

My name is Anastasia, and I'm a 12 year old girl from Ukraine. I would like to share my story.

It has been almost four months since my family was forced to relocate to the United States from Ukraine due to the war that began February 24, 2022. Before this tragedy, my mother, father, two sisters, and brother lived an ordinary life filled with fun and joy. Everything changed in one morning. On that fateful day, we awoke to the news that we couldn't attend school as usual, meet with friends, or play. Our souls were paralyzed with fear and deep pain we had never experienced before. In an instant, we were no longer carefree children. It's difficult to recall the first couple of days of that time. I remember we were unable to leave our homes and prohibited from turning on the lights. Our father joined a self-organized territorial defense force, an unofficial militia that patrolled our village at night. My dear mother continued to wipe away her tears and say prayers. We all prayed.

Fighter jets and helicopters frequently flew over our house. We didn't know whether they belonged to the Ukrainian military or our cruel attackers. We were disoriented and shocked. Why would our neighbors hate us so much? Why would anyone have such a strong dislike for us that they wanted to destroy us?

Since our house didn't have a basement, we sought shelter in our neighbors' basement during air raids. The majority of our fellow villagers and relatives volunteered to defend Ukraine. Even my uncle Bohdan, a military officer of the Azov special unit since the age of 14, defended our country from Russia. When the full-scale war began, he once again stood up to defend the Motherland. On March 3, 2022, he heroically died defending the city of Bucha. He sacrificed his life for us and for our Ukraine, leaving behind his mother, wife, and two young children. The loss we suffered is indescribable. Glory to Our Hero!

During that time, we did everything we could to help our military. Together with our relatives and fellow villagers, we raised funds to purchase vehicles and equipment. My father, who is a mechanic, often repaired cars brought from Poland. My mother and several women from the village cooked food and sweets for our soldiers. Children drew pictures and expressed gratitude and support for our guards. Cars were filled to the brim with supplies, food, and drinks to be sent to the front lines. I was involved in crafting camouflage nets along with my sisters and brother.

We continued this lifestyle until winter, when Russian terrorists attacked our infrastructure. The days became very cold, and the nights were freezing. I can vividly recall my parents' worry for us. Out of desperation, they made a post on Facebook begging for help with at least temporary relocation from such unbearable conditions. Our prayers were answered. To our surprise, Olena Matchenko, the founder of the American nonprofit organization "Toledo Helps Ukraine (THU)," reached out to us and offered us the opportunity to participate in a lifesaving relocation. THU secured us a sponsor and helped us with the necessary documents, and soon we flew to the USA.

We are immensely grateful to our sponsor Rick, Olena Matchenko, the Franciscan sisters who have provided us with a lot of help, and my Starlings Volleyball coach Dr. Paat, who organized a team of Ukrainian refugee girls to be part of a Starlings Volleyball team that represents our country. We are thankful that we have encountered such kind and compassionate people. My parents are now both employed, and we all feel safe here in the USA.

However, it is incredibly painful to acknowledge that thousands of people are still exposed to rocket fire from Moscow, and thousands of soldiers continue to sacrifice their lives for our freedom. It breaks my heart to think that countless children are unable to experience simple yet essential things in life, such as studying, traveling, and sleeping peacefully at night without running to bomb shelters or living in fear. Our children are no longer just children; they have become children of war. We will never forget or forgive the suffering inflicted upon us.

Glory to all our Heroes! Glory to Ukraine!