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‘Wherever there is darkness, we want to make a difference’: S’porean couple helping Ukraine war survivors

Ms Lam Bao Yan and husband Rudy Taslim are among Singaporeans who volunteered to help people affected by the Ukraine war. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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SINGAPORE – After years of volunteering in Africa, Ms Lam Bao Yan and her husband Rudy Taslim, both 38, made their wills – just in case – and flew to Europe to help Ukrainian war survivors.

Ms Lam first visited Germany to support Ukrainian refugees in April. She extended her trip when she got the chance to travel to Ukraine, where she returned to in August with her architect spouse.

Amid the jangle of war sirens, the pair have, within the past six months, established programmes providing shelter, food and counselling for single mothers, children, seniors and people with physical or mental disabilities. They are about to complete a project building 500 bomb-resistant homes in time for the bitter Ukrainian winter.

Their volunteer experience in Africa led them to believe they could also be of service in war-stricken Ukraine.

“We have seen how, playing our own little part, we can make a difference,” says Mr Taslim, founder and managing director of architecture firm Genesis Architects, where Ms Lam is the director of operations. She also runs a business providing accommodation and educational support for foreign students in Singapore.

The Christian couple, who got married in 2019, have no children.

Their passion for volunteering started with a visit to Mozambique in south-eastern Africa nine years ago.

Ms Lam visited the country to do charity work in 2013 after meeting Ms Heidi Baker, an American Christian missionary based there who was on a speaking engagement in Singapore. When Mr Taslim made a trip there the following year, he began questioning his career and future.

He says: "I'd been building shopping centres and commercial buildings and I wished to do more." He resigned from the architecture firm he was working at and bought a one-way ticket to Mozambique, where he spent four months in 2014, volunteering to distribute food and medical supplies to the underprivileged.

In Mozambique, which has high rates of poverty, he learnt what it meant to live with "hopelessness". Access to electricity, food and health services was scant in the areas he visited.

One day, he learnt that the grandmother of a young man he had got to know was dying from malaria. Luckily, the malaria pills Mr Taslim brought with him were enough to restore her to health.

He became motivated to do more pro bono work overseas. "Living in these communities, I experienced a paradigm shift. Instead of building and designing buildings, I realised I could be involved in building and designing their future. I am now in a sweet spot where I'm able to integrate my faith with my profession."

He started his own firm, Genesis Architects, in Singapore that same year. It has been involved in projects like building a spa in Sentosa and an island resort in the Maldives.

The couple would continue working with non-profit organisations, companies and governments throughout Africa over the next few years. They have launched livelihood schemes involving the provision of cows and goats, helped design a university in Mozambique, and built schools for former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as for blind children in Rwanda.

Closer to home, the Singaporean couple are working with local partners to build an airstrip for the transport of medical supplies to remote villages in the forests of Borneo. They declined to reveal the cost of these projects.

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Singapore couple build free bomb-resistant homes for Ukrainians

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February and images of war victims began to flood the media, it was an easy decision to fly over to pitch in. "It's in our blood. Wherever there is darkness, we want to play a part in making a difference. We also have the experience and ability to pioneer projects in different countries and pull teams to work together," says Ms Lam.

The opportunity came when the principal of a local bible school asked her to lead a group of 12 volunteers to Germany to work with a local Christian group, who were supporting refugees that had fled from Ukraine.

Between April and May, in the German town of Bad Blankenburg, they provided counselling and distributed food to refugees. Some of the evacuees were young girls who clutched photos of their fathers, whom they were separated from as many men were enlisted to fight. They asked Ms Lam wistfully when they would see their dads again.

you are super lwi
miss you very muc
I will never forget your
smile
I Love you

Ms Lam Bao Yan and her husband Rudy Taslim with messages of thanks from child refugees who fled to Germany from Ukraine. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

In Bad Blankenburg, Ms Lam was introduced to more than 10 non-governmental organisations working in Ukraine. This enabled her to leave Germany with some of the volunteers to head into the war zone for another month. She later returned for three weeks in August with Mr Taslim.

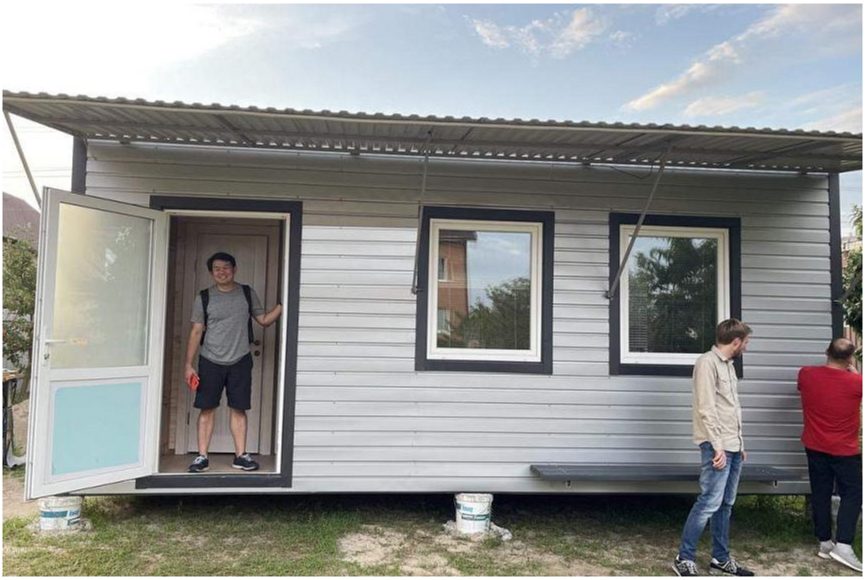
During these two trips to Ukrainian cities and towns like Kyiv, Bucha, Irpin and Moschun, the couple saw first-hand the ravages of war: wrecked cars and buildings with floors and windows missing; a group of 80somethings who had been living in chicken coops after their homes were destroyed; a blackened metal bed, all that was left of a house where a handicapped man lay as he burnt to death, unable to move when bombs hit.

A pile of vehicles that were destroyed amid the war in Ukraine. PHOTO: LAM BAO YAN AND RUDY TASLIM

They were accompanied by a team of professionals they had assembled, comprising dentists, doctors and counsellors. Working with local charities, they provided food, shelter, medicine, diapers and other necessities for the needy, especially the disabled and elderly as well as women and children separated from their menfolk.

Their agenda, says Ms Lam, was to serve the “lowest of the low”. “The Ukrainians we met had never heard of Singapore and it piqued their interest when they saw us. They had been hoping that the world's superpowers would help them. They thought they had been forgotten. They asked: 'Are you here to help us?' A lot of grown men broke down and cried," she recounts.

In November, Ms Lam and Mr Taslim will return to Ukraine for the final stages of building the 500 emergency homes. These housing modules, slightly bigger than a container and fitted with a toilet, kitchen and living spaces, can be connected to create larger homes. The cost of each home, crafted using locally sourced materials such as pine wood and industrial-grade styrofoam, is about €4,000 (S$5,600), about a quarter what it would cost if using imported materials, says Mr Taslim.



Architect Rudy Taslim in the doorway of one of the bomb-resistant homes he designed to house war victims in Ukraine. PHOTO: LAM BAO YAN AND RUDY TASLIM

It has been a fraught journey with close shaves.

On her initial visit, Ms Lam, who did not have a Ukrainian app that warns citizens of imminent missile attacks, scrambled into a nearby forest when she saw others doing so. She spent a few hours hidden among bushes. Finally, when the all-clear siren sounded, she was surprised to see a hundred other people rise from their hiding places in the woods to return home.

Mr Taslim was jerked back by his shirt collar by a local guide as he was about to enter a forest to look at pine trees. His guide pointed to a small sign he had missed which said "mine" in Ukrainian. He would have stepped into a field of landmines.

The couple take all the precautions they can, anxious to allay the fears of their parents. Before they ventured into Ukraine, they made their wills, wrote letters and said goodbyes to family and friends, in case the worst happens as the war roils on.

Ms Lam says: "We're not reckless and we don't put ourselves in the line of fire. We're not there to be heroes."

For more information on Ms Lam and Mr Taslim's work in Ukraine, go to www.loveonukraine.com

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