News

Singaporean in Ukraine: “The question isn’t why we care, it is how can we not?”

As people in Ukraine continue to suffer in war, Singaporean couple return to ravaged country to help build houses, care for special-needs adults and orphans

John Lim
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(Editor’s note: Lam Bao Yan is a Singaporean in her 30s who has taken two trips to help people in Ukraine. She and her husband Rudy are currently back in Singapore. They will return to Ukraine in November. This is her story, as told to John)

The Ukrainians have an app that tells them when a missile attack is coming.

I don’t.

Once, when we were shopping for groceries in a supermarket, I suddenly saw everyone running. People were screaming, shrieking, and running very fast.

As a Singaporean in Ukraine, I didn’t know what was happening. Our local guide quickly loaded us into his car, and drove us to the forest. Having never done National Service, I remember thinking to myself, “Forest can hide *meh*?”

But I just followed.

After several hours, I came out of the forest. And I wasn’t alone — other people emerged with me.

I was part of a group from a bible school in Singapore on a mission trip to Ukraine. We were among the first Singaporeans to be there. The others on the team were Stacey, a trauma counsellor (also an educator for 24 years), Devi, a special-needs coach, and Sandy who is a dental professional and speaks Ukrainian.

When we first met the local church leaders, they were astonished. Marvelling at how different we looked, one leader told us: “We didn’t expect God to send us a yellow-skinned person with small eyes. We thought people had forgotten about us.”

Rudy, Bao Yan’s husband, with some Ukrainians with special needs. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

We hadn’t forgotten Ukraine.

When news of what was happening in Ukraine first emerged, my heart was burdened. Deep down, I was asking myself, “How can we not do anything? How can we not care? How can we read and not do anything?”

I wondered if there was something I could do.

Helping Ukraine was brewing in my heart when an opportunity came to serve Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

In May 2022, I took a team of students to serve among the refugees in Germany. Every day, we would cook, clean and help them in other practical ways.

Then one day, a local church leader asked us if we wanted to go into Ukraine. I jumped at the opportunity. Of course, I was scared. But I knew that this was a chance to serve at the heart of the conflict.

It was a chance to help the people from *within* the country.

Seeing firsthand the destruction that the war has left behind. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

But first I had to get there.

We drove from the refugee camp in Blankenburg, Germany, first into Poland, then across the border into Ukraine. It took us three days to make the 2,000-km trip. In comparison, it takes just 13 hours to fly to Germany from Singapore.

Being in Ukraine was unlike anything I had experienced before.

I remember the first time I had to use a toilet in Ukraine. Our immediate difficulty was finding one we could use — we first had to find a petrol station that was still standing!

When we finally found one, I went in to use the toilet. There were bullet holes in the walls. The windows were shattered. On one wall, there was a long streak of blood.

One of the many petrol stations that were bombed, cutting off fuel supplies for residents. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

In May, we were almost into summer. The temperature was slowly rising, but with the warmth came the strong smell of dead bodies. I almost threw up.

It was at that moment, in that bullet-ridden petrol station, that I truly felt what it was like to live in a war-torn environment, where I couldn’t even use the toilet in peace!

Helping from the ground

One of the scenes from the destroyed villages that Bao Yan visited to try to evacuate residents. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

Some have asked me how I care about the Ukrainian people. But what they are really asking is *why* I care about a people, thousands of kilometres away, who have no seeming connection to me.

I can talk about all the sacrifices I’ve made to be there with them.

But those don’t matter.

Now that the borders are opening, back in Singapore, I could spend more time working, earning more money, buying a bigger house or enjoying another holiday. But while I may have a tomorrow to plan for, these Ukrainians do not.

That's what drives me.

I remember three children I met in a poor village. Their parents had disappeared since the war started, leaving behind a 15-year-old boy, an 8-year-old girl, and a 5 year-old boy with cerebral palsy.

When we first met them, they were extremely vulnerable. Especially the girl.

She was telling us about how the "uncles" in the village were asking her if she wanted to "work" so that she could help her family. We suspected that she was at risk of sexual exploitation. You can't imagine an 8-year-old girl sold into sexual slavery.

Discarded clothes in the garden of a plundered Ukrainian home. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

We later supported them with food and medical supplies for an entire year; it allowed them to go back to school.

Despite all that is still going on, they work hard to attend class, because they believe that better is possible. They believe in a future where what they learn, their skills, will have a place to shine through.

In the midst of the hopeless situation they find themselves in, they still dream of a better tomorrow.

Stories like that keep us going. Whilst we are tempted to give up, these Ukrainians haven't.

They are still fighting.

Helping life go on

Rudy at the front of the emergency housing he designed, with some locals. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

So what are we doing to help?

My husband Rudy and I run an architectural firm in Singapore. In Ukraine, we have been designing and building emergency homes for the upcoming winter. There, winter temperatures can fall to -20 deg Celsius.

We've been value-engineering the houses, in other words choosing cheaper materials to bring down the costs of rebuilding from €23,000 (S$32,500) to €4,000.

So far, we've built 200 homes, and we are committed to build 500 before winter sets in.

Life just hits different there.

One day, while working there, it suddenly struck me: What if the homes we built were destroyed again in the war?

When I asked a church leader, he stared at me for a while before explaining quietly but with conviction: "So? Does that mean we just give up? War or no war, life has to go on."

That simple phrase "Life has to go on" stayed with me.

Through the pandemic, in our own ways, all of us have gone through struggles and suffering.

I'm not trying to compare our struggles to those of the Ukrainians; I'm not saying we should care because they are suffering so much 'more'.

No. We've all suffered.

What I'm trying to say is that when we help, when we lend a hand in a practical way, we take a stand — together — in the face of all that's bad in the world.

Housed and homed

Bao Yan and Stacey with the groceries they brought for the Ukrainians. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

You may be sceptical. How much difference could our team of four make in a country of 44 million?

We weren't there to save the world. We knew we couldn't.

But we wanted to make every life count. We wanted the Ukrainians to know that they weren't forgotten. We wanted them to know that someone, somewhere, even from as far away as Singapore, still remembered them.

It is easy to forget. After all, the war has gone on for more than six months, and media attention has slowly shone its spotlight elsewhere — unless there is a dramatic new development.

Whenever we meet Ukrainians, it is a reminder to us that this is still a war going on. Every day, they would get multiple missile alerts that leave them quickly scrambling into underground bunkers or the forest.

A destroyed tank. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

But despite this, many Ukrainians still refuse to leave the place they call home.

There are others too who cannot leave: The elderly, the physically or mentally handicapped, and the men who fight in the war. Going into villages that have been flattened by war, we evacuate some of these people with varying needs.

Overwhelmed by emotions

(From left) Sandy, Stacey, Rudy and Devi. Photo taken in Irpin, one of the many destroyed villages. In between the shelled out parts of the buildings, people are still living in the undamaged units. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

How do I describe these emotions that overwhelm me?

In these destroyed villages, some of these handicapped are in wheelchairs. Or some with intellectual disabilities would struggle to understand what you were asking them to do. "Go, go!" You would shout but they just stare at you blankly.

Do you make the decision to stay with them or leave to find others "worth evacuating"?

What would you do?

What about the single, pregnant mothers whose husbands have been killed? They are hopeless and helpless. They want to abort their baby, afraid to bring a child into a world during a dark, deathly period. Yet, which mother would willingly want to abort her own child?

What would you do?

Our heart for the nations

Bao Yan with a Ukrainian teen with special needs. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

To us, every life is a life. It's worth staying behind for. It's worth telling them: "You're not alone. We will stand with you."

The world has problems, and alone, none of us can solve them. But together, we can. Coming together as a community, we can amplify kindness.

Kindness for us is practical, standing in the trenches with these people, fixing their lights, building their homes.

ОФІС АДВОКАТІВ
(073) 411 00 07
2 ПОВЕРХ

Scenes of destruction dot the landscape everywhere we went. Image source: Lam Bao Yan

I hope reading this story prompts a question within you.

The question isn't why we should care. The question is: How can we *not*?

Caring — and not caring — is a choice. I know this, because I too was tempted to let things slide.

Until I realised that my choice is a chance.

It's a chance to share what we have with the world. It isn't about giving up the holiday you've been saving for. It is about giving out of our time and abilities to others. It's about giving in to the knowledge that we can do something to make a difference in the world.

Let's not ignore that.

If you would like to contribute in some way, visit loveonukraine.com or email us at impact@loveonukraine.com.

Charity community feel-good inspirational
special needs Ukraine war

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