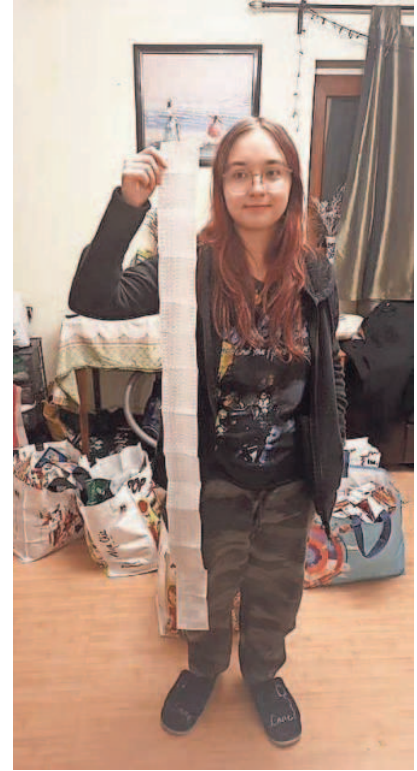


‘Although you can’t help everybody, you try to help who you can’



Ames family opens its properties abroad to Ukrainian refugees

Phillip Sitter Ames Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

Michelle Kelso and her family have roots in many places, including Ames, and they’ve tapped all of those roots to do what they can to provide shelter to Ukrainian refugees and supplies to health care workers in Ukraine. ● There were no plans to do such things before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February, Kelso said. “It just kind of unfolded as events occurred.” ● She and her family have opened the doors to their apartments and an office in Bucharest — the capital of one of Ukraine’s neighbors, Romania — and have collected more than \$7,700, including from people in Ames, for two trips to deliver supplies to a hospital near the Ukrainian port city of Odesa. ● Kelso works at George Washington University as the director of the sociology department’s Human Services and Social Justice program. **See FAMILY, Page 7A**

TOP LEFT: Michelle Kelso’s husband, Silviu Alexe, works with Romanian firefighters and other aid workers at the country’s border with Ukraine to transfer aid for a Ukrainian team to take across the border. **TOP RIGHT:** Michelle Kelso’s daughter, Calia Alexe, a senior at Ames High School who will graduate in May, shows the receipt for medications bought at a Romanian pharmacy that are destined for a Ukrainian hospital near Odesa. **PROVIDED BY MICHELLE KELSO**

“I really believe that each of us has an important role to play in shaping our societies. Even if we can’t donate money, there are other ways of helping. I think each of us has a capacity to contribute, whether it’s locally, nationally or internationally — even if it’s just having conversations with others... Where can we best make a difference?”

Michelle Kelso
on helping Ukrainian refugees

Family

Continued from Page 1A

She splits her time between Washington, D.C. and Iowa. Ames is where she and her husband Silviu "Alex" Alexe and daughter Calia Alexe settled in 2018 so Calia could start high school and get to know her Iowa family more — in the city where her mom grew up and went to the same high school.

Calia is a senior at Ames High School who will graduate in May but already finished her classes in January. She and her father are Romanian citizens, where she attended elementary and middle school. He can work remotely from Ames, as the whole family did for much of the pandemic.

The whole family was also on the ground last month in Romania.

'Although you can't help everybody, you try to help who you can.'

More than 4 million people from Ukraine have fled the country so far during the war — with millions more displaced from their homes within Ukraine — and while most of those who have left have gone to Poland, more than 616,000 people have gone to Romania.

There are things Kelso is powerless to stop — Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russian soldiers, atrocities in Ukrainian cities — "but I do have the capacity right now to assist through offering housing and medications, if we can get them, through the donations and kindness of my networks," she said.

She has spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe in her career and life — as a former photo stringer for the Associated Press and USA Today in Romania, studying there on a Fulbright scholarship, running a Romanian education-focused nonprofit for five years, and doing research in Ukraine on the Holocaust.

The people fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine and crossing into Romania have included friends' wives and children, but Kelso's family has been helping complete strangers as well — six groups of people in total, so far.

"Although you can't help everybody, you try to help who you can," Kelso said.

"For right now, these people are living very precariously," she said.

She said the Romanian people are rallying together in a way that is similar to how they responded to the fall of their country's communist regime. Romania has since become a member of the European Union economic alliance and the NATO military alliance.

Kelso's sense is that almost everyone in Romanian society is doing what they can to help Ukrainian refugees, welcoming them with open hearts and generosity. However, most people from Ukraine "hope and pray they can go back home," she said — they don't want to be refugees.

The people who first arrived from Ukraine are those who had the means to get out at the immediate start of the war and may have had people they knew to stay with. Since then, Kelso said the new arrivals have increasingly been people who left with the clothes on their backs and may no longer have homes or communities to go back to — in places such as Mariupol that have been heavily bombed.

That means their real estate assets may have been destroyed — acts of war not covered by insurance — income from any of their businesses may have dried up and they're low on cash.

They may have emotional trauma to heal from, and wives and children may be separated from their husbands, fathers and older brothers and sons who have been prohibited from leaving Ukraine in case they're needed to fight — though many women have stayed, too.

Children may need to register for school — online learning through their schools in Ukraine may no longer be an option as internet providers are bombed by Russia — and it's not yet clear what the way forward is for Ukrainians in Romania or anywhere else, let alone how to get anywhere else if they want to.

She said the Romanian government is looking at a three- to five-year timeline for integration, while in the meantime it's unclear how long of a process getting a humanitarian visa to a place like the United Kingdom may be.

Speaking for her family, Kelso said they can postpone renting out their apartments for at least six months, and a family member's apartment is available until he comes back during the summer. Her husband's boss has given him permission to use his office to house people.

In addition to housing, her family has helped get people food and clothing, as well as attempt to give some of them somewhat of a normal day by taking them out for pizza. Calia has also taken children to visit a dinosaur exhibit at Romania's natural history museum.

'I think each of us has a capacity to contribute.'

While a Ukrainian friend who had been out of the country at the start of the war was anxious about the fate of his family, Kelso told her husband to take him to the Romanian border with Ukraine to see if there was anything that could be done to have him feel like he was doing something.

That trip led them to Isaccea, a small town near Romania's Black Sea coast, which puts it down the road from Odesa.

Romanian and Ukrainian mayors were talking to each other and working together to bring aid to Ukraine. Silviu exchanged contact info with a woman running a nonprofit that all led to being informed about the needs of a hospital.

Kelso guessed that to date, her family had been able to purchase about \$4,500 worth of prescription and over-the-counter medications that were needed — including insulin and anti-seizure drugs — as well as baby formula for infants who are lactose-intolerant or cannot have soy, adult and child diapers, oral rehydration medication and food.

Items they gather are transferred at the border to a Ukrainian team and onto a truck that takes the cargo into Ukraine.

"Within two days, they had the medication and supplies they needed," Kelso said.



Michelle Kelso's husband, Silviu Alexe, explains to a Ukrainian mother at the central train station in Bucharest, Romania, how to register in the country. The Ukrainian family left Shostka, Ukraine when a humanitarian corridor opened March 16 and arrived in Bucharest March 18. PHOTOS COURTESY MICHELLE KELSO



Silviu Alexe, works with Romanian firefighters at the country's border with Ukraine to transfer aid for a Ukrainian team to take across the border.



Silviu Alexe hands over a bag of donated supplies to a Romanian firefighter on the country's border with Ukraine. Kelso's family has been sheltering Ukrainian refugees in Romania and sending supplies to a Ukrainian hospital.

She's been pleasantly surprised by people's generosity in donating to support her family's efforts — including a childhood friend, someone else who'd been on the high school swim team with her and classmates she hasn't seen in-person since graduating in 1988.

"We are absolutely thrilled that so many people wanted to assist Ukrainians who are in peril."

People who want to continue to support their efforts can donate to a GoFundMe set up by Kelso's friend, Caterina Titus, called "Ukraine-Romania Border Medical and Sanitary Aid."

"Every day, the needs on the ground change," Kelso said.

What's happening in and around Ukraine may feel distant. However, she said, "I really believe that each of us has an important role to play in shaping our societies. Even if we can't donate money, there are other ways of helping."

"I think each of us has a capacity to contribute, whether it's locally, nationally or internationally — even if it's just having conversations with others," she added.

People who can't help Ukraine could instead help with local organizations that have similar needs. Kelso said everyone should ask themselves "Where can we best make a difference?"

Phillip Sitter covers education for the Ames Tribune, including Iowa State University and PreK-12 schools in Ames and elsewhere in Story County. Phillip can be reached via email at psitter@gannett.com. He is on Twitter @pslifsabeauty.

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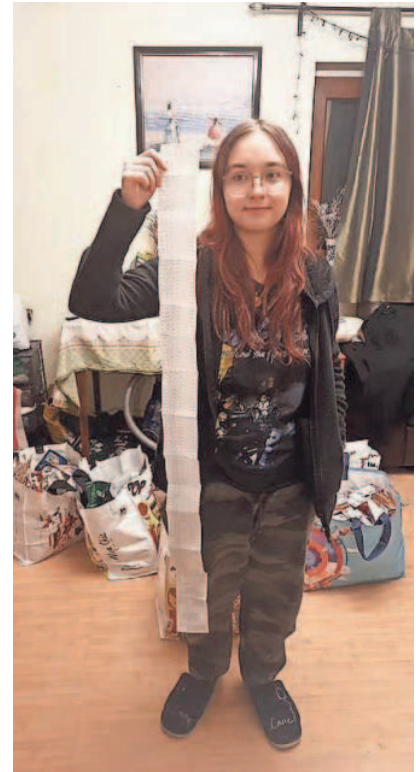
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