

Saving Lives and Building Futures

Fight For Right

In February of 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and Fight For Right (FFR) launched into action as a woman disability-led organization responding to the crisis. GADRA activated to assist FFR as they accomplished life-saving evacuations to safe zones, and across the border for people with disabilities who were suddenly displaced or refugees and separated from family, friends, and essential disability resources. They continue to work 24/7 in the most vulnerable regions of Ukraine to ensure that no one with disabilities is left behind or forgotten in either evacuating or receiving resources.

In addition to working in a war zone, they are also participating in policy making and recovery discussions, advocating for rebuilding a Ukraine with accessible infrastructures, inclusive societal strategies, and deinstitutionalizing humanitarian aid and disaster responses. They are shifting the narrative around disability and sharing their personal journeys from before and during war, and how we can do better as a global society. FFR is impacting the lives of so many Ukrainians with disabilities that it is easy to forget that they too are people with disabilities, whose families are on the front lines, and whose homes are gone. GADRA has been honored to have brought their experience, and support to FFR, who 18 months later continues to exemplify the capacity of a disability-led organization and the disability community.

In the words of Oleksandr.....

“If someone told me in the summer of 2021 that in a year I would live in Germany as a refugee, I would definitely think that person is not full of mind, but now this is my reality.

From February 24 to the moment of crossing the Ukrainian border (March 15), it seems to me that I have lived more than one life.

The decision to leave Ukraine was probably the hardest decision I had to make in all my 30 years of life.

My experience of escaping war is not a walk on the beach on a nice summer day, it's more of a crazy roller coaster.

I remember very well the day when my friends and I nevertheless dared to leave Kyiv, how we caught breaks between air alarms to order a taxi for a cost 10 times more than on any other peaceful day, like passers-by who passed by us asking "What are you going?" And then the real tests began, first it was necessary to get to the station, through the block of posts and closed bridges, the road instead of the usual 20 minutes took 2 hours, then to get through the huge crowd at the station to get to the track. The worst thing for me at that moment was not the possibility of a missile attack on the railway station, but the fact that we may not be allowed on the train, because we are men.

Fortunately, although not on the first try, we were still able to get on the train and already on the train realized that we had no idea where he was going. It was a very long and difficult night because there were so many people that I only had enough space somewhere in the aisle on the floor in the restaurant car, but then it did not seem to be any discomfort. I drove all night sitting on the floor because there was no more free space to even put my head somewhere and at least sleep for a couple of minutes, but I was then so grateful that I was leaving that I managed to leave Kyiv. Already in the morning, we found out that the train was going to Uzhgorod and then the real adventures began, because having a bunch of documents with us about our state of health, about our unfitness for military service at the first attempt to cross the border of Ukraine, we were refused and refused not

by the border service, and the military, who stood in front of the border service and filtered out all men of draft age, such as we are not disabled enough and in general everyone who is exempted from military service for health reasons, according to the military, did not have the right to leave the country, I will never forget these humiliating words in my address - no medicine - chickens cannabis! (Cannabis use is prohibited in Ukraine), at that moment it seemed to me that everything was already over - life was over and I would die either from a shell that would hit somewhere near me, or from the fact that I would run out of medicine.

But with the help of Fight For Right lawyers, I began my long journey of re-issuing documents for exemption from military duty, I had to spend three days in the military from seven in the morning until eight in the evening, without the right to leave the territory of the military commissariat, in order to re-receive this damn piece of paper. I still remember how every time I reported to the lawyer about my every step and that everything was fine with me, I was alive and they did not take me to the front.

The spectacle that I saw there for three days of my standing in queues to various offices I will remember perhaps for the rest of my life is a bunch of men with various forms of disability from diabetes mellitus, to psychosocial disorders standing in the corridor and waiting, unaccompanied, without giving even a place to sit down, because to stand for so long is a challenge for any person. The most ironic moment of all this was the "corridor of shame": when you finally get your re-release from military duty and you can finally leave the military then you must show your documents and this damn piece of paper to the officer at the exit, who will read aloud everything that is written there so that everyone who is standing and waiting in line will hear, what your diagnosis is and what kind of violations you have.

But then after spending three days in the army, in the cold, it seemed so unimportant and at the same time caused indignation.

Already somewhere from the third attempt, we still managed to cross the border of Ukraine, so with the constant support of the Fight For Right lawyer, I also reported via SMS that we approached the border, that we passed the first perimeter of the military, then another one, then issued permission from border guards to cross the border, then there was another perimeter of the military. The most disgusting thing about crossing the border was that at each such perimeter, the military literally pulled men out of the crowd and interrogated why we were going to cross the border and whether we had the right to do so. I still remember this strange feeling of complete security and freedom as I crossed the border of Ukraine with Slovakia. It's so strange when a war is going on a hundred meters from you, and here it is safe and a bunch of volunteers are trying to feed you or somehow help you. For some reason, it was so awkward for me to take food then, I told everyone: "Thank you, I have nuts in my briefcase, I have enough." And then a very long road began with a bunch of transfers, Kosice - Bratislava - Prague - Berlin. Finally, a friend met us in Berlin and we went to the small town of Frankfurt on the Oder, the whole journey took about 24 hours in total, it really was a constant movement, but for some reason, there was no such delight as traveling, the landscapes outside the window changed, but it did not cause delight.

Having finally arrived in Frankfurt on the Oder, I realized that this is only the beginning, after all, then began a long and difficult path of registration in all possible instances, it was at this moment that I realized my privilege because I had somewhere to go, I was met, settled not in a refugee camp, but to my house, my German friends not only hospitably received me a whole room in their apartment, and also helped with all stages of registration

and paperwork, because then I did not know German at all, but I had to constantly register on some sites, go to different instances and answer many different questions and without the help of people who know both German and your language, it would all be much more difficult.

I am very grateful to everyone who helped me all this time, to the Fight For Right team who almost led me through all the difficulties of the new realities in which we found ourselves on February 24th, to every volunteer abroad who tried to feed us, helped to deal with trains, to my friends Peggy and Nancy, who immediately called me on February 24th, offered to come to them, sheltered and helped to go through all the difficulties of obtaining temporary protection status.

From the first day we arrived in Uzhgorod, I joined the Emergency Response, which Fight For Right had already begun to do at that time, I advised people on the phone about how to leave Kyiv, how to call a taxi so that it comes for you, what should a man with a disability do to be released from the country, how quickly to re-pass the military commission to get this damn paper. I remember even how I somehow miraculously found a private carrier in 2 hours, in early March 2022 agreed to take a group of people from Kyiv to Uzhgorod, and then in half an hour in Uzhgorod found a bus that would take people to the border. Then it was a task with an asterisk, because of the 20 jinks of 19 they simply told me: "Hey, friend, are you sure that there is a war in the country?" And they just hung up. But it was such a drive and adrenaline that saved me from realizing the terrible reality. I understood that someone needed me, and there was a benefit from me.

The lesson I learned during all this time is that the war is closer than everyone seems. We all watch the news, see how they show the war in Syria or Afghanistan, and believe that this is

somewhere so far away and does not concern us, but in fact, it can happen anywhere and anytime.”

Help Ukrainians with Disabilities GoFundMe link:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-disabled-ukrainians>