

FINAL ENGIN Interview-Rose Tatum and Marianna Heusler

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: As the war rages on in Ukraine, and Russia continues trying to isolate and destroy the country, one organization, ENGIN, that's E-N G-I-N, is working to keep Ukrainians connected to the rest of the world by teaching English. With us today are Rose Tatum, volunteer manager for ENGIN, and Marianna Heusler, volunteer teacher. Ladies, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us.

RT: Thanks for having us

MH: Thank you, yes.

VC: So, Rose, let's start with you. Tell us about ENGIN, and how it got started.

RT: Sure. So ENGIN is a 501-C3 nonprofit organization that was actually started in March 2020 by Caterina Manoff. She is a Ukrainian-American and she actually happened to be tutoring a Ukrainian student online, and this particular Ukrainian student was top of her class and one of the top students in Ukraine at that time and although she had studied English in school, both vocabulary and grammar, she had never had the opportunity to practice speaking English. And what Caterina realized was that this was a problem that a lot of students in Ukraine faced. When she started digging in and doing some research, she realized that Ukraine ranked 30th out of 35 European countries in English language proficiency. This is important because having the ability to speak English fluently opens up a lot of academic and professional opportunities, and without that sometimes it can be very hard for a younger generation especially to succeed, and really build their country. So, she developed this organization thinking that she could recruit a couple of hundred students and try to match those with some of her friends, and you know, some volunteers, and it just grew. It grew very quickly, there was a high demand for it, she started building the organization, creating a structure, and creating partnerships with schools in both Ukraine and the US. And so, by January of this year ENGIN had grown over almost two years to serve, or to include, over 12,000 participants. That's both students in Ukraine and volunteers from over 80 countries. Well, then, the war hit, the war began, end of February and ENGIN had to take a pause and try to really decide what to do next. And that's what led us to what we are today. It's grown significantly and really became an important organization that pairs English fluent speakers, volunteers, with Ukrainians up to 35 years old now.

KK: Can you give us an idea how the program works; how do you connect the students and the volunteers? Do you reach out to the schools now that Ukraine is in this mess? I'm sure that's not easy to do.

RT: So how it worked prior to the war was, we actually have a person in Ukraine that works on our team, his name is Nicola. He oversees partnerships in Ukraine. He's actually a teacher in Ukraine and has developed all these partnerships with high schools and universities throughout Ukraine. So that's initially where our students were coming from, how they were learning about our program. And then on our side, the volunteer recruitment side, we've been using several different methods to recruit volunteers, but specifically up until the beginning of this year we were developing partnerships on our end with high schools and universities and colleges as well. And then we were pairing students based on age, interest, whether they wanted to be matched with another girl their age, or something like that, their availability, we take that into account as well, because there is a time difference we want to make sure they'll be able to meet at the same time, so the way it had been working pre-war was that Nicola is recruiting in Ukraine and we're recruiting here in the US and then we're matching these volunteers and students online, all via email and using video chat systems like Zoom or Google Meet or even some social media as well. Now post-war we have expanded our program to include Ukrainians up to 35 years old. School has been disrupted. Many Ukrainian students, their schools have been closed or they reverted to online learning, or they've had to evacuate and are now in other parts of the Ukraine, or in other countries so ENGIN has really taken on the role of, they're fulfilling that gap in education in the way that students and young professionals are now hearing about us as is through media, news media, we've gotten a lot of publicity and media in Ukraine and that's really driven up the numbers for our program. To give you an idea, since April 1, we've had over 8,000 Ukrainian students apply to our program.

VC: That's amazing. That's great. That's an increase in students for you?

RT: Yeah, generally we'll have anywhere from 200 to maybe 6-700 students sign up per month. Since April 1st it's been over 2,000, 3,000 every month.

VC: That's amazing. Could you tell us what goes on in a typical session, and how many students per instructor, or does it vary, that sort of thing?

RT: Sure, sure. So, to get to the session part, the sessions are an hour long each, so after a volunteer attends their training and goes through the whole application process, we try to set volunteers up, and Marianne, you can speak to this when it's your turn, we try to set volunteers up for successful sessions in the volunteer training. So, we try to cover all the basics on corrective feedback, how to develop session plans, how to use our

session plans, what to talk about during the session, get to know your student, cultural differences, and even how to deal with trauma when students have experienced trauma due to the war. So then, a typical session will last about an hour and it's one time a week. Your sessions can always be longer if you and the student agree on that but we try to have volunteers and students commit to an hour per week.

KK: Let me ask Marianna, since you're one of the instructors. First of all, I'm curious to know what made you participate in this program, what was your background that maybe egged you on to want to do this?

MH: About seven years ago, Vanessa knows this, I had a major heart attack while I was running around the bridle path, and that's actually how I met Vanessa, we're both leaders in the WomenHeart group and I think at that point you start, when you have a life and death experience you start to think about life and what you stand for, so I was always looking for various volunteer opportunities, and I subscribe to something in email that says things that you can do, and that's where I found it. To be honest with you, I didn't know that much about Ukraine until the war broke out, but then I saw all those people, you know, my heart went out to them with their children and their pets. I just couldn't imagine how horrible that must be. And I was a teacher for 20 years and I have a degree in English and I'm pretty good talking and writing and stuff, so I wanted to use that in a constructive way so when I saw this, I thought, gee, that would be perfect, and it is. It's really working for me.

VC: So, what are your sessions like?

MH: Well, right now, I have a wonderful girl. She's in her late twenties and she can only do 40 minutes once a week. We're going to increase it to twice a week. And I follow the sessions, but we go off track a lot. First of all, I ask her—she is still in Ukraine, her boyfriend is in the army, so I always ask her how she's doing and she said that most of her friends have already left but she's going to stay. So, we talk about what's going on in Ukraine. We talk a little bit about what's going on in the United States. Just the talking, I think, has helped her tremendously. She's much more—you know, it's interesting, she was in the tourism business. And she said, nobody's coming to Ukraine now, everyone is leaving Ukraine. So, she's trying to figure out where she goes from here. But one of the reasons she wants to learn to speak English—I asked her what her favorite subject in school was and I had to laugh when she said, "geography." Because I don't know anybody—because I was not a geography student but she loves geography.

RT: I loved geography, yeah.

VC: I see that map behind you.

MH: Yeah, I guess so and she's very interested in countries and she has a lot of questions about the United States. One thing she said that made me kind of sad, I said, if you had to go, where would you go? Because right now she's pretty safe but she says she hears the bombs 50 miles away. She knows they might be inching closer and she said she was an exchange student in Norway and she has friends there and they would take her in but she said, "you know, how can I do that? How can I go and live with somebody and eat their food and use their electricity and take their space?" she said. "That's just not right and I wouldn't feel good doing that so I'm staying where I am for now." And I thought, she's really such a nice person.

KK: I want to ask you about the level of how much the students can speak English. I mean I'm sure that there are different instructors having people that barely speak the language. How does that work?

RT: Yeah, that's a great question. I really want to touch on kind of what Marianne was saying real quick first is that these sessions are, we just really want them to talk. So, we provide these session plans just to kind of help keep that conversation rolling, but it really doesn't matter what you're talking about as long as you're talking. So, it's good to hear that your student is really, it sounds like you guys are developing a really good rapport and a friendship and that's really something that I hear frequently from our volunteers. So, with that being said, the different levels of English, our students, when they apply to our program, are given a test to determine what level speaker you are. So, they have to reach a certain beginner level of speaking ability with English in order to participate in the program, and can be all the way up to advanced speakers. And of course, volunteers have the opportunity to tell us in their interview, because that's the first step of the process after the application, we have like a 15-minute "get to know you" interview. You tell us if you would be comfortable working with someone who is a beginner student or if you prefer someone who is intermediate or advanced and we match based on that, as well as like, your interests and your age and those types of things. That's something that we also, from time to time, we try to monitor the success in those sessions and the improvement rate. So, it's not something because we're a non-profit and our budget is very low, we can't test all of our students to see how they're all progressing in their sessions but it's something we do from time to time to monitor if these sessions are successful.

KK: Is there a limit to how many sessions a student can take?

RT: No. Absolutely not. They can be in the program as long as they want to or until they age out.

MH: And what would that age be?

RT: Our age limit right now is 35 since the war started. We have changed it from 25 to 35, so we can now include a lot more people. We hope at some point that we can expand it to include all, however, at this time this is what we have the capacity to do.

MH: Can I just ask you a quick question? I'm amazed you get so many volunteers because, you know, it's hard to get people to volunteer. Is there a shortage of volunteers? How do you get these volunteers?

RT: Those are all really great questions. So, I've worked in the non-profit sector for probably about 13 years now and I'm actually quite new to ENGIN, I've been with ENGIN for a few months (MH Oh!) and previous to this I've always worked in the—volunteerism is something that's close to my heart so I know the challenges of recruiting volunteers. And it is really difficult to get volunteers to recruit and get them to commit. And ENGIN has, I think one, the time commitment is low, one hour per week, it's virtual, you can do it from anywhere, and it really appeals to people who really enjoy getting to know other people, especially people in different cultures, from different countries, I think that brings a lot of people to us and honestly since the war began there has been a lot of interest in (MH: In the Ukraine) yeah, and that's helped us out a lot.

MH: I mean I didn't know too much about Ukraine before this, I mean I knew where Ukraine was but it was the war that really made me think about volunteering for Ukraine because I might have volunteered before but it was just seeing, as I said, the heartbreaking... I actually asked my student, "are people still leaving Ukraine?" And she said, "not as much." I guess the people that wanted to go have gotten out already.

VC: Now the ratio of instructors to students, is it strictly one on one or are there situations where there's like one instructor, maybe they might have more than one student?

RT: Yeah, absolutely. So, we try to encourage volunteers to only do one on one sessions, but they can take on several students and they're welcome to hold group sessions from time to time as well, but yeah, so one volunteer instructor can have anywhere up to five students. It just depends on how much time they want to commit to the program.

VC: And then let me just go back to the training for a second. What is the training like and Marianne, how was that for you?

MH: Well, it was online and it was great. I really enjoyed it. I think it was an hour and a half, it wasn't long at all, and you're given a volunteer book which I refer to all the time and it has everything in it and it has the sessions in it and stuff. And then they give you a test, you feel well-trained and you feel very well supported. And I think that's important and you guys have been very supportive so I thank you for that.

RT: Thank you. With our volunteer training we really try to include anything we think—any challenges volunteers will face but also, we want to help them prepare and kind of know what they're getting themselves into before starting their first session. Like I said, that includes lots of things, not only developing that rapport with your student, what topics to discuss and how to correct their English, but also cultural aspects as well.

MH: Well, when I first started everyone said to me, my friends and family, "You can't possibly do this! You don't know one word of Ukrainian. How can you speak to a Ukrainian?" And I thought to myself, is this going to be the kind of thing where they don't know how to say one word, because that would be a little bit problematic, I'm not like...I was an English major but I was like an English major with like, you know, Shakespeare, not like phonics and stuff like that so I thought gee, it didn't sound like that at all. My student was a beginner but she doesn't know a lot of the language in terms of what meanings and stuff but she can carry on a conversation just fine and now she's learning as we go along to be more comfortable speaking and yeah, it was much easier than I thought it was going to be.

KK: As an instructor, do you have to give the progress of your student, or...

MH: That would be a good question. I think she's coming along splendidly and I tell her that and, in the training, they tell you how to encourage them and how to correct them when they mispronounce things and stuff but nobody's really asking about her progress. Now is that something they will do?

RT: Right now, we do have a support team but it's three women, three young women who are answering all questions for volunteers and students and really anything that comes into our info@ENGIN email box, they're answering all those. So, we're actually in the process of developing a support team just for volunteers. And then we will start reaching out to volunteers on a regular basis to monitor how their sessions are going and ask for feedback, and see if their students are improving, ask the volunteers what we can do to improve our programs. That is something that we're working on, it's very important to us. We just haven't had the manpower, really to do it until now.

MH: I just have to ask; do you ever get students who complain?

RT: I monitor the feedback from the students and from the volunteers and the only time I see negative feedback from the students is when they have a volunteer that doesn't show up for their meeting. And that does happen from time to time when volunteers will just kind of ghost us, ghost their student and not show up. It doesn't happen all that frequently but really honestly, it's the only negative feedback I've seen.

VC: So, speaking of challenges, and you can both weigh in on this, what are the biggest challenges you guys are experiencing because of the war and I would imagine technical issues might be a part of that?

RT: Yeah, technical issues are a big part of that, so when we started this program, it was mandatory for both students and volunteers to use video. It's easier to build that connection, and also when you're seeing someone speaking it's easier to hear them, to understand them, to learn the language, but with Internet connections being disrupted and slowed, we've allowed students now to call in without video. So that's a change that we've made. We still prefer video but that's not something that can always happen. Another challenge we're having is because students are having to evacuate sometimes they'll just disappear for a couple of weeks and we don't know where they've gone and we have to find updated contact information for them, or we have to wait until they email us to tell us that they've moved and this is where they are now and they'll let us know whether or not they can continue their sessions but that is a challenge for us when they have to suddenly evacuate, keeping in touch with them and informing the volunteer on what's next.

VC: I can imagine, Marianne, have you had...

MH: Yeah, you know, we do Zoom and sometimes she can't get on. We have to really work at it because of the wi-fi and stuff but she's very committed and very disciplined and every time she doesn't come exactly when she's supposed to my heart is like, oh my God, I hope she's OK, you know, that kind of thing, I hope she's all right, I hope her boyfriend's all right. So far as I said, her town is OK but she lives in fear. It's very sad.

RT: It's a common thing for our students and honestly, our team members that also live in Ukraine.

VC: What is your goal for ENGIN going forward?

RT: That's a great question. Our goals of course have changed a little bit, but overall, we want to be able to expand our program to include more Ukrainians. Our program is growing much quicker than I think that Caterina had anticipated just six months ago. We really need to beef up our volunteer recruitment, so I believe

that Caterina had a goal for ENGIN to reach 100,000 students in five years. I think we're going to meet or exceed that, it's just a matter of recruiting enough volunteers to match with those students. So that's going to be the biggest challenge.

MH: Well, this is non-profit, so I'm just wondering, that volunteer handbook, who created that? It's really quite extensive about, each month they give you questions to ask and stuff... did somebody just create that? Probably a team?

RT: It's a team, and we have some volunteers, some paid staff, and just a little more background on Caterina, she has her graduate degree from Harvard in education (MH: OK so that explains it). She worked with a team to develop the handbook, and every little part of ENGIN, the way that we're structured and how we work. She worked with team members mostly in Ukraine on putting it together.

MH: You can tell that it was somebody that knew education because they were able to put this together in a way that somebody with teaching experience...

KK: If people are interested in volunteering, where can they contact ENGIN?

RT: So, they can go to our website, which is www.ENGINprogram.org/volunteer. That'll take you to the volunteer tab (VC Can you spell that, for the people). Yes, that's ENG-i-n program, so no E at the end there, E-N-G-i-n program dot org backslash volunteer, and when you get to our website on that page you just scroll to the bottom, there is a link to our volunteer application there. That's the first step to getting started with ENGIN, that is completing the volunteer application. And if you have any questions about our volunteer program or want to learn more, we have all the details on our website.

VC: That's great. Well, we encourage all interested parties out there to check out the website and if that looks like it's something for you absolutely, absolutely do it. And you can also donate to the organization on your website, is that correct?

RT: That's correct. It's always needed, as a nonprofit organization, especially when it's growing so quickly, donations are always needed.

VC: Yes, many opportunities to help out. Well ladies, this has been an incredible session. Thank you so much for your time and for telling people about this wonderful organization.

RT: I really appreciate your being willing to highlight our organization. It's been a wonderful chat with you, and Marianne, thank you for volunteering with us. I hope I get to chat with you again.

MH: If I wanted to get more involved, I could do that through the website?

RT: Yes, you can EMAIL our info at enginprogram.org or you can email me—I'll put my email address in the chat there—and we can talk about getting more involved, there's definitely opportunities to do so.

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