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A HUB OF HOPE

Westchester continues
resettlement efforts by
helping Ukrainians

By TODD SLISS

One humanitarian crisis is a lot. Two overlapping? No sweat as resettlers in Westchester County are answering the call in increasing numbers beginning with Afghanistan last August to Ukraine starting in March.

The overwhelming need to help refugees and asylum seekers has been met with overwhelming enthusiasm for individuals and community groups to spring into action to take care of families forced to leave their homelands under dire circumstances.

Sergiy Glazunov and his family have been staying in a guest house in Scarsdale, but will soon relocate to an apartment in Mamaroneck. Wendy Kleinman saw a post on Facebook and while she and her husband, Scott, are philanthropic, they'd never taken strangers into their home before. It happened "very quick," but from a Monday conversation to Friday, the Glazunovs — Dad, Mom, 10-year-old daughter and small dog — were at their house. (They were one of nine families who responded to requests to house the Ukrainian family short term.)

"It's been an incredible, incredible experience," Wendy Kleinman said. "They're a lovely, lovely family. My son has become very good friends with their daughter. They play all the time. I go walking the dog with



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Residents of war-torn Ukraine evacuate under dangerous conditions, taking only what they can carry.

them. We've had them over for dinner and barbecues, Father's Day."

Also within days of their arrival, Glazunov's daughter was enrolled at Heathcote Elementary School for the final weeks of the school year, a piece of normalcy in a strange place for her.

"I will say Scarsdale was incredible," Kleinman said. "They got to my house Friday night and by Wednesday morning she was in school. Tuesday afternoon I brought her to my pediatrician to make sure she was up to date on whatever was needed. The school was great in helping make sure she was in the classroom and she was with another little girl who happened to speak Russian to help ease the transition. Heathcote has been wonderful to this little girl and Scarsdale has stepped up in a very impressive way."

The community has also been helpful. While Kleinman wasn't advertising the situation, whenever she mentioned it to friends they always asked what they could do to pitch in.

"It's what Scarsdale is all about, which is coming together to help people," Kleinman said. I've always thought that's one of the things that makes Scarsdale Scarsdale, and really sets us apart from other towns. People

have been so kind and thoughtful and willing to do whatever to help them."

While the Glazunovs weren't in need of being resettled, which is often a six-month to one-year community effort involving time and financial commitments, the short-term help they needed was crucial for the family. Sergiy Glazunov, 52, was born in Ukraine and came to the United States in 1994 to further his education with a master's degree and an MBA. He stayed in the U.S. to work and eventually became a citizen, so for the international businessman leaving Ukraine after moving back there 14 years ago, and having spent four years in Westchester, wasn't as dangerous or difficult as it has been for many others. After a week in a bomb shelter following the Feb. 24 Russian attack on Ukraine, the Glazunovs left the first week of March. They spent time in Europe before landing in Westchester.

"We were really embraced by the community, just a tremendous level of support for us and all the people who have been coming from Ukraine recently," Glazunov said.

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Well-known Ukraine pianist Dr. Irena Portenko, who lives in Dobbs Ferry and has worked in the Scarsdale Schools music program since 2008, has been taking action by raising money, collecting donations and holding benefit concerts to help Ukraine and Ukrainian musicians. She also helped in getting Glazunov, her ex-husband, set up with the Kleinmans.

Portenko is mostly relying on her music contacts to help other Ukrainians in need, raising tens of thousands of dollars thus far, with more concerts coming up July 29 and 30 in White Plains and Somers.

"I feel very helpful right now because I have a lot of connections through the students and Ukrainian community ... I teach all over Westchester and people usually know one another and they can recommend people with houses and empty rooms," Portenko said. "They do provide spaces to the refugees and this is a beautiful thing."

While Portenko appreciates the work being done by groups like United Help Ukraine, Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration (WJCI), the town of Greenburgh and others, her heart is heavy for those suffering from the war.

"I feel very, very split because part of me is very, very emptied by the events and there's a lot of emotions, including rage and sorrow and grief, all things that can really put a person down, but the other side you see what's happening and people are actually taking this whole situation as if it were happening to themselves, their families, and they are taking it close to their hearts and doing everything possible," she said. "Everybody is offering everything they have and this is very uplifting. You can see how people have given their hearts and souls, people of different backgrounds."

Portenko knows there is a lot to be hopeful for as she watches "the courage of the Ukrainian people" and the nation's army continue to put up a fight. That in turn motivates her. "We just continue because we have to," she said.

Learning from the past

WJCI has been working to help immigrants since president and co-founder Holly Rosen Fink created the volunteer organization three years ago. WJCI gained great notoriety during the Afghanistan crisis, so when the Ukraine war broke out



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Women and children often fled Ukraine alone as most males stayed behind to fight the Russian army.

WJCI became a go-to group.

Edgemont's Ira Lazar learned that quickly. After seeing one of the many emails from Greenburgh Town Supervisor Paul Feiner looking for housing for Ukrainian families, Lazar was connected with Fink.

"I sat down and read that and said, 'I don't know that I have a choice here,'" Lazar said. "I'm living alone in the house I raised my family in. I moved to Edgemont 45 years ago ... and now the house is empty and I have all these rooms and all this space and I don't think there is any way I could not do this."

Fink visited Lazar and the two agreed Lazar would take a family into his house in early July. "Holly really moves," Lazar said. "She is a woman in motion."

Lazar responded quickly because he knew he had to pay it forward based on his own family history. There was a war in Ukraine 100 years ago against Poland, similar to the one with Russia today, and in 1921 Lazar's mother, who was 3 years old at the time, fled with her family, crossing into what is now Moldova and eventually landing in New York.

"It's a hundred years later and the same thing is happening," Lazar said. "I have some familiarity with the area because in my youth ... I traveled in these areas, although they were a little different than they are now. I have some familiarity with what life is like there and having heard the stories that my mother always used to tell, I can't but be overwhelmed by what the people living in the places that I saw are going through now."

Getting to America was no easy task for

Lazar's mother's family. His grandmother was a widow and a matchmaker connected her to a widower who had papers to get to America. They married and eventually went through Ellis Island, settling in the Lower East Side, not speaking the language and struggling to make ends meet.

"They were poor and it was tough, but my mother was identified ... when she was in grade school as being extraordinarily bright," Lazar said. "The school system educated her differently and eventually put her into Hunter College High School, which was for exceptional young women, none of whom lived in the Lower East Side. She was brought into a different world and that was the world I eventually came to inhabit."

Lazar's mother taught an orientation class in the South Bronx during a period of Puerto Rican immigration to help children of all ages learn the language two months later.

Lazar visited Ukraine in 1966, 1970 and about a decade ago, but never got close to visiting his mother's hometown as the road was guarded. What he never realized is that a bribe would have gained him access.

Now Lazar has a chance to help a family — a computer programmer, an architect and two young children once they come to the U.S. from Western Poland after leaving everything behind except their car and a few belongings — the way others had helped his mother.

Lazar said WJCI is "totally connected with everything and they know how to get papers done, they know how to get entitlements, they know how to get health care for

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people, they know how to get people over here. There's a special program [Holly] knows about where there's no delay for getting approved."

Lazar expects the family of four to stay with him for the next school year as the older child will be of kindergarten age. "That's going to be a good arrangement and living here is pretty comfortable in this area, so I figure it would be better for them to save up money than to have to rent, so we're looking at a year," Lazar said.

Hearing the stories coming out of Ukraine today takes Lazar back to his childhood hearing about his mother's journey.

"I'll tell you it made my hair stand up," he said. "When people came over here they were helped by people after the Second World War. We had relatives and other people staying in our house whom my father brought over from Europe, even one family from Ukraine. They lived in our row house for a few years. It's sort of been in the tradition, in particular for people from that area of the world, that you've got to do this when people need help."

Since the Afghanistan crisis, WJCI has become "more of a force in the community" and "more known for our mobilization, social action, education and advocacy effort," according to Fink. WJCI received grants from UJA-Federation and the Shapiro Foundation in order to form and train groups to resettle Afghanis. The organizers went into 45 synagogues in March during HIAS's Refugee Shabbat with Afghani speakers just as things were heating up in Ukraine. "We started to get the ears of the community right at that moment and we knew we were sitting on something big," Fink said.

WJCI has helped resettle two Ukrainian families and has committed to helping 12 more. In addition they are helping other groups do the same.

"What we've seen is a huge amount of support from Westchester," Fink said. "Anything that's needed by a Ukrainian family takes minutes to obtain, whether it be camp for the summer ... [or] a doctor in the community."

While many of the Afghani refugees were coming in on Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for having helped the U.S. military in Afghanistan for 20 years, those coming from Ukraine have different entry points and statuses, often unable to work in the United States right away, making it tougher for

them to become self-reliant within the six months to a year resettlement groups give families to be on their own.

In addition to financial assistance, housing, furnishings, clothing, transportation and medical needs, many of the families are coming from extremely stressful situations, in some cases with the father back home fighting the Russian army.

"There's a lot of trauma involved," Fink said. "A lot of the women left their husbands behind. There are major issues. The bombs are dropping as we speak, so it's a very real-time trauma that I as a volunteer haven't dealt with before."

There is also concern that mothers will resort to prostitution or human trafficking to take care of their families. "That's a big concern, a really big concern," Fink said. "There are a lot of groups advocating to protect them from that. The women are really scared. Who knows if they have worked ... and all of a sudden they're in another country and their husband is not here."

Many of the early resettlement families are coming from word of mouth among community members in Westchester. WJCI's first came from a congregant of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue in White Plains, who met a man in a Scarsdale hair salon who had arrived from Ukraine days earlier with his 61-year-old parents. After their apartment got bombed on March 1, they took their wallets and passports and ran, evacuating out of Poland to America as he already had a green card.

WJCI teamed with Neighbors for Refugees and Sinai Free Synagogue in Mount Vernon to find and furnish housing in Fleetwood. Many other community members mobilized to help provide other necessary services before they moved to New Rochelle and an Afghani family has now taken over that house.

Another family consisting of a mother and son came from another "chance encounter," according to Fink, and "within days" they were living in someone's attic in Larchmont. It was ironic, a Jewish family hosting a non-Jewish family in their attic for a month until more permanent housing was found. "It is quite heartwarming," Fink said.

While they were in Larchmont, the mother and son were at Fink's house daily for dinner and English lessons as they slowly started to integrate. The son went to middle school and has a scholarship to Mount Tom Camp for the summer, in addition to free soccer lessons.

"It's just been a very generous, lovely outpouring here in the Larchmont/Mamaroneck community," Fink said, noting Larchmont Temple was highly involved.

WJCI has five more families on the dock-

et looking for groups to help them resettle, some of them in "limbo" living in Ukraine, Poland, Coney Island or with family members. Many of those families are also hopeful they can one day return to their homeland safely.

The generosity from throughout the county has evolved as awareness of the plight of the Afghanis and Ukrainians has been well documented in the news and online. Seeing it in "real time" has been a boost to the humanitarian efforts.

"The Jewish communities across America have stepped up in a very big way," Fink said. "Our goal is to use the Jewish community as a crux, as a lens to get to other communities ... When we form groups, we bring in churches, we bring in mosques — we bring in everybody — even though most of the families we are helping are not Jewish."

Though the list of affiliations and resettlement groups falling under WJCI's tutelage is rapidly growing, it takes time to get everyone up to speed so they are ready and able to take on a family. WJCI Vice President Marti Michael of Scarsdale has helped build that roster of coalitions since the COVID-19 pandemic closed down the borders and the work she had been doing since her 2014 retirement helping refugee families and children in Texas, Arizona and Mexico with the tent camps was halted. She soon got involved with WJCI and her work changed with Afghanistan and Ukraine.

"The Afghan crisis hit and we became instrumental in Westchester County in convening host groups to support the SIV refugees," Michael said. "We are a connector of the communities in Westchester. Although we are based in Jewish values, our host groups tend to begin at a synagogue and branch out and include people from all faiths and all areas of Westchester. It's been really extraordinary. The makeup of the groups is really wonderful."

In addition to working locally in Westchester, Michael has used her connections from having been the executive director of the Riverdale Y to lead the Northwest Bronx Coalition for Refugees, which recently resettled a family of seven from Afghanistan in South Yonkers and is also helping a Ukrainian family with certain needs.

Balancing two crises at once is challenging, but that isn't slowing the enthusiasm to help others. Michael fears that in addition to wars, climate change will cause a long-lasting immigrant crisis.

"Climate is affecting politics and is going to create wars," she said. "I have met many asylum seekers coming out of South America who are climate refugees. They are here

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because they lived on a family farm for five generations and now it no longer rains there, they can't grow food and they have no way to survive. Wars will end. Climate won't."

Malvina Peckerman joined WJCI's efforts earlier this year after attending Refugee Shabbat at Shaarei Tikvah in Scarsdale. She offered her services as an interpreter as she had grown up in Odessa, Ukraine.

Peckerman left the former Soviet Union "stateless" in the mid-1970s at age 21 as it was a difficult time to be Jewish in that area. After living in Austria and Italy she moved to Boston, then Brooklyn and most recently White Plains. "Historically it was a window of opportunity where we were able to leave legally," Peckerman said. "Being young we decided to use this opportunity."

Peckerman had the support of UJA, HIAS and Boston Jewish Family Services while making her way to the U.S. She's donated to UJA over the years and after meeting an Afghani refugee at her temple, she knew it was time to get more involved.

"Now I am simply ... paying back what was given to us so many years ago," she said. "I told Holly that I can be an interpreter or whatever is needed to help people from the country I left so many years ago. Most likely we are of different faiths, which is completely irrelevant to me. Where I grew up was a very multifaith environment. For us, as hard as the life was for Jews, it was our decision to move. We did it on our own versus people who are coming here now — they are running from the war."

Peckerman heard stories from her grandparents and parents about their struggles, so she sees history repeating itself in a negative way. Though none of her family remains in Ukraine, she does have childhood friends there whom she is in touch with. As it was during World War II, they are fighting for their land, while she and others are helping from abroad.

"It's very American," Peckerman said. "The country is a melting pot. All of us came here in the last 200 years for a better life, for freedom, to exercise our religious rights. Once we settle, especially the adults who went through the process of getting accustomed to a new country and naturalization and being grateful, it's only natural for us to try to help those who are running from their homeland."

While Peckerman knew she was buying a "one-way ticket" out of Ukraine, that is not

always the case for the current refugees.

"Some people are just hoping for better, for the war to be over," she said. "They would like to go home. For us it was a one-way ticket for better or for worse. We didn't know what the life would be. We just packed and left the country. Speaking a pretty good level of English opened doors for me."

Hitchcock Presbyterian Church in Scarsdale has partnered with Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains to work with WJCI and Hearts and Homes for Refugees to get involved in the resettlement movement. Two congregants were inspired back in August when they were "watching [Afghani] babies be handed over fences and put on planes," according to Hitchcock Associate Pastor Rev. Katherine Pater. They told her it was the congregations "Christian obligation to do something for these people," especially since the U.S. government had been involved in protecting Afghanistan from the Taliban for 20 years before pulling troops out.

After a conference call with Hearts and Homes for Refugees and a connection made with Kol Ami a new resettlement group was formed. "We realized we are two very similar organizations in terms of size, in terms of resources, in terms of temperament, if you will, who are both really interested in doing this work and they had done it before," Pater said. "They had helped resettle a Syrian refugee family three or four years ago."

It took a lot of work, but the temple and the church did their due diligence in setting up committees and fundraising and making sure they had the manpower, and soon they resettled a family from Afghanistan in Westchester. There was a core group of 10 or 15 from Hitchcock who have had a direct, ongoing connection with the family, but at least half the congregation has donated money or items, and all of the congregants have been educated and participated spiritually in the endeavor.

"What we intend to do is take the knowledge, skills and connections we've built with realtors, with housing groups, with our Jewish brothers and sisters at Kol Ami and hopefully train and empower and equip other organizations in our area to continue doing this work," Pater said. "It's hard, it's complicated, you're accompanying your family through all kinds of legal and cultural and linguistic challenges and that can be very hard, but it's very rewarding."

As he has watched what he said was an estimated 35% to 40% of his country ravaged by the war, Glazunov has turned his sights toward rebuilding. Part of the reason he returned to live and work in Ukraine was

because it was "developing quite fast at that time" and he wanted to be part of that movement, most recently working for a gas production business owned by a company from the United Kingdom that has assets in Ukraine.

Glazunov is calling the Rebuild Ukraine initiative a "people's startup" as it depends on the global community — both individuals and groups and businesses of all sizes — to become stakeholders and use their expertise and resources in redeveloping the country. Glazunov has been using his contacts to get the ball rolling, with construction one of the main focuses.

"It's a wide range of initiatives in construction and health care, oil and gas, pretty much the full range of sectors," he said. "By starting the rebuilding from the bottom to the top it should complement all these major things that should come eventually. This will give a jumpstart to the economy now. ... I'm trying to work on and convey this idea [so] it gets some traction and support."

A Community Rebuilding Project is also underway as Glazunov has reached out to officials like Feiner to start establishing sister communities. "A community here will help to rebuild a community in Ukraine," Glazunov said.

With the length of the war and the final damage both unknown, Glazunov calls it a "chicken and egg problem" as he searches for the current needs and infers what will be needed down the road.

"We need to structure this in the proper way," he said. "It all takes time. The country is already functioning to a big extent. The war has moved to east and south, but that can change. The economy needs to restart, needs a jumpstart. In the communities that have suffered tremendously we need to find some ways to push some life into them."

There are also financial risks involved, but with a strong network, Glazunov is confident the country can bounce back, which is why he is working at 3 a.m. with his Ukrainian team and then during daylight hours in Scarsdale with his local partners.

"All these attempts shouldn't be viewed as purely humanitarian efforts," Glazunov said. "I think people in the United States need to think of how to make the best for themselves, for the United States and for the Ukraine, so this type of approach is what needs to be established. For me it's the way to go."

There's a lot at stake around the world whether it's resettling families or rebuilding their homes so they can go back. For families near and far, Westchester County has become a hub of hope, thinking globally and acting locally.