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FEATURED

River Valley chief medical officer speaks of helping Ukraine refugees

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Jeannie Mueller, outside a shelter in one of the proper outside Warsaw, in front of flags for Poland, the city of Warsaw, and Ukraine. (Courtesy photo/Jeannie Mueller)

Jeannie Mueller, chief medical officer for River Valley, spent two weeks in Warsaw, Poland, in January to help women and children who were forced to flee their home country due to the war in Ukraine. On the morning of March 4, Mueller, in partnership with Montrose's Friends of Ukraine, gave a presentation on the experience at Montrose Center for the Arts.

Mueller and her trip:

Mueller explained that Poland was quick and willing to help their neighboring country, stating that approximately 1.6 million people have fled to Poland. In fact, Poland refers to Ukrainian people as "guests" instead of "refugees."

Most of these guests, and the majority of the people who Mueller helped during this time, were women, children and elderly people — men between the ages of 15 to 65 are not allowed to leave Ukraine.

"They're wonderful people. What I really took away is that this (Ukraine) is not a third-world country. They are like you and I," Mueller said, sharing that many of the patients she treated were school teachers, bankers, and others whose entire lives were uprooted.

As soon as war broke out in Ukraine, Mueller knew she wanted to help. After researching medical missions she got together with non-profit International Medical Relief out of Denver last fall.

The mission listed on the nonprofit's website is: "To provide access to sustainable health education and medical services in underserved and vulnerable communities around the world to improve the health, wellness, and quality of life of those populations most in need."

Lawyers from the nonprofit helped Mueller prepare to practice medicine out of the country, and by Jan. 1, she was in Warsaw.

While there Mueller went to six different shelters, the farthest an hour and a half out from Warsaw. She saw multiple cases of hypertension, influenza, pneumonia, and psoriasis which stress had made worse, among other illnesses.

On top of helping with medical cases Mueller also taught yoga to the people there and two classes for Ukrainian psychologists.

Mueller also saw lots of cases of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Ukraine and Poland speak two different languages and use two different sets of money, not to mention the differences between the two countries' cultures, Mueller explained.

The shelters lacked privacy, with people sleeping and eating next to strangers. There were 20 containers used as showers for approximately 800 people, said Mueller.

While there were translators at these shelters, Mueller commented on how drastic these refugees' lives have changed, and how quickly. "Can you imagine your house gets bombed and you literally leave with a bag?"

Many of the supplies used were brought in from the U.S. Even with suitcases full of medicine, antibiotics, and other medical items, they inevitably ran out. Once this happened Mueller and other volunteers had to substitute them when possible. Unlike here at places like River Valley they did not have X-ray machines or CT scanners.

"You have a stethoscope and your hands," said Mueller, highlighting that while we rely on technology here, warzones do not have such luxuries.

Mueller and Friends of Ukraine:

On Jan. 15 Mueller returned. She said presentations like the one March 4 are meant to make people aware of what is truly going on in Ukraine and Poland. Her experience was humbling, but education is knowledge and knowledge is power, she said.

Mueller met Michelle Prentice-Leslie and Friends of Ukraine before the trip, back in December. Later Mueller and Prentice-Leslie, one of the founders of Friends of Ukraine, realized they were neighbors. From there, they formed a relationship that led to the presentation.

Prentice-Leslie also emphasized that it is important for people to remain aware of what is happening in Ukraine. Friends of Ukraine has 15 people in its sponsor circle who meet regularly, with others donating coats and materials from time to time.

Friends of Ukraine supports and helps refugees who come to the U.S. Members work with Uniting for Ukraine, a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services program that allows Ukrainian citizens and their immediate families to come to the states for two years. After that they may decide to become U.S. citizens, but as Prentice-Leslie and Mueller both emphasize, many want to go back to their home.

Friends of Ukraine has helped two families who have come to the U.S., and they plan to do a rally like last years for Ukraine Independence Day, Aug. 24. They also look to have another tree for Montrose Center for the Arts' Treetastic! event, which is where Mueller and Prentice-Leslie first met.

For more information on how to help, you may contact Prentice-Leslie at leslie732m@gmail.com or visit International Medical Relief's website.

"Ukrainians are very resilient. They love their country, and they are so grateful for people to come and help them," Mueller said. She is planning to go back to Poland this summer.

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