

Wausau and Newcomers Help Bridge Cultures

The aroma of fresh delicacies greet everyone at the first step with the friendly greeting of the owners Anton and Anastasiia Chystiukhin soon to follow. The welcoming space filled with comfy chairs and fun games invites them to stay and enjoy the treat in house with a conversation with the Chystiukhins bound to occur.

Since December, Wausau has grown to include Just Right Bakery. Anyone who comes is prone to come back soon to indulge again in both the treat and owners' kindness. Ukrainian culture has emerged in Wausau and they are proud to share pieces of their home.

The delicious Ukrainian desserts and coffee have become a talk around town, drawing people in from all over. After one year in the United States, the Chystiukhins have made a rich impact that the community seems to crave.

It took three days for the Chystiukhin family to travel from their home in Kharkiv, Ukraine to a hostel room in a small village near the border of Romania. This route is equal to the distance from Wausau to Chicago.

The trip took an extended amount of time due to the waves of Ukrainians fleeing from the Russians' horrific unpredictable bombing. After months away from their home without any let up, their hope to move back decreased and talk for a more stable and safer place to live began.

Dangers, such as wars, are on the rise and threatening citizens across the globe. For those affected, the choice to become a refugee is not a want, but a need, and refugees depend on stable countries to welcome them.

Like many other refugees, the Chystiukhin's decision to leave their beloved home of Ukraine was not easy, but Russia's deepening invasion made the hope of protection and stability anywhere within Ukraine limited and brought the family great fear.

With their son Mark's safety and education on their mind, parents Anastasiia and Anton started their search for a sponsor. Through Uniting for Ukraine, a process created by the United States government to assist those fleeing Ukraine, one was found in Wausau who not only agreed to sponsor them into the United States but also opened up their home to the family.

By mid-2023, according to the UN Refugee agency, 110 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide and 36.4 million of those were refugees. In the United States, resettlement agencies have formed locations in towns across the country to help settle and rehome up to 125,000 refugees annually, as stated by the Migration Policy Institute.

In 2021, the Wausau branch of Ethiopian Community Development Council Multicultural Community Center (ECDC) resettlement agency opened tasking the Wausau community to welcome the new neighbors.

Though Wausau has a past of welcoming refugees from southeast Asia in the 1970s, this wave in the 2020s faces unique challenges.

As community engagement coordinator at ECDC, one of Tana DeLonay's tasks is to engage with the community to spread awareness and communicate with the public about what ECDC is and what it means for Wausau.

"95% of people that I have talked to had no idea that refugee resettlement was happening, but the response and the support has been overwhelming," DeLonay said.

However, some backlash has occurred as some community members feel that those from other countries are a problem to deal with, question why they are here, or believe the refugees are coming in illegally.

"A lot of it has to do with misinformation so we have really done our due diligence to be really positive and strategic about our message," said DeLonay. "All of our referrals do come from the federal government so our resettlement is very different than what is happening at the border and people don't always understand that."

The lack of knowledge and minor backlash, however, have no effect on the support or impact already being made by many community members.

For incoming refugees, proficiency in English is a major barrier when adjusting to a new culture.

"We have found that a lot of our Afghanistan folks that we have supported have worked with our government doing interpretation, so they are bilingual which makes it so much easier for them to get a job, get around, and understand the culture," DeLonay said. "Our clients from Myanmar speak Rohingya, which is an entirely oral language, so this presents greater challenges with community integration."

The language barriers and cultural differences affect both sides. Newcomers are having to adjust to Americans' more systematic way of living and the community are having to adjust to their cultural ways.

It is important to remember that not only are refugees coming to Wausau, but they are bringing their culture with them to share. They play an important role in cultural exchange, help expose the community to other cultures, and shape a unified future.

The Chystiukhin family shows a start to this unification through their bakery.

“People say they love our desserts and are thankful to have us here,” Anastasiia said. She is happy to be able to share the culture of her home with the people who are welcoming her to theirs.

“When we started we thought, ok who is going to try some Ukrainian cakes, but the community was so welcoming and supportive,” Anastasiia said. “We had a huge line for our grand opening and that was something we really didn’t expect.”

Steady flows of people have continued to patronize their bakery since opening, and some even traveling from out of state. For this, Anastasiia and Anton expressed nothing but appreciation.

One of the main reasons for the Chystiukhin’s move to America was education for their son, which Wausau has provided.

“He’s taken to Wausau a lot faster, and it’s really a nice place with lots of opportunities here,” Anastasiia said. Mark has been enjoying his time in school: making new friends, going to the boys and girls club after school, participating in activities and sports, and being part of the gifted and talented program.

For many of the children, this will be the home they know, so their upbringing and community engagement in these early years is important. The Wausau School District is welcoming the children in and working on adjusting to help them get the most out of their education.

DeLonay explained that John Marshall Elementary School has recently created a newcomer center to help aid children from other countries who aren’t as proficient in English or just need some extra help integrating into an American school system. This is important in making sure they feel at ease and welcomed in the new school environments. It also gets them into American education at a rate that’s not overwhelming.

In the D. C. Everest School District, there has also been a rising number of students from other countries, though not as refugees, but migrants. Leslei Dickerson, the English Learning teacher at the senior high, has been working with the incoming students and helping the transition into a new environment.

“It is a lot of very rewarding work getting students acclimated to a new school system,” Dickerson said. She has been working with the people across the district and community to help make the process of integrating into the school district and surrounding area as smooth as possible.

For the newcomers, setting up systems to make their experience smooth, as Dickerson does, is important. “We want to make sure our students are happy, feel welcome, and are comfortable and safe,” explained Dickerson. “For example, teaching routines like how to use lockers, change classrooms during the day, go through breakfast and lunch lines, and manage the buses. You use a lot of repetition.”

Similar to John Marshall, Everest will be implementing “Newcomer Programming” starting in the 2024-2025 school year to work with the new students and their families, Dickerson informed. There are several people in each school involved in the “Newcomers Programming” for each building and one designated person, with Kristen Spiegel Berg as the lead in this position.

This program will aid the school district in helping the newcomers as their numbers rise.

Recently, a group of Haitian siblings, the Augustin’s, have moved from Haiti to America to live with their uncle, who has been in the Everest area since 1990. Dickerson shared that they left due to gang violence and hope for better education opportunities.

With speaking Haitian Creole, there is a language barrier D. C. Everest has to work around. While the older sister Niodmimi, who goes by Mima, has been teaching herself English since she was 11 and is fairly proficient, her younger brothers, Billy and Sam, are just starting to learn. Mrs. Dickerson shared that technology has been very helpful through using a translator to help understand each other.

“These kids can take their iPads into the community, type something, show the person, and be understood,” Dickerson said.

Mima, hopes to be an architect and has been working hard to advance her studies, grateful for educational opportunities here. She is appreciative of the kind teachers helping her grow as a student and reach her goals.

“I always ask her how was your day and she says great,” Dickerson said, “Always a positive attitude. The teachers want her, Billy, and Sam to be successful.”

Though Everest has worked hard to welcome these students, Mima misses her friends from home and students here have yet to fill the gap.

“I’m always at home because I have no friends to go with,” Mima said. She explained she is always at home listening to music, watching movies, learning English, or working on homework.

Many students have stepped up to get them out of the house and feeling included. Sophomore Sienna Pachniak recently took the family to a soccer game and then an ice cream shop.

“It made me feel so wholesome because it felt good helping them make friends with us and get them into the community,” Sienna said, “They are so fun and energetic, and I would love to hang out with them again.”

Getting Wausau’s new neighbors out into the community and engaging with people as students, as Everest has, is important to help them feel welcome. Making Wausau A Home, a recent club formed within Everest, helps to address this and is dedicated to bringing refugees and the community together.

Whether in school or within the community, it's apparent that support is present. Businesses are offering positions, students are building connections, and people are continuously wanting to learn more and help.

Wausau has come to savor the contributions, culture, and flavors of its new arrivals.