

“New Hampshire for Ukraine” Donors Send Ukrainians 700 tons of Food, Sleeping Bags, and Love

In late February 2022, when the bombs started falling on innocent civilians in Ukraine, Susan Mathison met Alex Ray on their small-town New Hampshire sidewalk. “What are we going to do?” she asked. “What can we do that really matters?”

Alex Ray, owner of the Common Man Family of restaurants, hotels, and rest areas, had a long history of personally and financially supporting emergency responses in Haiti, the Bahamas, New Orleans and Kentucky. Friends of Alex knew he’d already been thinking about that very question.

“Everyone wants to help,” he said, “but they don’t know how. We need to give people a way to help that they can believe in. People need to know that the help is real.”

From that sidewalk conversation, the “NH for Ukraine” campaign was born. “The Common Man Family,” Ray said, “will match the first \$1 million raised. We’ll send \$2 million in humanitarian aid.” Ray’s leadership donation was a call to action across New Hampshire; the state’s Granite United Way offered to be the fiscal agent for the campaign, Steve Rand, a Plymouth Rotary Club member along with Ray, stepped in, and former New Hampshire Governor John Lynch helped with public service announcements and phone calls. WMUR TV and radio stations promoted the campaign along with IHeart Media and the NH Fisher Cats, the state’s AA Baseball league.

By mid-May, Alex, Susan, and Ray’s partner Lisa Mure were on a plane to Poland and then on to Ukraine to identify the most critical projects for funding. In Poland, they met heroes who were building a network for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Ray and friends saw thousands of people, stacked bed-to-bed, in refugee centers and orphanages packed with traumatized children. They met Ukrainians determined to do whatever it takes to help each other to remain Ukrainian.

The need was great and the network of Rotary volunteers in Poland and Ukraine meant that NH for Ukraine funds raised would go directly to the purchase and distribution of critical needs without delay or carve-outs for administration.

While Alex sent photos and videos from work in Poland and Ukraine, donations began pouring in. People raised money any way they could; a woman hosted a tennis tournament, artists donated paintings and quilts featuring the colors of Ukraine; a local church held a ukulele concert dressed in blue and yellow. New Hampshire high school kids wrote 1,500 letters in Ukrainian to kids in refugee centers. Hundreds of hand knitted hats and teddy bears showed up anonymously at a one of Ray’s restaurants. The Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains made 300 scarves, each with a hand-written note attached.

Caring citizens trusted their donations would be sending a message of hope and of peace to Ukrainians half a world away. “Each person gave how and what they could. It

was amazing,” said Ray, of the 2,500 donors who sent donations of every size, many with handwritten cards and letters sending their hopes for peace.

In just six months, New Hampshire citizens expressed their solidarity and care with over \$1.3 million donated thus far – that’s one dollar for every resident in this small state - matched by Ray’s \$1million. The fund’s \$2 million coffer has funded 700 tons of food for orphanages, villages and refugee centers throughout Ukraine; a new trauma counseling center for Ukrainian refugee children; a temporary center for displaced children with disabilities; and a bloodmobile now deployed and operating in Ukraine..

Ray and friends made another trip to Ukraine in October which provided insights into the changing needs for refugees, including the coming winter and the enemy’s use of the cold weather as a weapon of war. The trip led to expanding efforts to include thousands of thermal sleeping bags and generators in addition to food and shelter support.

The October trip to Ukraine also taught Ray something else. “We can’t be finished! We thought when we reached the goal of \$2 million that we’d say – ‘hey that was great, we did a good thing.’ But that’s not how this war works. Those kids and families still need us to care. There is still lots more good to do in Ukraine. We will keep working as long as they need us.”

In response to the on-going need, Ray decided to expand the funding campaign beyond New Hampshire’s border, rebranding the effort with a nod to his restaurants’ moniker. The “Common Man for Ukraine” campaign, according to Ray, encourages Americans from all walks of life to follow his company’s motto to ‘Do Good.’ “We hope we will keep making a difference through a streamlined and highly effective funding pipeline from everyday folks here in the U.S. to Ukrainians in need through our Rotary partnerships,” said Ray.

“If we all contribute something small, together we can do something big and something good for our neighbors in Ukraine,” said Ray. “They need us.”

To learn more the Common Man for Ukraine, or to donate, please contact Susan Mathison via email at Susan@commonmanforukraine.org or by phone at 603-530-2314.

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