

## Turning compassion into action: Iuliia's grassroots support for Ukrainian newcomers

There are people we meet who have a wonderful ability to respond and act in moments when most of us feel stunned and helpless.

Iuliia is one of those people.

Iuliia has led a grassroots response to the Ukraine-Russia war for the past three and a half years. She's opened her home, making her family's chicken farm a haven for Ukrainian newcomers to land and begin rebuilding their lives. She's the driving force behind community gatherings and donation drives.

This mom-of-three says her tireless volunteerism is a way she can act locally to respond to what's happening back at home. When the war started in 2022, Iuliia remembers wishing she could hop on a flight and pluck her mom, sister and her sister's children from the country.

"I was sad and scared and angry, and I couldn't help them," she remembers.

Iuliia arrived in North America some six years earlier, a freshly graduated veterinarian from small-town Ukraine.

Prior to her arrival, Iuliia worked for a veterinary clinic, travelling to farms and treating cows, sheep, pigs and small animals.

"Surgeries were my passion. This was when everything was quiet, when you had to be patient and so delicate. That was my favourite thing to do," she says.

As a 20-something in search of adventure, Iuliia signed up to take part in a year-long international program at her university that sent veterinarians to work abroad. She arrived in the U.S., to work on a pig farm with 6,000 animals.

There, in the only bar for miles, Iuliia met Bill. From southwestern Ontario, he too was on a work visa in the U.S.

It turns out they were both driven, independent, adventurous people and they hit it off. They began to date, and when Iuliia's work took him to the next state, Bill still made the six hour drive every weekend to see her. When Dovzhenko's work term came to an end, Geisel proposed and the two got married at a little white chapel in Las Vegas. One of her friends gifted them tickets to jump from the highest hotel in Vegas.

And so they took a big leap together.

Fast forward a few years. They were living in Huron County; Bill worked for local farmer and was able to partner with him to get into chicken quota. He cleaned up an

old two-story barn that had been used for storage and retrofitted it with all the technology of a modern broiler barn.

Meanwhile, Iuliia soon had two daughters. She was adapting to life in Canada, finding her niche in a new career as a fitness instructor at the local YMCA and as a mom.

She loves rural living and couldn't imagine living in a big city. She and Bill love that their children run around the farm without shoes on.

Everything changed when the war broke out.

"I took action locally because it was something that I needed to do to help," she says.

In a simple Facebook post, Iuliia wrote that she was hoping to help the Ukrainian war effort by collecting donated items to send back to Ukraine. She hoped to fill her mini-van and drive it to London, Ontario to the Ukrainian Congress Centre, where it would be sent to Ukraine.

"The power of social media is amazing," Iuliia says.

The outpouring of support from Goderich and area residents was overwhelming.

The response led to a three-month collection effort that filled a transport trailer with clothing, medicine, food and other essential supplies, along with a U-haul truck being filled with wheelchairs, walkers and crutches for the war effort. In addition, many more boxes of clothing were brought to the Salvation Army in Goderich. Other donations were picked up by volunteers with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress – London branch.

After the trucks were packed, Iuliia turned her attention to bringing Ukrainians fleeing war to Canada. A new program for people escaping the crisis was set up by the Canadian government, offering a three-year open work permit to Ukrainians.

Iuliia worked alongside retired architect Roman in that donation drive, and later the pair spoke about the possibility of bringing Ukrainians fleeing the war to Huron County.

Over the course of several meetings, Iuliia, Roman and the Huron County Immigration Partnership, along with others, discussed how we could set up an approach to provide safe places for Ukrainians to arrive in Huron County and rebuild their lives.

First, Roman and Iuliia arranged for a mother and her adult son fleeing Ukraine's war to settle in Goderich in the summer of 2022. They found a host for the family to stay with, a job for both and rides to get them to and from appointments. Soon thereafter, a family of four arrived from Ukraine, followed by a family of six. The process of helping the newcomers settle was repeated.

At the same time, Iuliia responded to personal requests on her social media page from friends and family and offered them information about how to come to Canada.

Together with the Goderich Lions and the Huron County Immigration Partnership, Iuliia and Roman organized a community gathering in August 2022 at Camp Klahanie, just south of Goderich, to bring Ukrainian newcomers together. The event drew 85 attendees – with newcomers from Goderich, Wingham and Exeter meeting for the first time. The gathering led to a series of monthly potlucks held in a church basement, leading to friendships forming and key information about the community being shared.

In early 2023, Iuliia's mother arrived and began living with the family. The same year, Iuliia's son was born. In 2024, Iuliia's sister and two children arrived in Canada too.

In total, Iuliia directly helped 19 Ukrainians come to Canada, hosting them in her own home after they arrived, helping them find work and getting their children in school.

In addition, she's helped dozens more people as she settled in Huron County. She's acted as interpreter, driver, apartment hunter, conflict negotiator, service referrer, event coordinator, information provider for the past three and a half years and continues to do so.

For those voluntary efforts, Iuliia is being recognized in the 2025 I Am Huron campaign, a celebration of immigrants making an impact in their communities. She is among six other recipients.

When asked about advice she would have for other immigrants moving to Huron County, Iuliia underlines the importance of making connections.

"This is a wonderful place with wonderful people. Just start talking. If you need help, ask for help. If someone is asking for help, help," she recommends.