

From Kyiv to Exeter: A Ukrainian family finds home in Huron County

How's this for a community welcome?

When Tanya and her family of five arrived in Exeter, after fleeing war-torn Ukraine in the summer of 2022, the neighbourhood was ready.

"The day we came here, it was a Friday, and we came about 8pm. We turned down the street, and we started guessing which house we were going to because we were staying with a host family. And it was difficult, because every house had a Ukrainian flag in their window," Tanya remembers. "All the houses had these welcoming signs."

A teacher by training, Tanya arrived in Exeter after spending most of her life in Ukraine's bustling capital of Kyiv, a city of 3 million people.

Early years

In Ukraine, Tanya says her childhood was spent with summers at her grandmother's village and the school year at their family's home two minutes from a local lake in the city.

"Kyiv is busy. There's traffic jams, shopping malls, lots of sports and art activities happening," she remembers.

As a child there, Tanya says she loved school, studying, and church.

"I was busy with drama, with choir, and with helping at Sunday school. I also loved the library. When other kids were busy with just playing outside in their yards, I would go to the library and spend the whole day there," she recalls.

Studying English and education at university at both the Bachelor and Master's level, Tanya trained as an English teacher before leading English classes for teenagers in the city.

Like many Ukrainian women, Tanya also balanced career with time away for maternity leave.

"In Ukraine, maternity leave is three years," she explains. "The government saves your spot for that time. So I left when each of my children was born. After that, I moved into private schools as a substitute. But it was always teaching, teaching, teaching."

Then, normal life got interrupted.

War and Displacement

Life shifted drastically in 2022. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Tanya and her husband, Serhii, faced difficult choices. Serhii, who had once run a business in Ukraine, had already begun working as a truck driver in the Czech Republic after the pandemic shut down many restaurants he partnered with. The family fled Kyiv for Czech in March 2022, the same day Canada announced a new program for Ukrainians seeking refuge.

"I called Ottawa that day to find out what to do," Tanya recalls. For two months, the family stayed in Czech Republic, filing applications and waiting for visas.

On June 17, 2022, they landed in Toronto. "It was very windy," she remembers. "We saw this huge Canadian flag waving. I had never seen a flag so big."

From Toronto, they traveled straight to Exeter, where a host family welcomed them. But their first morning brought a shock.

"It was June 18, and plus five degrees at eight in the morning," she laughs. "People told me Canada was cold, but I thought, in June? That was a surprise."

Starting Over in Canada

The first few months were a blur of paperwork and discovery. "It felt like being a student again," Tanya says. "You have to learn how things are done, where to buy food, how to find friends, church, work. Everything is new."

There were practical hurdles, too—passport renewals, health cards, Social Insurance Numbers—for five people. "I quickly knew my phone number and address by heart," she says. "I had to write it so many times."

Yet there were moments of warmth and community. On their first weekend in Exeter, the town held a yard sale.

"We met all of Exeter that day," Tanya recalls. Neighbours introduced themselves, and even gave her youngest son a Lego set. "He was five, and so happy," she says. "It reminded him of home."

Support continued to be offered as the family settled in the community.

"There was a lady who helped a lot. When we moved from the place where we lived with our host family, and into a place on our own, she asked neighbours if they could help us. When we arrived to move in, on the porch there was a huge box. It had some food and some other essential things to just help us move in. People just covered all our needs, and one person said that these people need help and voila, they helped," Tanya remembers.

Family and Resilience

Through it all, family has been her strength. She and Serhii are raising three sons

"It's a fun crowd," she says. "You're never bored."

Her children have even coaxed her into adventures she never imagined. "They taught me to camp. I would have chosen the library over camping," she admits with a grin. "But they showed me how fun it can be."

Coming to a small town, after a lifetime of living in a city, has pleasantly surprised Tanya.

"What surprised me the most is how people are open, no matter who you are. When we compare it to Kyiv, they are more chatty, and they're like, 'How are you doing?' And, 'what wonderful weather?' So they stop and have a talk. They don't rush somewhere and you start a conversation with a person you didn't know. You know, if you do it three mornings or three nights in the row, probably on the fourth one, you're going to have a friend," Tanya remarks.

Returning to education

Determined to teach again, Tanya joined the supply list at a local school. Soon, she was regularly called in to cover classes.

While she dreams of being a full-time teacher again, there are hurdles to overcome. To be a qualified teacher in Ontario, Tanya is required to have her credentials assessed and complete additional training and qualification requirements as dictated by the Ontario College of Teachers.

Undeterred, Tanya has found other ways to continue her passion for education.

In her first year in Canada, Tanya helped three other families who came to Canada with limited English language knowledge by translating for them. She even went along on a day-long training to help someone obtain a forklift license. She has been called on by other local businesses to help with language barriers when needed.

On the weekends, Tanya leads a Ukrainian-language class for other children of Ukrainian heritage, so that they maintain the language of their culture.

"She dedicates so much of her personal time helping others," shares Inna Zgryvets, whose son attends the Ukrainian language class.

Tanya also volunteers to organize children's activities at community events such as Newcomer Day at Camp or Learn to Curl events for newcomers. She has also emceed at the Huron Multicultural Festival in Goderich and volunteers with Super Capes for Kids, a non-profit group based in Exeter who sews and donates capes to children at London Children's Hospital, Stratford General and South Huron Hospital in Exeter.

"I feel the drive to help from inside and follow it. I see a need, and if I understand that I'm capable of doing it, I just do it," Tanya shares.

For her contributions to the community, Tanya was named as an I Am Huron recipient, a campaign that celebrates contributions immigrants and newcomers to Canada make to Huron County's communities.

"I love this small town. I love that it is a green town. I love the library here. I love that we have just 17 minutes to get to the lake, to get to our relaxation area. The kids can swim, you can watch the sunset, you can just relax. It's a beautiful area," Tanya says.

Tanya's journey is more than one family's story of resilience—it is a reminder of the power of community.

"From flags in the windows to food on the doorstep, Exeter showed how simple acts of welcome can ease the weight of displacement and create a sense of belonging. Her experience demonstrates that when communities open their hearts, they don't just help newcomers start over—they enrich the fabric of the place they call home," says Pam Somers, chair of the Huron County Immigrant Advisory Council.