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Culture and Lifestyle

Meet the S'porean couple rebuilding homes & restoring power in Ukraine

In aid of war survivors, Lam Bao Yan and Rudy Taslim have built 450 houses in hard-hit areas and set up a network of 80 'lighthouses' providing hot meals and medical aid.

By SGN | 17 Apr 2023

"Why are you here? Everybody has left. All the foreigners have left."

When Bao Yan first entered Ukraine in May 2022, three months after war had erupted, she joined a gathering of 800 pastors in Lviv – close to the western border – who were stunned to see a foreigner arrive, let alone a small Asian woman.

Entering Ukraine wasn't part of her original plans, but after leading a group of bible school volunteers to help Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Bao Yan was moved by their plight and felt compelled to do more.

The devastation she saw was heartbreaking. In Bucha, there were corpses on the ground, cars burnt and wrecked, hollowed-out buildings riddled with bullet holes. And as millions of Ukrainians escaped their war-torn homeland, millions of others were left behind, lacking the resources to flee.

Typically, the most vulnerable survivors were the old, the young or the infirm, and Bao Yan resolved to help them however she could. Returning to Singapore, she regrouped with her husband Rudy, gathered resources, and strategised their next steps.

Moved by the plight of Ukrainian refugees, Bao Yan and Rudy have made multiple trips into the war-torn country to provide aid.

Building homes and bringing hope

At Rudy's architectural practice, Genesis Architects, Bao Yan spearheads pro bono projects. These include educational institutions in Africa, such as a school for the blind in Rwanda and an accredited university in Mozambique.

Now that the refugees in Ukraine needed new homes, Rudy set out to design a solution that would be low-cost, bomb-resistant, and able to endure the frigid Ukrainian winter, where temperatures can plunge to –20°C.

"He sourced local materials, spoke with local factories, and employed local builders and movers," Bao Yan shares. "And they were happy to help rebuild their own country." Eventually, Rudy's team managed to build around 450 houses in hard-hit areas like Bucha, Moshchun, Kharkiv and Donetsk.

Rudy designed low-cost, bomb-resistant, winter-proof housing for Ukrainian refugees.

After Russian airstrikes paralysed Ukraine's power grid, Bao Yan and Rudy organised efforts to deliver generators and turn churches, orphanages, hospitals, government buildings across Ukraine into a network of 80 aid stations – so-called 'lighthouses' – that provide hot meals, electrical power, counselling and medical aid.

In Zhytomyr, 140km west of Kyiv, they also set up a shelter for pregnant widows and people with disabilities, employing local nurses and therapists to support these vulnerable groups. Their work has helped around 500 women through pregnancy and childbirth. For Bao Yan, it's been incredibly gratifying to know that these mothers did not resort to abortion and to see, months later, their babies alive and well in the world.

Bao Yan and Rudy helped set up a network of 80 'lighthouses' across Ukraine and supply them with generators to power heaters and charge medical devices.

Drawing closer to the frontlines

So far, Bao Yan and Rudy have made four trips into Ukraine, each lasting three weeks or so. The journey from Singapore, which takes up to 50 hours, entails two flights to reach Krakow, followed by a long drive towards Kyiv.

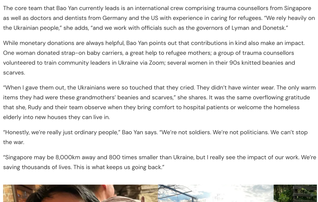
Fuelled by a desire to reach desperate survivors, the team has travelled further east and closer to the frontlines. On the most recent trip, Bao Yan recalls being stationed in Lyman, a small city in the Donetsk region, mere kilometres from the frontline.

"I stayed in an underground shelter and could hear the shelling going on every few minutes, all day and night," she says. She could also see Russian drones flying overhead, scouting the area.

The team delivered food as well as winter shoes and gloves to the civilian soldiers – men who had been separated from their families and had to stay back and fight. "When I return two weeks later to the same spot, there are people I don't see anymore. I ask, 'Where are they?' They are no longer alive."

At the frontline hospital, Bao Yan witnessed the horrors of war: Ukrainians wounded by bullets, bombs, and even landmines. Yet the hospital was woefully ill-equipped. There was a shortage of hospital beds, operating tables, lighting, surgical instruments. In desperation, doctors were asking her to deliver expired supplies or secondhand equipment if she could.

Some of this equipment spells the difference between life and death. "Without an oxygen concentrator, they could only operate on a patient for 10 minutes, which is not long enough for a successful operation," Bao Yan says. "Now with the oxygen concentrators we bring in, they can operate for 60 minutes and longer."



Bao Yan and Rudy continue to drop off supplies like food, diesel, heaters, clothing and sleeping bags to support internally displaced refugees, most of whom have lost everything in the war.

Activating help across borders

Having recently obtained residency permits in Ukraine, Bao Yan and Rudy are now able to prolong their stays in the country. Aside from coordinating the provision of medical supplies from around the world, they're hoping to build more homes, set up more shelters, and support the soldiers in Bakhmut, where the war has been raging for months.

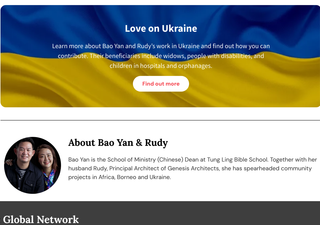
The core team that Bao Yan currently leads is an international crew comprising trauma counsellors from Singapore as well as doctors and dentists from Germany and the US with experience in caring for refugees. "We rely heavily on the Ukrainian people," she adds, "and we work with officials such as the governors of Lyman and Donetsk."

While monetary donations are always helpful, Bao Yan points out that contributions in kind also make an impact. One woman donated strap-on baby carriers, a great help to refugee mothers; a group of trauma counsellors volunteered to train community leaders in Ukraine via Zoom; several women in their 90s knitted beanies and scarves.

"When I gave them out, the Ukrainians were so touched that they cried. They didn't have winter wear. The only warm items they had were these grandmothers' beanies and scarves," she shares. It was the same overflowing gratitude that she, Rudy and their team observe when they bring comfort to hospital patients or welcome the homeless elderly into new houses they can live in.

"Honestly, we're really just ordinary people," Bao Yan says. "We're not soldiers. We're not politicians. We can't stop the war.

"Singapore may be 11,000km away and 800 times smaller than Ukraine, but I really see the impact of our work. We're saving thousands of lives. This is what keeps us going back."



Love on Ukraine

Learn more about Bao Yan and Rudy's work in Ukraine and find out how you can contribute! They benefit vulnerable widows, people with disabilities, and children in hospitals and orphanages.

Find out more

About Bao Yan & Rudy

Bao Yan is the School of Ministry (Chinese) Dean at Tung Ling Bible School. Together with her husband Rudy, Principal Architect of Genesis Architects, she has spearheaded community projects in Africa, Borneo and Ukraine.

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