

December 2023

Dear Friends, Family, Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

On February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, my thoughts immediately were of Zoryana and Charlie Mills and Zoryana's family back home in Ukraine. Where exactly were her family members? In Kyiv? In the countryside? Somewhere else? Were they safe? All I could think to do was to pray...pray for Zoryana, her family, her homeland and all impacted by the conflict. A tragic event, a world away, was now very personal to me and I felt helpless. What could I do?

Now 22 months later, I have an answer to that question. Because of the myriad of connections between my life and Zoryana's, I know this endeavor we are undertaking together is blessed by our Lord. It is a mission for which I am honored to be a part.

The Family...The Mission

Zoryana's parents live in a small town and the war has not yet reached them but the missiles have landed within 8 miles of their home. Other family members live in Kyiv where bombing is a regular occurrence. By God's grace, none of her relatives have been killed.

Earlier this year, Zoryana's brother, Igor, was able to join her and Charlie here in Vandalia, through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' Uniting for Ukraine Program. Zoryana was Igor's official sponsor. He worked construction, faithfully attended our church, studied English every day, created gourmet meals for his Vandalia family and enjoyed time with his sister. Igor has recently relocated to Florida where he is employed fulltime in construction and is part of a large Ukrainian community, settling into life here.

Meanwhile, the war rages on and the time has come for the relocation of Zoryana's niece's family to the US. Victoria (Zoryana's niece) and her husband Oleg, along with 7-year-old daughter, Marianna, and 5-year-old twins, son Gleb and daughter Alisa, have been approved through the same Uniting for Ukraine Program. Zoryana is the family's official sponsor, a requirement of the program. The members of the John Calvin Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, Missouri, have also pledged official support for this family escaping Kyiv as Russian attacks escalate. Zoryana is thrilled that the family will soon be here as she and Victoria are very close, talking daily if Victoria could get a cell phone signal and if it was safe to leave their basement hideout.

Victoria and Oleg will be applying for work permits so that they can eventually support their life here on their own. Oleg is a talented commercial and artistic photographer who until recently was continuing his education in graphic design. Oleg will be seeking employment as a commercial truck driver for the time being, setting aside his pursuits in the field of fine arts. Victoria is currently employed in Ukraine as a supervisor in a logistics company and would like to continue with employment in that field here.

The Prokhodovs are an active young family who enjoy nature and all kinds of outdoor activities such as fishing, hiking and biking. They are excited about a fresh start, learning English, starting school and jobs, making new friends, leaving behind the roar of warning sirens and pieces of missiles in their yard.

Zoryana admitted to me that she is worried. In an email last month, Zoryana wrote "I don't feel comfortable asking for help, but I can't do it by myself (for a family of five)." My response, "Nor should you have to do it by yourself. You are a member of this church family. I am happy to help. Others will be too!"

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25:40

That's the mission—to raise funds for groceries, gas, and other necessary supplies to help Victoria, Oleg, Marianna, Gleb and Alisa acclimate to their new life here.

With each link I discovered between Zoryana's family and mine, I saw the hand of God, blessing me with this relationship...blessing me, blessing Gene, blessing all of us with this opportunity.

During this season of giving, please join us in providing hope for a better, safer, happier life here for Victoria, Oleg, Marrianna, Gleb and Alisa.

In Christ's Love,
Ann Schwarm

PS: To learn more about Zoryana & Charlie's story, Zoryana's own transition from Ukraine to Vandalia, the Schwarm family's many connections to the Mills family and more about Gene's "Grandpa DP" and his refugee story, check out the church's website or Facebook page later this month. We promise you more stories and more photos.



A special fund has been established here at the church. Please make checks payable to the First United Methodist Church of Vandalia. Online giving is available by visiting our church website: www.vandaliafirstumc.org, or you may scan the QR code with your phone. When contributing online, or by check, please indicate "Ukrainian Refugee Family Support" or "URFS" in the memo. No gift is too small or too large. Checks may be mailed to FUMC 127 North Fourth Street, Vandalia, IL 62471.

