

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Today's guest is Rob Rose, travel journalist and host of the syndicated TV show, Raw Travel, where he takes viewers on his off-the-beaten path journeys. Rob shot four episodes in Ukraine where he met soldiers going to the front lines, volunteers who traveled to Ukraine to help, and Ukrainians just trying to live their lives in the face of the Russian invasion. Welcome, Rob. Thanks so much for joining us today.

RR: Thank you, guys, for having me.

VC: For those listeners who don't know your show, talk a bit about Raw Travel and tell us what makes it unique.

RR: Yes, I began Raw Travel after I was living abroad in South America, living in Colombia, 2009 and 10 and basically just experienced travel very differently than the travel I was seeing represented on US television and having worked in TV most of my career, I saw an opportunity. And so, the type of travel I really wanted to showcase to Americans in particular which was more long-term travel, off the beaten path, budget travel. A lot of US travel revolved around luxury, or food, or celebrities, and so I immediately thought, let's do something really raw, kinda like the way I'm living. So it was like no hair, no makeup, and really no host was the idea and I just kinda was the host by default because I'm free and I was financing it myself. So, I'm cheap and I ended up thinking maybe it'll be on the air, maybe it won't. It got on the air. Because it's independent and we were able to find our way and we worked our way from 70 markets to, now we're in 187 cities and we're in our 12th season. I don't know how many countries I've been to but it's several dozen or scores and I'm very proud of the work we've done. People think I've been everywhere but I still have a lot of places to go.

KK: Well, it's interesting watching the four- part series on Ukraine. You did say, "I didn't know much about Ukraine's history on the onset. What did you learn, why did you go back more than one time to volunteer during this terrible invasion by Russia?"

RR: Well, the first time I went to Ukraine predated Raw Travel in 2012 so that was the Yanukovych years, and for those people who don't know Yanukovych was like a Putin puppet so in 2014 was the Maidan Revolution where they ousted him and he fled to Russia. So, I was just like watching from afar and I'm like hey, I've been there. But I didn't know a lot of people, right? So, I went back on 2019 after the Maidan and that's when I really got to know people. I met musicians, I met a wonderful photographer, she took me on a photography tour and I put her on camera. She ended up being our videographer, Anastasia. Anastasia was a refugee from Eastern Ukraine from the original invasion in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014. So, when I got to know Anastasia and her family story, they had to basically start all over in Kiev I was just like wow, it hit home. It just happened coincidentally that I was able to go back that same year in the winter on a press tour courtesy of Ukraine International Airlines, so I got to go to Lviv for the first time and I learned even more history. And so, things started to fall into place at that time and I'd also gone to the small country of Georgia that same year. And Georgia has a very similar history to Ukraine in that Russia has invaded, occupies part of the territory, meddles in their elections. They just had an election and it's controversial because I'm pretty sure it was messed with big time by Russia. And so, after seeing all this, when the full invasion occurred, I now knew people and my heart was breaking. So, I went back in 2022, I was with Anastasia who had just refueed from Paris. She had not been back to Ukraine since she had fled with her little brother while her father and mother stayed behind. Her mother is a doctor and her father is a soldier, he had to fight. Her mother stayed behind to be with her patients. So, we went back, she was able to reunite with her mother. We filmed a little bit but it was short. So, in 2023 when the documentary was filmed, I just said, I gotta stay longer, I gotta go deeper and I met more people including some humanitarians, specifically Mark Carey who is a Marine, not an active Marine, but retired from the US. He invited me along. So, I went back, reunited with Anastasia and we filmed what was the four-part docu-series, My Summer in Ukraine. And then I went back again last summer and I stayed even longer but I didn't film this time. I was just there to experience Ukraine. I took notes, I took photos. Hopefully I'll write something about it someday. One documentary is very difficult to make so I'm still digesting that work.

VC: Rob, you introduce us to other volunteers who came to help like yourself. So how are they able to get food, clothing, supplies, etc. to these families, to these people who have lost everything. Do they work with organizations, do they work with NGOs?

RR: In 2022 when we went, the full invasion was pretty new so places like xxx, Poland which was an outpost where refugees came. World Central Kitchen was set up there. All kinds of refugees were coming through that train station, that's where you saw the footage of people, just the horror in February 2022. I didn't

meet Mark Carey until 2023. But he and his humanitarian partner who is a lady from the UK, her name is Himie. When everybody was leaving, they went in. And I met so many volunteers like that. I met Paul Hughes from Canada, with HUGS Ukraine. Same thing, former military guy. Everybody's getting out, he went in. Himie, I don't want to guess her age, but she's not young, she's not in her 20s or 30s. She worked in the art world in London and crowd sources a van and drove in by herself into Ukraine, into a war zone. And she's not ex-military. So, her and Mark, and are they're featured in the documentary. They just met up and said Hey, let's team up and do this. Now to answer your question, Vanessa, this war, the volunteer effort, you hear about all the money the United States is giving. A lot of it is just old military equipment given a dollar value and then we're replacing our old equipment with new equipment usually in the United States so it creates American jobs. All those myths, a lot of it is Russian propaganda, unfortunately reiterated and repeated and amplified by people in a certain political party here... but the myth that we're giving them money is just not true. We're giving them some. Most of it is military equipment. So, most of the volunteer efforts are very grass roots. Non-governmental organizations, raising money. Everything from an individual like Himie crowdsourcing a van to Mark, getting his own little source of people. Every Ukrainian I know that is in the United States has either been here for years or, maybe in the East Village, Chicago, or whatever, they all know somebody there and they're crowdsourcing, they're finding, you send socks, and you find someone who is going and there are these chat groups and you're able to send stuff over. Another group we work with, Care for Ukraine, another American who has been living in Ukraine for ten years. He is a logistics guy who has been living in Ukraine and he just started Care for Ukraine, and keep the kids learning because he saw something that needed to get done so we raised money for him as well. So, it's just a lot of grass roots efforts from a lot of different people.

KK: Did you need permission from anybody to get into—we saw that the bombs are going and everything is not that far from you guys. Did you have to get an OK from the Ukrainian government or...

RR: In 2022 it was really wild and woolly but I did get a press pass. But anybody could go. You can go as a volunteer. Of course you're going to get checked at the border. Traveling to and from a country at war is the hardest part of any journey and it takes hours, sometimes days to get in and out. So far, I've gone by train and by bus and by foot. There are several ways to cross the border. And of course, they are going to look at your passport but generally speaking if you're from the United States you're good to go. If you're from Moldova and you're crossing over they might want to check you out a little bit closer because there's a problem of course with Russian agents in the country who give away military positions and that's always a problem. I mean there's Russian agents here in the United States—I have stories to tell—but basically, anyone can go. At this point in time the train is a wonderful way to get around in Ukraine. You cannot fly there because the air space is closed. Generally speaking, if you're coming from Poland and going to Western Ukraine which is the more peaceful part, the front is in the East. Anywhere can get hit at any time by a missile. A missile cost a lot of money so they're not as frequently bombed as someone from the East where you can hit it with cheaper mortars. Places like Kherson or Kharkiv when you get there, they're just bombing them every day multiple

times a day. Of course, drones have changed all of that and now drones hit Kiev regularly which is in the center of the country. So, the drone warfare has made it a little cheaper for Russia. Of course they're getting them from Iran. But anybody can go, that's what's amazing.

VC: Now speaking of drones, in one of your episodes you actually embedded yourself with a training unit of guys who were learning to use these in battle. So, tell us about that.

RR: That was amazing. I was surprised how much I enjoyed it. That was right when drone warfare was just beginning. That was in summer of 2023. And what I liked about that was it was the day of graduation and it was the camaraderie that these soldiers had built up because they came from different units. They were there ten days in this drone school which is privately funded by someone who raised money—privately funded, not by the government. These were government troops training to go back and take the training to their own troops. And of course, flying the drones, I've used drone photography for our own show. I was just amazed; they're building them from the ground up. DGI, a Chinese company, will not sell to Ukrainians. They will sell to Russia although they say they don't but they are. So, they have to get these materials and build them themselves. The camaraderie was amazing, I was there on graduation day. I probably got more emotional there than I did with some of the other things I saw which was... because I knew these guys were going back to the front the next day. And some of these guys sitting around a fire pit sharing a meal with me, they're gonna die, or they're gonna come back with missing limbs. I don't know why, maybe it's the end of the trip, it's a beautiful day, and then to put an ending on it this last summer in 2024, that drone school had been upgraded to another one and some of the same guys took me out and it had changed dramatically—the technology, what they had been working on, they had been working on anti-drone stuff, they were working on drones that could fly farther, faster, it's just amazing how fast this innovation has progressed, and one of the things that we tell to politicians in DC, especially those that appear to be reluctant to fund Ukraine, this innovation that Ukraine is putting forth is very advantageous to know because the United States is behind on this and this is the future of warfare. And they'd better understand that this is the future of warfare or we are going to be in big trouble.

VC: Right, and I know that you touched on the creativity of these soldiers in utilizing civilian equipment and kind of retrofitting them for war, like the cars and stuff. Were they modifying the drones as well?

RR: Absolutely. One hundred percent. There are people just dedicated...the thing about Ukraine, I fell in love with it, in 2019, is the artistic creativity of these folks. And I think that springs from being oppressed. Any time I go to an oppressed, war-torn, some place that's been through hell, like Cuba, which obviously they have to be very resourceful, like Colombia, South America had a civil war for fifty years. There's a resilience there. And what you see in Ukraine is, that is expressed in their art but also in their technology, an incredibly innovative technological work force. Unfortunately, a lot of people who worked in IT had to go to the front in the early days, they had to learn how to be soldiers. But a lot of those guys in the second wave, they used them

more intelligently and they could work retrofitting things and things like that. But there's never enough vehicles. They're easily disabled, like buying trucks and cars, that's the first thing that most people need that the troops have to actually fundraise to buy, is a truck for their troop. A lot of times at the drone school we had private vehicles, so you've got a nice BMW out on a dirt road where you need a four-wheeler. They don't have jeeps. That's the way it is there, I'm sure near the front they have more military grade vehicles of course.

KK: There are so many moving stories in this series and especially, you see people trying to rebuild their towns and have some semblance of normalcy. Can you tell us like one story that was the most memorable for you?

RR: It would be hard to pick. I will just say that normalization is a defense mechanism. You know, you fight to be normal for your children but I guess in Kherson in 2023 the big dam had just been exploded by Russia so it flooded so many people. So, think about what was it, hurricane Helene here? (KK Yeah) Think about that magnitude times ten except man-made, unnecessary, and people's homes, farmland, where they had made a living for centuries, now toxic, now unable to be inhabited, for, I don't know, 30, 40, 50 years, depressing to smell, we went to this lady's house. She was an older lady, her daughter was there, they were trying to salvage what they could. She was so eager for us to film. She didn't speak English of course but somebody there from the Red Cross was interpreting for us, the local chapter. Of course, she breaks down and cries. You could tell her home was beautiful. The top half of her home was beautiful, gorgeous. They take care of their homes. And the wealthiest man in the world who lives in a disgustingly vulgar home-I'm talking about Putin- has a mansion, I'm not talking about Mar a Lago. You ought to see Putin's house. It's a palace. And then he's destroying these hard-working people, like tens of thousands of their homes and everything they ever worked for. And it's so unfair and unjust but basically, she was so upbeat. Anyway, at the end, she had already shed so many tears. She was like, "we will win! Slava Ukraine, glory to our heroes!" (KK: Yes!). She's going to rebuild and I'm like, I don't think she is but I don't want to tell her that. I don't know, all I know is that she was very resilient and that encapsulates Ukraine in a nutshell. But they are human beings and we don't need to take it for granted that they can just take punishment after punishment forever without intervening.

VC: One of the stories that certainly stood out to us was Lada, the lady with the orphanage.

RR: Yeah, Lada's great. So, I'll tell you something, in 2024, a year after filming the documentary I'd only seen Lada once when Himie, I think she was Himie's contact, Himie was helping support her and her orphans. And so, Lada told us the story that you see in the docuseries about getting those kids out of there. You remember Bucha, Bucha is where the soldiers just murdered civilians young and old in cold blood, and buried them. War crimes. Bucha was not far from where Lada's orphanage is, so as word got around as to what was happening in Bucha, she's like, we've got to get these kids out of here. So, she sends them ahead but in order to get them out of Ukraine she has to be there, their caretaker does. So, she's getting there and of course she

gets roughed up, you know, I'll let people see the documentary to see what happened. Obviously, she survives. Tells me her story, she was very adamant about telling the story. And I knew at that point when I'm interviewing Lada that I was in trouble because if someone's going to tell me this story then I have this massive responsibility to do it justice. We told Lada's story, a lot of people donated money just from being moved from seeing her story. And I was in Kyiv which is about an hour from where her orphanage is in 2024 and I was just going to the gym. Like I said, normal things are happening. And I look far off in this underground mall that I take to get underneath the main road and I just see someone from the back and I...that looks like Lada. She was so far away, and I was like, that's impossible. What would she be doing here? I've gotta see if it's her. I poked her on the shoulder and it was her. She doesn't speak English but the coffee barista did. The coffee barista translated, I bought her a coffee, we hugged and yeah, it was wonderful seeing her there. You know, and that's why I went back in 2024. I wanted to see all the people that I had filmed in 2023 and see how they were doing mentally, physically and show them what I could of what they participated in.

KK: What amazed me about Lada's story is she had a gun to her throat, or head, but another soldier came over and said, she's a mother, and that's why they let her go. Through this nightmare there's still a soul underneath it all.

RR: Absolutely. It's a tough subject for Ukrainians. I have two mantras. One is I never tell hungry people what they should eat and I don't tell war victims how they should feel. For many Ukrainians, they hear anything to do with Russia and it'd just a negative feeling, I get that. But the reality is there are some folks who still are human and we know that and some of them are working, actively fighting for Ukraine against Russia, some of them inside, doing some things in Russia, to great risk for themselves. Others are like my buddy who is a musician who is anti-war and was being harassed and he had to be exiled so he's living in South America, gave up his career and is struggling mightily, all because he chose to speak out. I travel too much, I know that human beings, there's good and bad people everywhere, but the thing about Russia is, they have been brainwashed, they have been browbeaten, and they have been so cynical. It's such a cynical place right now because of what happens to people who are in the opposition. They get poisoned, they get killed, and unfortunately, we're starting to see some of that darkness happen here in the United States and it is emanating from the same forces. This is basic good versus evil as World War II as far as I can tell.

KK: Absolutely. And Ukraine has been at war for a long time.

VC: If Kamala Harris does not win the US Presidential election, what do you think will happen in Ukraine?

RR: I think it's pretty obvious that Trump will force Ukraine to the negotiating table by and the only way to do that is Putin will freeze the conflict, will take whatever territory he's already claimed which are, if I'm correct, four...about 20 to 25 percent of Ukraine will be declared Russia because I think without US support Ukraine,

even though they will fight to the last drop of blood, they probably wouldn't be able to and even if they resisted then Trump would say, look, they don't want peace so they're on their own kind of thing. But the reality is when that happens not only have we just rewarded someone for starting a war, for invading a sovereign country, other people, such as China will probably invade Taiwan as soon as their earliest opportunity. Venezuela started talking about Guyana which I didn't know that was disputed. There's a great book called Autocracy Inc. by Anne Applebaum. She's a writer for I think The Atlantic and I read the book and it's basically all these autocrats, what they do is they take advantage of situations. So, when they see Putin getting away with this those guys will chime in. And at some point, probably after the Trump presidency, because there is no need to invade if you have your puppet in the White House which is what I see Trump as. He's another Yanakovich (VC: Yeah, for sure). I won't get into how disturbed it makes me feel. (KK You can) I'll just say Christians, if they saw the vile stuff that I'm exposed to from Russians, if they knew Christians are tortured and yet they're supporting Donald Trump, I had one lady email me and said, whatever Ukrainian children die because of Trump's presidency is just collateral damage because he's gonna save so many unborn children here in the United States (VC/KK: What???) So basically, saying an unborn child in the US is worth more than a born child in the US. (VC: Oh, my God!) ... I get exposed to all of it. By the way, I have to look at all of it and say, is this an actual American doing this, or is this a Russian pretending to be an American? It always goes through my mind now because Russian disinformation is so deep, we don't realize it but there is no doubt we have some nasty politics going on right now between ourselves but if you look back at the root of it, Donald Trump is not the disease; the actual disease is Russian disinformation and Donald Trump is the symptom, the result of that. (VC Exactly). They need each other. That's what will happen and Putin will take Ukraine in whole at some point as soon as Trump is out of the White House.

KK: You mean Trump is in the White House, Putin's gonna take...

RR: Yeah, but after he leaves. They'll probably have some kind of... (KK: Four years?) Yeah, he'll probably wait four years. He might or he might not. Because Trump's gotta be like, I stopped the war in one day. They're supporting each other. They all support each other's afflictions (???) and that's what's important. They may not be coordinated with a phone call but they know what they're doing. (VC: They do.). They have intermediaries like Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson.

VC: There's a lot of danger there. Now Rob, when you were in Ukraine, and there was shelling going on, and bombs and so forth, did you fear for your own safety?

RR: A couple of times, yeah, for sure. Definitely when we were in Kherson, bombs are going off and... I'm like a chameleon a little bit and I think that's like with travel so the great thing is when you get there, you're all up tight, your heart rate is beating. I got locked in an ATM because I was panicking because I couldn't find the exit button and, just stupid mistakes, I was afraid to get in the elevator, by the way that's a legit fear (KK: Yes)

because those elevators are small and old and Soviet and... you know, power goes out, man, and you're going to be there for a while. I won't do well in this enclosed space. You do get a little bit irrational but here's what's great. The calmness of the Ukrainian people really calmed me down so I'm like reacting and it's, until they panic, I don't. But in Kherson when the bombs are going off and I see Mark and Himie getting uptight... we went through a couple of checkpoints where the military were very uptight by our presence because they did not want to be responsible for our deaths. (KK Yes.). That's when I got scared, and in this particular film that was the scariest moment I think we had. And after that I kinda got used to some bombs going off and I'd just roll over and go to sleep which is scary and you wake up the next day and you're like oh, that was pretty close, man but this last trip we went to a safe... I wasn't filming it and that's why I got angry about it because we went to a safe house about five kilometers from Kharkiv to deliver some ATV ambulances to some soldiers and the whole night, the house was shaking, I got no sleep and I was so angry for putting myself in that situation without a purpose. if anything, all that experience taught me is how disgusted I am with war and how just horrible it is. Because I was there without a purpose really, I felt like it was a dumb risk to take and I was a little angry that I had put myself in that situation. But when I was filming, I felt like I had a purpose. (KK: Exactly) I was okay with it. I was scared but I was like, if I die like this, this is how I... I knew the deal coming in. (KK: Totally understand that) (VC: Right)

KK: The series is amazing. What else do you have in the works after...

32:06 RR: You know, it took a lot out of me. I'm really just trying to work on a potential, I'm just calling it democracydefend dot com right now. It's kind of a startup working on debunking Russian disinformation, seeing if maybe video journalists can play a role in that. We know that journalists in Russia get killed. We know that journalists in Mexico get killed. They get killed all over the world for just being journalists. As a travel journalist I never really got exposed to that danger. I was in Cuba under cover and I felt a little fear, but going to Ukraine and just seeing... I don't feel like I can do just a travel show any more. Like well, I'm having a good time drinking wine. I hope I can, I hope the world changes. (VC/KK: I hope so too.) Right now, I can't do it. I can't do it. What I would love to do is to open the eyes of so many people who have been brainwashed by this Russian disinformation which has been amplified by places like right wing media (VC: Yes, yes.) They play both sides but it's right-wing media, it's the Breitbart's. Fox News started it with the election of Trump in 2016 it just went to another level (VC: Yup). I've never seen so much disinformation in my life that I have right now and it's vile, it's disgusting. Americans can have different opinions and disagree but to be at each other's throats like that all you're doing is empowering Vladimir Putin in Russia.

RR: I have a Facebook page for democracy defend. I just took out an ad on Facebook to say check out our website. I would say 95% of the comments are from what I would call MAGA Trumpers. (KK: Oh No...) And of those, and they were vile, they were disgusting, they don't like me. I'm like, I'm a hardworking, tax-paying guy who gives back to his community. But yeah, I'm the bad guy here. And I don't apologize for taking up for

vulnerable people and I never will. I'm just going to point blank say that in the open and dare someone to call me on that. But I realize when I'm looking at it, I'm either looking at Russian disinformation bots and trolls or the result, the downstream result of that. So, what we have to do is we have to stop it at its source. (VC: Yes). The good news is that you can pre bunk these things. You can inoculate yourself to it. I've come a long way. I feel like I can spot a troll a mile away. If you have time for one quick story, I was in Washington DC at the Ukraine Action Summit when the aid was delayed because Donald Trump had told his people "Don't approve aid for Ukraine." And Mike Johnson, the Speaker of the House played along for six months until, while we were there advocating and shaming them and then finally [he said] Oh, I just read the CIA report, I think we should bring... Oh, you just read the CIA report? I find that hard to believe. (VC: OH, man...) And some friends of mine who were on my side in terms of Ukraine, were like, no, no, he... They were defending Mike Johnson. Including some Ukrainians. We call that Stockholm syndrome.

VC: So, Rob, you said earlier that you didn't have any immediate plans to go back to Ukraine. Is that right? (RR: I'll be back next year for sure. I just don't like the winter; I'll be back in the summer.) Now these four episodes, you. Mentioned you have a documentary in the works. Are you going to combine these four episodes and make one documentary, what's your...

RR: So happy you asked that. So basically, I just combined what was made for TV into a documentary and I would like to invite you guys out It's going to premiere-I don't know when it's coming out—November 13th in New York and then we're just going to do screenings all around the US. That's in New York City, but we'll throw it online. Basically, people want to meet and talk, I'll try to get some people who have also been to Ukraine and do some Q and As. I think these grass roots screenings, my mom's church in Tennessee where I'm originally from, has asked me to come in. It's a tiny church but it's super important because I was so dismayed when some of those guys were repeating essentially Russian disinformation to me when they found out I went to Ukraine and I'm like, can't wait to get down there and just clear the air, tell them who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. They're really confused. And they're good people.

VC: Spread the good word. Now where can people view these four episodes?

RR: Go to Raw Travel Ukraine dot com, that's rawtravelukraine.com and on the front page you'll see our YouTube links to those, they can see the four episodes there.

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