



## The Quiet Trail: Oregon's Hidden Humanitarian Crisis

*By Mila Shelehoff*

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*Across Central Oregon, Ukrainian families who fled war are discovering that refuge can have an expiration date — and the consequences ripple through our schools, neighborhoods, and moral conscience.*

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## **Prologue: The Teddy Bear Test**

*Imagine carrying your child's favorite teddy bear through a war zone —  
not because it can save their life,  
but because it might help them smile again.*

*Now imagine arriving in a new country — exhausted but grateful,  
believing that your child's smile will finally last.  
You find a job, enroll your child in school, begin rebuilding your life.  
And then one day, a letter arrives in the mail —  
a government notice stamped "no longer eligible."*

*That moment — when the sound of paper tears the illusion of safety —  
is happening quietly across Oregon today.  
Not in headlines or protests,  
but in the private heartbreak of families who truly believed  
that their refuge here was real.*

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## **The Unraveling Promise**

If you live in Bend, you may have already met them — a mother at the bus stop, a father fixing a neighbor's deck, a child on the soccer field speaking a soft mix of English and Ukrainian.

These are the families who fled bombs and blockades with nothing but passports and hope. They arrived in Central Oregon with trembling hands and open hearts, told they had found safety. Two years later, many are discovering that the door that once opened for them is slowly swinging shut.

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Across the country — and here in Bend, Redmond, Madras, and Sisters — Ukrainian families who came under the *Uniting for Ukraine* program are facing a quiet crisis. Their humanitarian parole, the temporary legal protection that allowed them to live and work safely in the United States, is expiring.

When that happens, so do the supports that made survival possible — food assistance, healthcare, and work authorization. For some, the renewal process is confusing and delayed. For others, it never comes. Without that paperwork, parents can't work. Without income, they can't pay rent. And without food or healthcare, safety itself begins to unravel.

No one is talking about it loudly. But it's happening right here — in our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods.

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## **What's Actually Happening**

The *Uniting for Ukraine* program, launched in 2022, was an emergency humanitarian measure. It offered displaced Ukrainians two years of lawful stay, the right to work, and access to essential benefits. It was never meant to be permanent — but no families imagined they'd be asked to rebuild their lives in two-year increments.

Now, as those protections expire, families are receiving termination letters and notices of ineligibility. Work permits are stalling in processing backlogs. Healthcare coverage and food assistance are disappearing. For most, returning to Ukraine is unthinkable. Cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Nikopol remain under threat. Yet the policies that once saved their lives are expiring faster than the wars they fled.

This is not a political issue. It's a community one — a question of who we are to the people who trusted us.

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## **The Long Shadow of Removal**

America has walked this road before.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, later enforced by Martin Van Buren, forcing entire Indigenous nations — Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee,

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and Seminole — from their homelands. It was justified as “reform,” “order,” and “progress.” The result was death and displacement: the *Trail of Tears*.

That logic — of removing people under the language of necessity — is older than our republic, and it returns in modern form.

Today, we don't call it removal. We call it expiration. We call it compliance. We call it policy. But for families living it, the effect is the same: being uprooted again, by systems that mistake paperwork for justice.

Once more, those who trusted this land for safety are being told: *You cannot stay*.

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## **Intermezzo: Between Home and the Unknown**

*Between yesterday and tomorrow lies a thin strip of life.  
Here, among the mountains, children learn new words,  
and mothers learn to trust the silence again.  
Each morning begins the same —  
with coffee, a to-do list, and a short prayer  
that the day will pass without fear, without letters,  
without another “you are no longer eligible.”*

*Between the lines of documents, between changes in rules,  
something stronger than status is being born —  
a community  
bound not by stamps, but by kindness.  
And perhaps this is where the true Oregon begins —  
not the one on the map,  
but the one measured in humanity.*

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## **Names and Faces WORK IN PROGRESS**

*Anna and her daughter Alice Drozdova arrived in Tumalo after two years of displacement across Europe. Anna, a single mother and teacher, watched her city fall under occupation. Her brother*

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*disappeared defending the Chernobyl area. Her daughter Alice — a gifted violinist and robotics student — stopped speaking in school after months of hiding from explosions.*

*When a friend in Oregon offered them shelter, they came. Alice now attends Cascades Academy on full scholarship. “For the first time since the war began,” Anna says, “my daughter told me she was happy.”*

*In Bend, the Hryhorenko family — Yulia and Oleksandr, with their children Anhelina and Ivan — are rebuilding their lives from ashes. They arrived after their city was bombed, their school commute turned into a battlefield. Yulia, a physical education teacher and volleyball coach, still calls her students “my team.” Oleksandr, a carpenter and fisherman, can often be found weatherproofing a deck or replacing windows at a local school. On weekends, he finds peace casting lines across the Cascade Lakes.*

*Their 16-year-old daughter Anhelina, once a Ukrainian Junior National Nordic Ski Champion and now a sophomore at Summit High School, dreams of competing under the Ukrainian flag again. Their 10-year-old son Ivan, learning English at Miller Elementary School, races the slopes of Mount Bachelor with boundless joy through the MBSEF Youth Program.*

*Yulia recently lost a childhood friend in one of the bombings that obliterated her village. “We try to plant new roots,” she says softly. “But sometimes the soil still smells like smoke.”*

*Denys and Olena Vasylenko, along with their four children, represent another kind of quiet heroism. Before the war, Denys — an auto mechanic by trade — founded a community refuge center in the Ukrainian city of Nikopol. With almost no resources, he opened his garage and workshop to the displaced, the addicted, and the hungry. He offered warmth, food, and shelter to anyone who needed it. When missiles began to fall, that workshop became a sanctuary — one of the few places left standing where people could survive the night.*

*Olena managed the finances and logistics, keeping meticulous records for their charitable foundation Devora, which fed hundreds through local donations and volunteers. Together, they turned compassion into infrastructure — sustaining a lifeline of dignity in a collapsing city.*

*Today, the Vasylenkos have relocated from Madras to Bend to be closer to the Ukrainian community. Denys takes care of the children, dreaming of returning to the community work he once did, while Olena, while learning English at COCC, continues her full-time position at Griffin Seed International, a Madras-based seed company, whose owner sponsored their Uniting for Ukraine arrival two years ago. Their three older children attend William E. Miller Elementary School, while little Polina eagerly awaits her enrollment next year to join her siblings. The family*



*is slowly reclaiming a sense of normalcy. "We're safe," Denys says, "but I still think of those we left behind."*

*These are not stories of tragedy alone. They are stories of endurance — of parents rebuilding a sense of belonging for the sake of their children, of mothers re-learning how to breathe after years of survival, of fathers finding dignity in honest work on foreign soil. Each day, they piece together fragments of hope with whatever tools they have: a violin, a set of skis, a wrench, a prayer.*

*And these stories are not rare. They are quietly unfolding in every Oregon town — in the families next door, the children in our schools, the workers rebuilding our homes. There may be a family in your own neighborhood reliving this same fragile balance between gratitude and fear, safety and uncertainty.*

*The difference between despair and resilience, between erasure and belonging, often comes down to whether a community chooses to notice — and to care.*

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## **What It Means for Oregon**

When humanitarian parole ends, it doesn't just affect the families who receive the letters.

It affects the classrooms that lose bright, bilingual students — children who have already learned how to start over and now tutor their peers in courage. It affects local employers who lose skilled workers, mechanics, translators, and teachers who contribute daily to Oregon's workforce. It affects faith communities that lose volunteers and friends who show up early to brew the coffee and stay late to sweep the floor. And it affects our collective integrity as a region known for its welcome — a place that has always prided itself on generosity and grit.

Humanitarian parole was never meant to be permanent, but it was meant to protect. It was a promise that safety here would not vanish as suddenly as it did at home. Now, that promise is cracking — not out of malice, but out of neglect, bureaucracy, and silence.

What kind of community will we be if we allow our newest neighbors to slip quietly into poverty and uncertainty — not because of failure or fault, but because of expired papers?

The irony is that these families already give more than they receive. They teach, build, coach, volunteer, and repair. They enrich our schools, our economy, and our culture. To lose them is to

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lose part of Oregon's living story — the human thread that keeps this state vibrant, creative, and whole.

The truth is, these stories are everywhere. They're woven into our daily routines — the mother helping with carpool, the dad fixing your windows, the children at your school's science fair. Most of us simply don't know how close the crisis already is.

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## **A Call to Keep the Promise**

This is not an abstract debate about borders or budgets. It's about people we already know — the families in our neighborhoods, the children sitting next to ours in class. Central Oregon can lead where federal policy falters. We can speak with one voice to urge our representatives to extend humanitarian protections, restore access to food and healthcare, and speed up the renewal of work authorizations.

Local nonprofits like Art Sprouts (ASI) and state-supported programs like Oregon Refugee Children Assistance Services (ORCAS) are already responding to the gaps — offering trauma-informed care, arts-based healing, language navigation, and community connection. But they cannot do it alone. Here's what we can do:

- ☐ Write to your state and federal representatives to support continued humanitarian parole and benefits for displaced families.
- ☐ Volunteer or donate to local groups serving refugee and immigrant communities.
- ☐ Speak up at school, city, and county meetings. Ask what plans are in place to support students whose legal status is at risk.
- ☐ Share these stories — in classrooms, workplaces, and places of worship. Visibility is not charity; it's civic duty.
- ☐ Ask questions when you are unsure.

Each letter written, each conversation started, each act of awareness adds weight to the moral side of the scale. Because silence, too, is a form of removal. Oregon has always stood for pioneers — not only those who crossed mountains, but those who dared to imagine something better on the other side. That spirit of courage and care is still ours to uphold.

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## **The Choice Before Us**

History offers a mirror, and this time we cannot claim we didn't see. The quiet removal unfolding now will not leave the same kind of scars as the Trail of Tears, but it carries the same moral weight — the slow erasure of those who trusted us with their lives. We are being asked, once again, what kind of trail we will walk — one paved with compassion or compliance. The promise of Oregon — and of America — must not end with an expiration date. We can choose differently. We can choose to keep faith with the families who believed us when we said, *you are safe here*. Because the cost of this quiet removal will not only be theirs — it will be ours. And the legacy we build today will define what Oregon's trail stands for tomorrow.

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## **The Trail Ahead**

The trail ahead will not be marked by wagon ruts or map lines, but by choices — quiet, everyday decisions made in classrooms, offices, and kitchens across Oregon. It winds through PTA meetings and grocery aisles, over soccer fields and into the small, unseen acts that hold a community together. Each gesture of welcome, each policy that protects, each neighbor who chooses to notice — these are the steps that redraw the map. If the Oregon Trail once carried seekers westward in search of promise, this new trail carries us inward, toward the heart of who we are.

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## **Author's Note**

The reference to the *Trail of Tears* in this piece is offered not as comparison but as reflection — a recognition that the logic of displacement has resurfaced across centuries in new forms. This essay honors Indigenous histories of removal in Oregon and beyond, acknowledging that today's humanitarian crises unfold on land shaped by those earlier injustices.

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## **Submission Package**

Summary for Editors (60 words):

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In this commentary, Bend advocate Mila Shelehoff exposes a quiet humanitarian crisis in Central Oregon. As humanitarian parole protections for Ukrainian families expire, the promise of refuge is dissolving into uncertainty. Through the stories of local families, she shows how federal inaction is reshaping Oregon classrooms, workplaces, and the very definition of community.

Author Bio (40 words):

*Mila Shelehoff is a Ukrainian-born mother, writer, and community advocate based in Bend, Oregon. She directs the KOLOVITA Initiative through Art Sprouts, Inc., supporting displaced families with culturally responsive care, storytelling, and community connection across rural Central Oregon.*