



Oleh Dzoba (right) and Sofii Drahan (middle), pictured Wednesday with their sponsor Janae Cantu (left) are believed to be the first people to arrive in Ames through the Uniting for Ukraine program, a U.S. initiative to take in up to 100,000 Ukrainians fleeing Russia's war against their country for up to two years. NIRMALENDU MAJUMDAR/AMES TRIBUNE

Ukrainians work to build new lives through Uniting program

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Ames Tribune
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Welcoming strangers to live in one's home is not an easy process for anyone involved, but for two people from Ukraine and their hosts in Ames, it's been worth it.

Oleh Dzoba said, "We do feel like part of this family, absolutely."

Dzoba and Sofii Drahan, his partner, came to the U.S. through the government's "Uniting for Ukraine" program and were matched with wife-and-husband sponsors Janae and Jacob Cantu.

"I just kind of felt like it was some-

thing I was supposed to do," Janae said of wanting to become a sponsor after Russia's expanded invasion of Ukraine began in February.

About a month has passed since Dzoba and Drahan's arrival in Ames. They and the Cantus continue to navigate the bureaucracy of resettlement, learn each other's languages and enjoy time and meals together as Dzoba and Drahan begin to build the lives they can have in the U.S. for up to two years through the program.

Dzoba and Drahan appreciate Janae's home-cooked muffins and Jacob's breakfasts, while they've made varenyky — Ukrainian dumplings — and Dra-

han has made the dough for pizzas.

Ada Hayden Heritage Park is Dzoba and Drahan's favorite spot in Ames. The trees, grass and soil are similar to those of Ukraine.

"Many times I catch myself thinking that, yes, it reminds me of Ukraine, and I'm thinking of Ukraine, but then I'm building new memories," Dzoba said.

"We feel at home," he said. However, he added, "It's very important that people and countries are helping Ukraine and are not forgetting what's happening there right now."

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Uniting

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'We understood that it's much better to be in the United States than in Europe'

Dzoba and Drahan lived in Zbarazh, which is about 100 miles east of Lviv in western Ukraine.

Dzoba had his own store, selling and repairing phones, accessories and other Apple electronics, and Drahan was a student at a teacher-training college. They've known each other for three years.

Russia's expanded invasion of Ukraine began in the early-morning hours of Feb. 24, but Dzoba and Drahan didn't leave Ukraine until April 18.

Dzoba said in the beginning of the war, his business received many requests to supply the Ukrainian military with electronics. He wanted to help and delivered parts to the army, but as supplies gradually dissipated and his inventory dried up, he decided he would be better off somewhere else where he could earn and send money to family and friends, and maybe even send food, if need be. "Luckily, nobody asks for food, yet."

The first time they saw destruction from the war with their own eyes was when passing west through Lviv, where Russian missiles had destroyed businesses. At the border with Poland, they first waited in a long line and then for three hours in a bomb shelter during an air-raid alert — time enough to get cleaned by Ukrainian customs officials while in the shelter.

By the end of the first day of Russia's invasion, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had declared martial law, and men ages 18 to 60 were and still are generally prohibited from leaving the country.

Dzoba, 28, said there are exceptions, including for him as a graduate student with no military experience, but he still had to get a permit from military authorities in order to leave.

He does feel guilty. He has a friend who returned from Germany on the eve of the war and was drafted. "Now, he's somewhere with Javelins (an anti-tank weapon system), killing the Russians. I feel mentally torn that some people are defending and I'm sitting here in safety."

He's grateful that the U.S. and other countries are supplying weapons to Ukraine, which is evening the match for their forces outnumbered by Russians.

He and Drahan flew from Poland to Italy — where his mom lives and where they thought they could temporarily find work and a place to live — and it was in Italy where they heard the initial announcement about the U.S. Uniting for Ukraine program.

The program, run by the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, could allow up to 100,000 Ukrainians fleeing the war to temporarily live and work in the U.S. for two years — though Ukrainians in the program must have a sponsor who agrees to financially support them for the duration of their stay.

"We understood that it's much better to be in the United States than in Europe, because Europe is overwhelmed with refugees, and you cannot stay there for



Oleh Dzoba (right) and Sofia Drahan (middle), pictured Wednesday with their American sponsor Janae Cantu, (left) are believed to be the first people to arrive in Ames, Iowa through the Uniting for Ukraine program, a U.S. initiative to take in up to 100,000 Ukrainians fleeing Russia's war against their country for up to two years. NIRMALENDU MAJUMDAR/AMES TRIBUNE

an extended period of time," because of the continuing flow of people leaving Ukraine, Dzoba said.

Unforeseen challenges: 'I admittedly didn't know what it took'

Cantu said early on in the war, a lot of people were generous enough to offer up spare bedrooms for Ukrainians, but she said, "That's great, but do you know what this really takes? I admittedly didn't know what it took."

She had joined a Facebook page, "North America for Ukraine," which was formed in March to help people in the U.S. and Canada who are working to resettle Ukrainians navigate immigration processes, host matching, employment opportunities and general resources.

Once paired with Dzoba and Drahan around the second week of May, Cantu said the North America for Ukraine group organized a chat with them — monitored to make sure no one was potentially being taken advantage of.

Dzoba and Drahan arrived May 27. Diane Birt, with the Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance — one of the local groups that has helped Dzoba and Drahan — said the two are the first they're aware of to arrive in Ames through the Uniting for Ukraine program.

Another Ukrainian family that had arrived earlier in the war has settled into an apartment, and the alliance is working on matching with another family of four to hopefully bring them to Ames, Birt said.

A spokesperson for U.S. Citizenship and Immigra-

tion Services told USA Today that as of June 14, the Uniting for Ukraine program had allowed 11,000 Ukrainians into the U.S. — in addition to 22,000 more people from Ukraine allowed in by U.S. Customs and Border Protection before the program was up and running.

Meanwhile, as of early June, more than 45,000 Americans had submitted applications to sponsor Ukrainians, according to Homeland Security data reported by CBS News.

The Cantus' home was built for roomers, with separate living rooms and bedrooms sharing a kitchen and backyard — but that was an easy part of the process.

Cantu said she's been frustrated by a lack of transparency in steps such as submitting work authorization documents for Dzoba and Drahan, and in dealing with case workers in Iowa who were automatically assigned but are not located in Ames.

They have been successful in getting Dzoba and Drahan signed up for Medicaid, but they're waiting on Social Security numbers.

Working with nonprofit organizations and navigating individuals' generosity has also been complicated.

In Ames, Cantu said Good Neighbor Emergency Assistance Inc. donated some bus tickets, food vouchers and a phone SIM card. The Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance provided some cash, and the alliance's volunteers have provided transportation to appointments.

However, Janae Cantu said, "A lot of organizations don't want to give you cash. They want to pay for utility bills, and they want to pay for your rent," but in this case, those are her utility bills and rent. "When you're in this kind of program, you don't have those things set up."

She said there have also been one-off expenses from Dzoba and Drahan's relocation she never thought of: the rabies booster shot Dzoba needs because he volunteered with animal rescue organizations in Ukraine; shipping medication from the U.S. to Ukraine for a cat of his; shipping supplies from Ukraine for Drahan's Etsy store, "FeltLandGifts," where she sells felt toys, baby mobiles, ornaments and other items.

While they wait to receive their Social Security numbers and access to more government benefits, Dzoba and Drahan have a GoFundMe — "Oleh & Sofia Settle in Ames" — at gofund.me /8c33862c.

Through it all, Dzoba said, "People are really nice and very hospitable. Those people that learn we are from Ukraine, they try to help, they want to help, so it's really reassuring."

The future: 'We just need to win'

Dzoba hoped the U.S. would welcome in more than the 100,000 Ukrainians the country has so far committed to hosting, "although we are very grateful for this number, too."

To feel comfortable going back to Ukraine, he said the country would need to have reclaimed all territory taken by Russia and Ukraine would need to have become a member of NATO, "otherwise, there are no other opportunities to maintain a peaceful life here."

He and Drahan want the world to be aware of Russia's atrocities committed in the war, and Dzoba warned that if Russia occupies Ukraine, scenes of torture and mass graves from places such as previously occupied Bucha would be seen in other countries as well.

"To preserve innocent lives and to preserve people, we just need to win and we need to destroy (Russian President Vladimir) Putin," he said.

Dzoba and Drahan talk with their families every day. Dzoba has two brothers in Ukraine who didn't want to leave, and Cantu said Dzoba's been teaching his brothers how to run his business.

Dzoba and Drahan are focused on learning English. Dzoba said he'd be willing to take any job, knowing that limited English language skills would prevent him from doing the kind of job he had in Ukraine or from going back to school.

Drahan might go back to college, and once Dzoba knows more English, he might take some computer programming classes.

At home, Cantu said she's been learning Ukrainian through online Duolingo lessons. Otherwise, "We use the Google Translate app, and that usually works fine."

Dzoba said, "We will never forget this, and we are really grateful."

Dzoba and Drahan spoke with the Tribune through Irina Bassis, who served as a translator.

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 @psliffeisabeauty.

Obituaries

TODAY'S OBITUARIES AND DEATH NOTICES

Name	Age	Town, State	Death Date	Arrangements
*Nervig, John	86	Ames	08-Apr	Grandon Funeral & Cremation Care

* Additional information in display obituaries

Obituaries appear in print and online at www.legacy.com/obituaries/AmesTribune

John Nervig

AMES - John Nervig, age 86 of Ames, Iowa died at Israel Family Hospice house in Ames on April 8, 2022. A celebration of life memorial service will be held at 11:00 a.m. Thursday, July 7, 2022, at Bethesda Lutheran Church, 1517 Northwestern, Ames, Iowa. Burial will be at Ames Municipal Cemetery at a later date.

John was born August 3, 1935, in Slater, Iowa to Herbert and Doris (Heggem) Nervig. John married Patti Jean Miller on November 30, 1957, in Ames, Iowa. The two had been inseparable since. John enjoyed following his alma mater, the Iowa State Cyclones. He spoke many times of the ISU win over Wilt Chamberlain and the Kansas Jayhawks at the Armory in 1957. John loved time with family, especially if it meant a trip to Hickory Park with his grandchildren.

This summer, the 85th edition of the Iowa Masters will be contested at Veenker Memorial Golf Course in Ames. Remarkably, John has been part of the action for 70 of those events, first as a player, followed by a tournament director/co-director and now as an honorary official. John first played the Masters in 1952. Starting in 1958, he reeled off 50 consecutive years of playing in the tournament, a record that stands alone today. "There's something special about the Iowa Masters golf tournament," said John. "It's a combination of a challenging golf course, great tradition, well-run tournament featuring volunteers and staff who love the game and players who love to compete and renew the great friendships developed over the years." On the tournament's 75th anniversary, and in recognition of decades of service, Nervig received an honorary life membership to Veenker. One of John's proudest achievements in his seven decades of involvement in the Iowa golf scene is being named the 2011 recipient of the George Turner Distinguished Service Award by the Iowa Golf Association.

John was an engineer for the Iowa Department of Transportation. He retired in the year 2000 following a 42-year career with the IDOT in Ames.

John is survived by his wife, Patti Nervig of 64 years, three sons: Mike (Amy) Nervig, Steve Nervig, Dave Nervig, and two grandchildren who cherished every moment with 'Papa', Nate and Raegan Nervig. He was preceded in death by his parents, sister, Doreen Nervig and stillborn daughter Susan Jean Nervig.

John offers this parting advice.

"The game of golf is a lot like the game of life. You have far more good days than bad days and just give it your best effort."

Memorials can be directed to Bethesda Lutheran Church and the Iowa Golf Association.

Online condolences may be directed to www.grandonfuneralandcremation.com

