

The journey to safety: Fleeing war and facing uncertainty



by Jodi Roberts, communications manager and U4U sponsor

As parents, most of us would do whatever it takes to protect our children - no matter the challenges. Over the past few months, I've had the honor of walking closely with two such parents who left behind everything they knew in search of a safe place - away from war.

That journey started in June of 2023 when a senior leader in my church shared a picture of a family of four on the projector screen during service. He had known this family for decades because they attended our sister church in Ukraine.

This family was doing their best to endure the hardship and uncertainty of war. But when bombs started to fall close to their home in Lviv - it became too much. They wondered if maybe someone had room in their heart and in their home to sponsor them under the [Uniting for Ukraine \(U4U\) program](#).

I looked at that picture - one of the children similar in age to my grandson. I thought, "what if that were MY daughter and grandchild - living with the constant fear that any moment could be their last." What would I want for them?! My heart was pricked with the awareness that I could say "yes" - I could sponsor this family and make it possible for them to find safety.

And so that journey started. It took some time to complete the sponsorship process, and there were certainly hiccups along the way. Thankfully another member of my church had sponsored a family in 2022. She was a tremendous resource for us - answering the seemingly endless questions we had about the process and what to expect once they arrived. In August, this sweet family of four, exhausted from travel, arrived in the States, relieved and hopeful.

The months that followed were busy. We grew accustomed to sharing a home and sharing life together. Even my cats eventually warmed to the guests - and my guests to the cats! We shared stories, laughs, and occasional tears along the way. I've had the opportunity to learn about Ukrainian culture, including their food. Though I admit, I've given up hope in learning their language!

I've witnessed their strong sense of community, their industrious and resourceful nature, and their appreciation for frugality. And I gained a renewed appreciation for many things I take for granted - like the ability to drink water from my kitchen tap.

I heard stories about the war and how it took a toll on them - and watched their concern as bombs continue to drop close to the homes of loved ones they've left

behind. Even the little guy, with his limited English, shared the war's impact. He told of his mom covering his ears when the missiles went overhead. "They were loud and scary," he explained.

And I came to understand that even prior to the war, life in Ukraine was a struggle. Bare necessities were hard to come by, it was impossible to save, to dream - the future looked bleak.

Coming to America was nothing short of a dream for them, especially in light of the war. They longed for something better for the children.

So with great determination, my sponsored family worked hard to get established here. They enrolled their oldest child in school. They opened a bank account and established credit. They navigated our complex healthcare system, secured employment, and gained an understanding of their tax responsibilities.

The father even obtained a driver's license and purchased a car - something that would've been completely out of reach in Ukraine.

As further testament to their resolve, in a little over 5 months, this family has done what it takes to establish their own household - having just signed their first lease. While they appreciated having a safe spot to land and get on their feet - they are ready to launch out on their own.

I have the utmost appreciation and respect for all they have accomplished - especially on the heels of living through the trauma of war. Admittedly, I find myself more than a little protective over them - knowing how easily our immigrant community can be exploited or struggle to understand the complex systems all around us. And also because I know that despite everything they have done towards

building a new life here in the States, it can all be pulled out from under them in the months to come.

Approximately [170,000 Ukrainians](#), including my sponsored family, face an uncertain future when their parolee status expires after two years. For some families, that deadline is fast approaching! With all the headlines concerning immigration and immigration reform, little is being said regarding the future for these families. And few understand the complexity of our immigration system and the subsequent impact it has on those seeking a safe place to call home.

Next week we will dive a little deeper into nuances of Parolee status and what it means. In the meantime, as we consider as a nation how we will welcome newcomers in the future - as we examine our policies and practices around immigration - let us center these discussions on this one critical truth - these are real people. Let us aim to treat them with the same care, consideration, and love we would extend to our own family.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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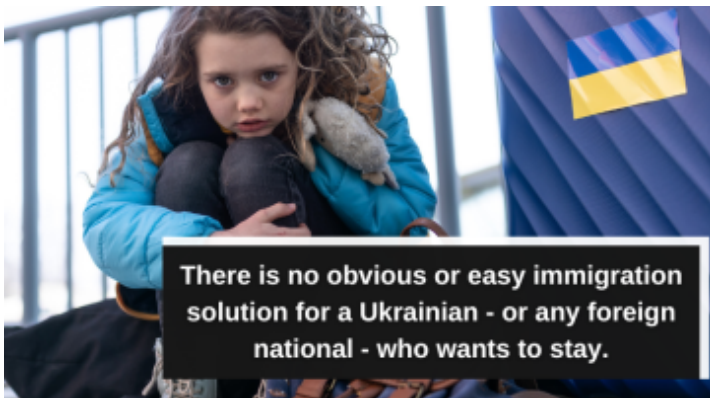


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