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Global Hands for Ukraine

On April 5, 2022, I stepped off of an airplane and into a warzone. After sitting on the couch with my dad and watching the news about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, my mind got to work. Seeing innocent people suffering severe, life-threatening injuries made my stomach churn. I wanted to find a way to support the people who were suffering in a way other than donating money or diapers to an organization. I wanted to help in a way no one else did or imagined doing. I wanted to help the fleeing refugees myself, applying the skills that I had learned related to the medical field for the benefit of others.

The result: Global Hands for Ukraine. Global Hands for Ukraine is an initiative that I created, which consisted of four medical professionals and me traveling to Ukraine to provide direct medical care to refugees fleeing their homes in Ukraine to safety in Poland.

We started by getting in touch with some friends who were refugees suffering through the war, who provided us with insight into the situation on the ground there and informed us that our efforts would be greatly appreciated by the community. We used those words as motivation and got right to work raising money. In just 1.5 weeks, we raised over \$31,000 to support the initiative and our goals, helping the suffering community as much as possible.

We had initially planned on going there on our own and setting up our tent, but we partnered with Medical Volunteers International, which is a larger organization that already had a medical tent set up to provide humanitarian aid to those in need. Landing in Poland, we got straight to work. The entire team was put on a 24-hour shift the moment we got there, and we could not have been happier to accept the task. The idea of being on the ground and providing medical care to those who needed it most at the time fueled us with motivation like nothing else could.

The roads were dark. No lights in sight, no human life in sight. It was like driving through an abandoned country. We would take a bus in and out of Ukraine every day, whether it be 6 am or 6 pm, according to our shifts. The tent was always lively, with the World Central Kitchen providing free hot meals to refugees suffering in the cold. The patients came in waves as buses arrived from cities all around Ukraine. Sometimes, it would be quiet with 1-2 patients over a few hours, while sometimes, it would be all hands on deck to handle the rush and get patients organized, making sure every patient gets an appropriate amount of medical attention. However, sometimes we did not have a choice.

As one of the buses arrived, a woman collapsed, getting down the stairs of the bus. These refugees were experiencing levels of distress that we may never feel, many suffering from cases

of hypertension (high blood pressure) and hyperthermia (overheating of the body). The doctors on sight were shocked by how significantly high the blood pressure of some of the patients was, putting into perspective how serious the situation was.

Hearing the stories of some of the refugees explained why they were experiencing these medical issues: families were to pack their lives into a single carry-on sized suitcase or a backpack, forced to live off of whatever they were able to grab in the short amount of time that the Ukrainian military allowed them before having to catch a bus into another country. Some families were able to leave the country in their vehicles, making the life transition just a bit easier. However, families would be waiting in lines that stretched for miles and lasted for days just to cross the border into Ukraine. To do anything we could, we assembled a secondary medical team and began walking across the line of cars, offering medical care to anyone who may need it.

Some injuries were minor, but some were life-threatening. The woman who collapsed off of the bus was experiencing a severe heat stroke, eliminating her ability to communicate clearly and think adequately. Had she collapsed just a few hours earlier, it is not certain that she would have made it out of the warzone at all.

The boy in the black leather jacket. A memory I will never forget. It started with a brother in a black leather jacket and a sister in a white dress awaiting the arrival of their mother. The older brother approached me: "Hello sir, do you know anywhere that we can sleep for the night?" After guiding them to one of the tents that was set up for refugees to rest in, I left them to rest and awaited their arrival in the tent for food in the morning. I saw them come to the tent for food, still without their mother, who was due to arrive that morning. Due to traffic delays, she did not arrive until the afternoon, but the family was finally back together. Something was different about this family, however. I saw myself in the older brother's shoes, doing everything he could to ensure that his family was safe. I kept an eye on them, making sure they got everything they needed to cross the border safely.

Instead, what I saw was something I would not have predicted. Tears began flowing down the cheeks of the mother, daughter, and brother. The law put in place by the Ukrainian government was that all men between the ages of 18-60 were forced to stay in the country and fight in the war. The family was splitting apart for what could have been forever, right in front of my eyes. My heart felt heavy, and I knew I needed to help. I gave the mother and daughter \$200 in cash to help them with their transition to the new country; a small action that I would have been eternally grateful for had I been in the brother's position. After saying goodbye to his mother and sister for an indefinite amount of time, the boy came back to me and gave me a big hug, leaving me with a memory I will never forget.

Being in the country and seeing families being torn apart put the severity of the conflict in perspective for me, making me forever grateful for what I have and appreciative that I could play a small role in helping these refugees toward a better and safer future. Today, I still think about the boy in the black leather jacket, serving as a constant reminder that there are people out there who are going through things significantly worse than I am.

Making this medical mission a success came with no ease. There were many hiccups in the planning and execution of the process, but we were able to work together as a team to brainstorm

solutions and push forward. Reflecting on this, it is crucial to recognize the key role that technology played in the success of this mission. The entire idea stemmed from the footage of the rubble in Ukraine that my dad and I watched on TV. Had we not seen the severity of the conflict in the video, it is not certain that things would have progressed the way they did.

Thanks to technology, we were able to communicate with local Ukrainians, who informed us that we would be able to go to the country and provide medical care. Pivotal to our success, we utilized the power of social media as a way to spread awareness of our mission. We created a GoFundMe page, allowing us to collect all of the money raised in one place and showcase how much we had advanced. By sharing this with people on social media, we were able to reach an audience larger than we could have achieved on our own and had genuine community support to ensure that our mission was a success. In addition to raising money, we were also able to provide people with progress updates through social media. From the day we purchased the plane tickets to weeks after we returned, the social media page remained highly active in showcasing what exactly we were doing in Ukraine. This allowed us to show the people who donated that their money was going toward a genuine purpose and that we were following through with what we had promised.

One of the things we did with the money raised was assist a school in providing students with school essentials. These materials included gym clothes, notebooks, laptops, pens, pencils, and more. We also provided many families with life necessities such as toiletries, medications, food, and more. For one family, we were even able to purchase them a car due to their severe need for personal transportation. We continued these efforts even after we left, working closely with the phenomenal people we met while we were there to ensure that families that needed the most help received it.

As this was the first humanitarian aid mission I have led, I received copious amounts of feedback, both positive and negative, from the community, my team, and the people I met in Ukraine. However, this was all important to me in learning what worked well and what did not, helping me make sure that my next mission was even more successful than this one.

Utilizing social media to our advantage significantly supported our success on this mission, helping us not only with sharing our experiences with the world but also sparking the idea and assisting us in raising the money we needed to make the largest impact possible.