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Escaping Ukraine's horrors

Mother, sons make harrowing journey out of war-torn Kyiv to South Kitsap

By BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

A little more than three weeks ago, Daria Kuserets and her two boys — 10-year-old Makarij and 8-year-old Zaharij — left on a harrowing, circuitous journey across two-thirds of Europe to escape the horrors of war in their homeland of Ukraine. On March 7, the young family finally arrived after a long air journey from Geneva, Switzerland, to Seattle, then on to the Port Orchard home of Daria's sister Alexandra Kuserets for an uncertain future. Here is their story.

PORT ORCHARD — Until late February, life was wonderful for Daria Kuserets and her husband Borys. The married couple and their two young boys were content and fulfilled living life in Kyiv, Ukraine, a dynamic metropolis of nearly 3 million people ripe with entrepreneurs, growing businesses and a nascent democracy.

The family lived in a beautiful downtown high-rise apartment close to Borys's high-end furniture factory called Kassone, which he built from the ground up. Daria — informally called Dasha — is a driven, intelligent woman who worked for years obtaining her college education in Canada and France, ultimately earning a doctorate in economics and law. For the past two years, as one of Ukraine's foremost experts in the field of artificial intelligence, and as a university professor, she also built her own dream career by establishing the University of Artificial Intelligence in the capital city of Kyiv.

That all changed on Feb. 23. The storm clouds of war that had been looming in the east for months finally erupted in a fury

of explosions, destruction and carnage. Bombs dropped from the skies by Russian fighter jets with indiscriminate fury fell in a thunderous cacophony over Ukraine's largest city and other urban areas in the nation once part of the Soviet Union, altering — and destroying — the lives of millions of Ukrainians.

The cruelty of Vladimir Putin's war was just beginning.

The beginning

The morning of Feb. 23, Dasha woke early for her yoga class before heading to work at the university. That's when she heard the wail of air raid sirens, followed by the thundering sounds of explosions from bombs that struck military and airport installations in suburban Kyiv. She woke up her husband, then quietly awakened the boys. In just five minutes, she grabbed documents, passports and some cash she had set aside. Departing their 15th-floor apartment, the family headed down to the building's underground parking garage. There, they encountered a horde of fellow neighbors, shocked by the nearby turmoil overhead.

Dasha: "In the media, we heard about the possibility of war. I believed it would happen, but not a lot of people did. I did because I know Russia well. I had heard [Vladimir] Putin, so [my husband and I] understood it was going to happen. So I had packed our clothes as an emergency. Before the war, there was a lot of business activity here. People were working hard and making plans in their lives."

"Everybody thinks there was panic, but I kept working. I only had two days, so I had to arrange



KITSAP NEWS GROUP PHOTO BY BOB SMITH

Sisters Alexandra and Daria "Dasha" Kuserets, pausing outside Alexandra's Southworth home, ponder the future of Dasha's family and their embattled home country of Ukraine.

for it and prepared our documents. I knew something was going to happen because Putin loves very much to celebrate Russian people. The 23rd of February in Russia is Army Day. There was a celebration, and then it happened. A lot of people were completely surprised. Nobody thought that there was going to be bombing."

It was a paradox, Dasha said, recalling the contrast between their productive lives beforehand and now the bombing and turmoil. Entrenched all day down in the parking garage, her neighbors had gathered with their pets (some of them had to be tragically left behind after people fled Kyiv). After a phone conversation with Borys's parents, the family left to spend the night at their home. The kids dozing in their clothes, sleep was difficult for the adults because of the constant thuds from the bombing and the shrill Ukrainian anti-aircraft rockets. Collateral debris rained down from the sky around the parents' home, igniting fires nearby.



COURTESY OF DARIA KUSERETS

A moment of relief and shared hugs for the Kuserets family after arriving in France.

Returning to the parking garage on the second day, people arriving from the Ukrainian city of Donbas, southeast of Kyiv, told her that "if you want to leave, do it right now because it's going to be much worse." Dasha asked her friend, single and without family, to accompany them on their escape out of Ukraine.

Dasha: "Imagine such a feeling, like a rat being in the garage. It's a big difference when you have organized a university and do great things at a very high level — then you are stuck in a garage. Russia wants to kill us. They were bombing everywhere to create panic. We had five minutes to make a decision. I asked my

husband — what should we do? Looking at a road map with the understanding that the Russians wouldn't bomb the city for 30 minutes, I asked my friend to come with us, because you should help other people.

They didn't sleep for two days and nights. With the highways heading west out of Kyiv packed with cars heading to the border with Poland, the five took out for Romania. They crossed the Dnieper River, staying on the right side of the highway since the Ukrainian army had mined the bridges on the left roadway to stall any Russian ground advance.

See UKRAINE | 6

SKFR's call volume breaks record in 2021, keeps rising

By BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — The number of calls incoming to South Kitsap Fire and Rescue increased 10.7 percent in 2021, reaching more than 12,000 calls in one year and making it the busiest fire district in Kitsap County.

The call volume continues to rise this year, according to SKFR Fire Chief Jeff Faucett. Emergency calls in January were 20 percent

higher than in the same month last year, he said, necessitating a need for the fire district to hire more personnel.

In 2021, SKFR responded to 12,005 emergency calls, or about 33 calls a day. But what might be surprising to many people is that emergency medical services accounted for 68 percent of all emergency responses by SKFR. Fires accounted for 208 calls — or 1.73 percent of emergency calls in 2021.

"Fires are devastating,



and the most costly emergency service we provide," Faucett said. "Fighting a fire takes more personnel, apparatus and equipment than anything else we do. While fires are a small percentage of our calls, we must be prepared for when

they happen to prevent loss of life and property."

While SKFR provides the highest level of emergency medical service, called Advanced Life Support, the agency also responds to explosions, hazardous material spills, technical rescues, motor vehicle accidents and natural disasters. And then there are the proverbial "cats in trees" calls the fire district occasionally receives.

"We've had pets stuck in trees, water leaks, people

unable to get off the floor, residents locked out of their house or car, kids stuck in playground equipment, house water pipe breaks — you name it," Faucett said.

Also on SKFR's call list are "special calls," classified as someone believing there is an emergency when there might not be one. The fire chief says that, regardless, a fire unit is dispatched to check it out.

SKFR's emergency crews have been responding to calls for many decades — in

fact, it is celebrating its 75th year of service this year. Celebrations are planned later this summer when the weather brightens.

"We are extremely grateful for our community," Faucett said. "We can't say it enough, [but] 'thank you.' The South Kitsap community has invested in and built a high-quality emergency service response. Their personal and financial support means that we can save lives and property."

Mayor seeks 'one word' to describe Port Orchard

City survey asks community for a descriptive word to adorn new community event center

By BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — Mayor Rob Putaansuu is looking for just the right "word."

Putaansuu and the city are asking the public to suggest ideas for "one word" that celebrates Port Orchard. And that one word could be incorporated into the exterior design of the planned Port Orchard Community Event Center and Library facility, which will be sited downtown on the waterfront.

Members of the public are being asked to provide their suggestions online at

imagineportorchard.com/one-word.

The wordplay is to be added in large letters on the exterior face of the building, the design of which is being done by Bremerton-based Rice Fergus Miller Architecture. The firm's current conceptual design includes the word 'Community' on one end of the building in large letters and "Event Center" on the other side.

The mayor said he'd like community members to give their input on what they believe should adorn the building — and he thinks someone may have a better idea.



The mayor is asking the public to suggest ideas for "one word" that celebrates Port Orchard. That word could be incorporated into the exterior design of the planned Port Orchard Community Event Center and Library facility.

"I really like the way the word 'Community' wraps around the two sides of the building in the conceptual drawings," Putaansuu said. "I especially like how the word 'Unity' is created when you face the building head-on, and it made me think that there must be a better idea than 'Event Center' for the other side of the facility."

The mayor said the

"one-word" survey is an opportunity for the community to make a statement about what makes Port Orchard so special.

"Since this facility is intended for the benefit and enrichment of the public, I thought that asking the public to help could be a meaningful exercise," Putaansuu said.

The survey will be online through April 10.

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Ukraine

CONTINUED FROM 1

Dasha: "When we were crossing, it was very scary because a [Russian] fighter jet was flying above the line of cars we were in, and it was very loud. There would not be much you could do if they started bombing. We unbuckled the kids and told them to get out of the car and hide if that happened."

Romania

The family and their friend drove nonstop for two days straight. Reaching the border with Romania, Dasha told her husband, "OK, let's go." Borys turned to her and said, "I don't want to go. I want to stay here and help." The former athlete and now furniture maker and businessman made the decision, as did scores of Ukrainian men, to leave the side of his family to enlist in the Ukrainian armed forces and take up arms in support of their homeland.

Dasha: "We started to cry, and I said, 'I want us to go together.' But I gave him an opportunity to decide, as all men should, and he decided to stay in Ukraine. There was no time for dramatics, not wanting to traumatize the kids."

At 4 p.m. on Feb. 26, Dasha, the boys and their friend entered Romania at the Porubne customs entrance. Upon crossing the border, they and other refugees were met with kindness by the people in the small village who had organized housing and provided food and telephone cards for them. Dasha accessed a Facebook page offering housing for the arriving Ukrainians. One party offering to house them was a couple — strangers — who had a place for them to stay in Bucharest. Driving nonstop, they arrived in Bucharest — a 1,500-kilometer drive from Kyiv — without stopping or sleeping.

Dasha: "They had a nice place that was for sale and they took it off the market for us. They filled the refrigerator with food. I was very surprised how people helped a lot."

Dasha, ever prepared, had filled her car with cans of fuel in Kyiv to keep them on the move. Needing to get her car serviced for the long trip (Dasha had scheduled an unmet appointment in Kyiv before hostilities broke out), she pulled into an auto shop. The work normally would have cost \$600-\$700, but the service mechanic declined payment. It was a gift, he told her.

Hungary and Slovenia — and finally to France

Seemingly endless kilometers faced them after leaving Romania. Ahead was a vehicular trek through Hungary and Slovenia before reaching Italy. The tedium was broken only by the noise of the adolescent boys in the back of the car. Arriving at each border crossing meant recounting, and reliving, their bizarre story to customs officials and sympathetic helpers along the way. Her preparations back in Kyiv and those precious collections of documents, however, somewhat eased the confusion and concerns.

Tired and unsure of the route ahead, Dasha motored on into Italy.

Dasha: "Going into Italy — to Milan — we found out that there were no hotels open after 10 at night when they would close their doors. It wasn't until 2 or 3 in the morning that we got a place to stay. After Milan the next day, we then got to Mont Blanc in France. It was a very beautiful city — one of the positive things on our trip, which we did try to find along the way. It was so different in this part of Europe than in Kyiv, where everything has developed so quickly with new businesses and investments. Here and in places like Romania, everything was established, so it was strange to see."

They traversed the circular, winding roads surrounding Mont Blanc until reaching Lyon, where Dasha parked her car with friends there, people who she had stayed with years ago as an exchange student living in France. The French couple drove the exhausted group to nearby Switzerland, where on March 7 they headed to Geneva's international airport and boarded a flight for their trip to



COURTESY OF DARIA KUSERETS

A French couple, longtime friends of Dasha Kuserets, drove Dasha and her boys to the international airport in Geneva, Switzerland, for their long flight to Seattle.

Seattle. Thankfully, Dasha possesses a U.S. visitor's visa and the boys, who were born here, were able to quickly depart Europe for Seattle and a reunion with relatives — her sister, brother-in-law and cousin — living in South Kitsap.

Arrival in South Kitsap

Dasha and the boys are now staying with her sister Alexandra and her family living near the Southworth ferry terminal. Alexandra Kuserets is herself something of a success story. Educated at the University of Wisconsin, she is a senior technical program manager in IT for ActivTrak, an Austin, Texas-based cloud workforce analytics software provider with a presence in Seattle. She's currently working remotely from

her South Kitsap home, where her family has lived for two years.

Now in the U.S., their first priority was getting the boys settled in for their new life here — with a murky future ahead.

For the boys — Makarij and Zaharij — their first introduction to life in America began in earnest March 14 when they started school at South Colby Elementary, where they are enrolled in South Kitsap School District's English Language Development (ELD) program. The boys, who speak only Ukrainian, said they were excited to start class at South Colby — the district has in place a teacher who is able to help them get started learning English.

Alexandra: "They [SKSD] were super-supportive. The district has

a program for immigrants. We'll have to support them and help them integrate with the school and stabilize their lives. But Dasha needs to support them financially. She doesn't want to apply for refugee status. She just wants to work while she's here. With her education and experience, she has so much to offer society here. After all, she helped Ukraine reach the next level in IT. Dasha doesn't just want to be here and not be working and contributing."

Alexandra says her sister is extremely driven, smart and hard-working. Ultimately Dasha's best hope is to have an employer in her field of expertise to sponsor her so she can earn an income and support her young family while they are here.

Still, Dasha can't help but think about her

previous life and what has been lost.

Dasha: "We invested so much in our country. It was hard work to get to my level of education. And my husband has his factory, which sent furniture to Europe and the United States, their biggest importer."

Then there are the worries about loved ones back home. Her husband, who she's in contact with every day, is helping the Ukrainian military with logistics, information, humanitarian needs and transportation. On Friday a few weeks ago, they "had a big scare" after learning the army wanted to assign Borys to command 30 men on the front lines in eastern Ukraine, where so much of the intense fighting has occurred.

See UKRAINE | 7

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARIA KUSHERETS

Dasha Kusherets (right) with a colleague at the University of Artificial Intelligence in Kyiv, Ukraine, before the war.

Ukraine

CONTINUED FROM 6

The military is paradoxically struggling with the patriotic fervor of its people — it has so many volunteers, there's some confusion about how to utilize them most efficiently. But to the relief of Dasha and her family, Borys is now contributing from safer confines.

She worries about their parents, who live in the outskirts of Kyiv, a strategic area whose military base and utility station have been a target of the Russians. Dasha's in-laws have moved in with a great-grandmother living 100 kilometers south of Kyiv, where it's safer. Through it all, the sisters have kept in constant contact with them.

Alexandra: "They [their parents] haven't slept at all. I worry about them because my

dad has heart medication and my mom has asthma because of the stress. It's so sad. They have a beautiful house and dogs and cats. That was their life and they were living their own dream. My dad said, 'I just don't want that to control my life. Putin doesn't have control over me.' He was even planting tomatoes and said, 'You can't tell me what to do. I'm going to go on with my life.' But we got them to leave because it wasn't safe where they were. They brought two big dogs, a little dog and a cat, and one change of clothing with them to a safer area. They didn't have much time to do anything. Where they were, they couldn't leave the house. But they're safer now, and they now are able to go for walks."

The sisters' father, Vasyly, is an academic with a doctorate in philosophy and is a published author of more than 30 books. And their mother is a retired history professor, and "an



Dasha Kusherets's boys outside South Colby Elementary in Port Orchard March 14 on their first day of school.

incredible gardener and cross-stitch artist."

Alexandra said even though their parents are in a safer place, the war has taken a psychological toll on them. While on the phone with their mom, someone had entered the house where they are staying, and the door loudly closed. She shrieked over the phone, "Oh my god, the bombs are exploding!"

Welcoming neighbors, but an uncertain future

The top priority right now, Alexandra said, is to create a sense of normalcy for the family. The first order of business is to

get the boys busy with school (they now have their own Chromebooks at school) and Dasha back to work, fulfilled and providing for her boys. That includes finding a place to live. They've called an organization that serves the large Ukrainian community in the Puget Sound area, but their calls haven't yet been returned — Alexandra suspects they've been overwhelmed because of the war in their faraway homeland.

The family has been embraced by their new Southworth neighbors near Alexandra's home. Ten of their neighborhood families generously donated bicycles, helmets, beds and bedding, and

clothing for the boys. It's a small step toward normalcy.

But Dasha remains hopeful that her dreams, and that of her family, will once again — one day — be realized back home in Kyiv.

Dasha: "When it stops, I want to be the person to help develop the country and fight for democracy — and fight for a future. We don't want to be part of Russia. We have a different philosophy of life — we're different in every way."

Note: To help Dasha and her boys during this confusing time, Alexandra has set up a fund-raising site in which people can contribute financially for Dasha's family. It can be accessed at give-butter.com/boys-daria.

Kitsap Credit Union donates \$10K to support displaced Ukrainians

STAFF REPORT

PORT ORCHARD — Kitsap Credit Union has donated \$10,000 in support of Ukrainian refugees who have fled their war-torn nation.

"Our hearts and thoughts go out to our Ukrainian neighbors, and although separated by distance, we stand beside them at the most devastating moment of their lives," said Shawn Gilfedder, CEO of Kitsap Credit Union.

The crisis in Ukraine has already displaced more than 3.5 million people who have escaped their nation in search of safety due to the unprecedented attacks by Russian military forces. In its show of support, the credit union donated to the United Nations Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF). According to the organization, UHF was chosen because of the work it does through tax-deductible donations to support refugee families. UHF coordinates with the United Nations, partners in Ukraine, neighboring countries, and authorities to help and protect refugees and people displaced by violence, conflict and persecution, the credit union stated in a news release.

Kitsap Credit Union said it is inviting others to join them by donating through local branches or its website. To learn more about UHF or to make a tax-deductible donation, visit crisisrelief.un.org/ukraine-crisis. People also can consider

donating to International USA, Mercy Corps or Save the Children.

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