so many times that I just go; I feel like part of my heart is still [there]," Reis said.

During group exercises for a portion of the week-long mission trip, Reis was partnered with

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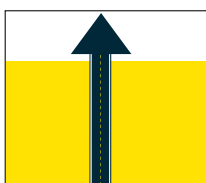
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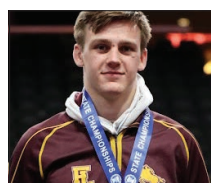
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Ukraine

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an older Ukrainian priest who seemed more serious than Reis' temperament. As the six American and six Ukrainian participants were about to split up to visit the towns where the Ukrainian clergymen lived, Sergiienko, a youth minister at the time, chose Reis to be his partner for the remainder of the trip.

On their four-hour drive from Kyiv to Chyhyryn, the local interpreter translating on the car ride realized the two were a match made in heaven.

"He starts ripping me, and I start ripping him. And then she goes, 'Oh, you guys are going to get along really good,'" Reis said. They now refer to one another as brothers because of their similarities in how they think and act.

At the end of his trip, he had a gut feeling he'd be back to build his friendship with Sergiienko and help him build a church.

Reis has visited Chyhyryn, Ukraine seven times since then, the most recent in 2019, and Sergiienko has visited Forest Lake about as many.

On a visit by Reis to Ukraine in 2010, he reminded Sergiienko, still a youth minister at the time, that the goal of their partnership was to support the establishment of a Ukrainian church.

"I said, 'Listen, when I met you, Sergei, we talked about starting a church.' ... I was expecting a long conversation and he goes 'Let's do it,'" Reis recalled.

Before Reis left Ukraine, Sergiienko already had a core group of people to help him create what is now Big Family Church



Submitted photo

A woman from Big Family Church, the Ukrainian daughter church of Willowbrook Church in Forest Lake, makes bread for distribution in their area by funds donated by Willowbrook.

in Chyhyryn, about four hours south of Kyiv along the Cherkasy Oblast river. Cherkasy, similar to Rochester, Minnesota according to Reis, has been hit by Russian attacks.

Since 2010, Willowbrook Community Church has been financially supporting its Ukrainian daughter church. That all changed earlier this year, when Willowbrook's financial support was no longer needed as his church had become self-sustaining.

"He was proud – so proud – to tell me, 'We've got this thing. That was our agreement,'" Reis said.

Reis doesn't think they made any agreement in which Willowbrook would stop funding Big Family Church when its congregation grew, but he understood Sergiienko's pride in the accomplishment.

"The Lord's got a sense of humor. Basically, it felt like an hour [passed] when he told me 'Hey, we're good, we don't need anything,' [until] the war hit," Reis said.

Light in war

On Thursday, Feb. 24 when Putin ordered Russian forces to invade Ukraine, Sergiienko messaged Reis, "Well, he's stu-

pid."

Sergiienko was in Estonia visiting friends when the war started. His community told him to stay in Estonia away from Ukraine, but he drove back.

"He was driving around traffic coming toward Estonia, and he's going back into the warzone," Reis said.

Sergiienko's church community has been relatively untouched by Russian troops or missiles, although the conflict has gripped the country for more than a week.

"For the most part they can hear the planes, and they can hear the tanks, but they haven't been touched," Reis said.

Despite the dark time in larger cities, the church is still trying to celebrate life at their services, but being located in a remote town has presented difficulties in getting essential goods and gasoline. So Willowbrook Community Church banded together to donate more than \$17,000 to support its daughter church in Ukraine.

"This is very personal. ... This is not just a country, this is people we know," Reis said.

Willowbrook's generos-

ity extended beyond Big Family Church's need as Sergiienko told them they cannot use it as fast as they've received it, so he asked for prayers.

"That's what they ask for all the time, 'Pray for us, pray for us.' ...It just doesn't seem like it's enough. But it's everything they need," Reis said.

A portion of the money Big Family Church received has been allotted to buy bread ingredients to make and pass out at checkpoints they've set up around their city.

"5,000 miles away [from here], there's women serving bread to people and caring for people and loving people and the church is still doing well. ... In the darkness this light is shining there," Reis said.

The congregants are not only making bread for Ukrainians in their community, but anyone who passes through the city, even Russian soldiers.

"[Sergiienko] goes 'I can sense what they feel, so if they come by and they're hungry, we'll feed them,'" Reis said.

Even though it has been difficult for western European countries to estimate refugee numbers, the United Nations reported that

more than 2 million Ukrainians have been displaced. Reis doesn't believe Sergiienko plans to relocate the church and leave Ukraine, but he's already offered to support the church should they flee to another country. However, Reis thinks it is unlikely that his friend, a proud Ukrainian, would leave his home due to this war.

"If this thing goes bad or really ugly, yeah, I don't think he'll retreat. He'll stay in there and he'll keep feeding people until the day he's gone," Reis said, speaking to the Ukrainian spirit at large as well.

The two instant message or talk on the phone almost every day to support one another.

"I have a strong belief that this is happening for some type of purpose. I love feeding off Sergei, and he gives to me more than what I give to him by his 'it's going to be good [attitude]," Reis said.

He related this situation to the movie "Jakob the Liar," whose main character lies to fellow concentration camp members by telling them of reports that they will be liberated soon as a way to motivate them to keep pushing forward.

"I felt like that with Ser-

gei a few times. ... I've got a picture of what's going to happen here, [saying] 'You guys are going to be good,' ... but inside I'm like 'Oh my gosh,'" Reis said.

Reis is experiencing a range of emotions throughout this uncertain time and how it is impacting his friend across the globe, but the desire to do more is nagging at Willowbrook as a whole.

Willowbrook members have been texting Reis daily asking for updates about Sergiienko. Some Willowbrook members haven't met him and are still concerned asking how to help their community in Ukraine.

"It's hard. ... It hits home right here in Forest Lake, as they are our daughter church. So, if I had a daughter over there I'd want to make sure she's okay," Reis said.

Reis and Sergiienko both lean on their faith as they hold onto hope through this time of war.

"You just have to exhale sometimes and go, 'All right God, it's in your hands,'" Reis said. "You know, I don't think He brought us this far to drop us, and He's got a bigger plan that we can't see now."

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