

Boxes to the battlefields

People in Ukraine are finding unexpected support from around the globe – including Portland's Slavic community

BY EMILY GREEN
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In a thick Russian accent, Mikhail Mitkov-Baklanovsky explains how the round adhesive bandage he's just pulled from a cardboard box will keep a lung from collapsing after a bullet pierces it. As he speaks, he's standing next to a small mountain of medical and military supplies he's stockpiled in a small room off his lower-level den. The bandage will adhere through dirt, blood and sweat, he says, and the valve in the center will allow the punctured lung to breathe.

His wife, Tatyana Putra, points out that the wound dressing they've purchased is very special.

"It's made of crab shells so it stops bleeding – in three minutes," she says.

Mitkov-Baklanovsky is a Russian descendant and native of Ukraine. He attended high school in Donetsk, a Ukrainian city now occupied by pro-Russian separatists that, in many areas, has been reduced to rubble. He and his wife met while attending college in the south of Ukraine, and they immigrated to Portland with their children in 1992. He's worked as a software project manager, and she runs a custom drapery shop in North Portland.

Since September, the couple have shipped more than \$100,000 worth of medical and nonlethal military supplies from donors in Portland to the Ukrainian army and other groups fighting alongside it. Volunteers in Ukraine tell them what is needed, and then they send it – everything from splints and bandages to a \$7,500 pair of refurbished night-vision binoculars.

Their 23-year-old son, Nick Mitkov, contributes by spray-painting camouflage patterns on black generic kneepads on the front lawn of their Southwest Portland home.

This family is not alone in its efforts. In Portland, Vancouver and other U.S. cities with large Slavic populations, grassroots contributions to Ukraine have been considerable. Locally organizers report tens of thousands of donors.

Portland-based Medical Teams International, in collaboration with Ukrainian-American Cultural Association, is shipping 28 pallets of medical supplies to Kiev this week, including bandages, syringes, walkers and wheelchairs, says MTI spokeswoman Angie Allee. Many other local supporters send individual packages directly to friends and family.

"The old women send jars of borscht," Putra says.

UACA board member Tatiana Terdal says Portland's Ukrainian community is very diverse, with members of different ethnicities, first languages and faiths.

"What unites us is love of Ukraine and support for Ukraine. Russian propaganda has tried to portray the war in Ukraine as a civil war rather than the war of Russian

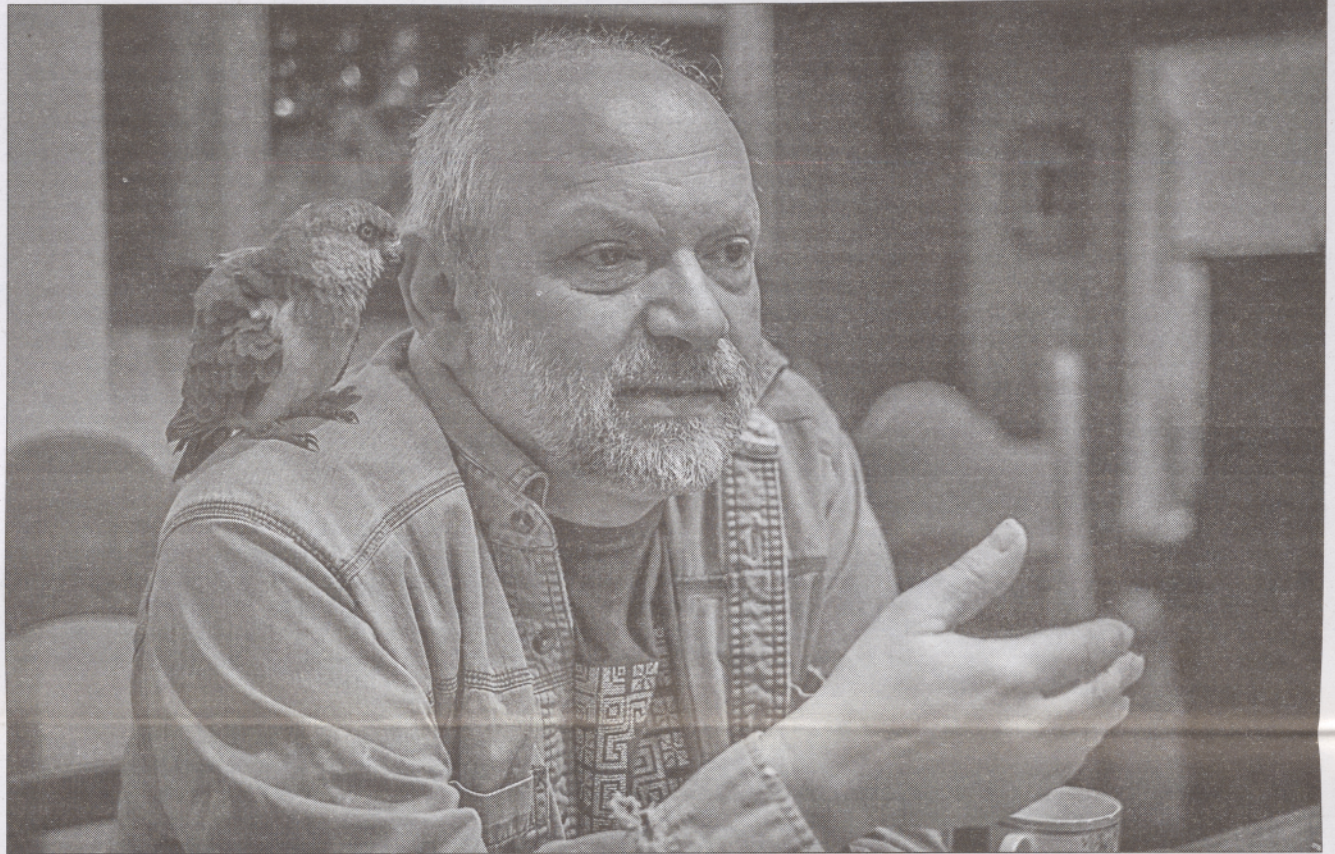


PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Mikhail Mitkov-Baklanovsky sits at his kitchen table, discussing the conflict in his native Ukraine as his family's parrot, Tony, chirps on his shoulder. He and others in Portland's Slavic community send aid to the Ukrainian army and forces fighting alongside it.

aggression," she says. "Many of the members of the local Ukrainian community are first-generation Americans who grew up during the days of the Soviet Union, remember it well and don't want to go back to those days. Since most of us have close families in Ukraine, we don't wish the return of the Soviet Union for them and support their struggle for democratic future."

At last count, the Coalition of Communities of Color estimated that in 2011 there were about 22,000 Slavic immigrants – which includes Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Serbs, Czechs, Bosnians, Bulgarians and Croats – in Multnomah County.

Over a hot cup of Russian tea and a mound of colorfully wrapped Ukrainian candies, Mitkov-Baklanovsky expresses how he felt he had to do something when the conflict broke out in his homeland.

"It really scared me," he says. "If you do nothing, you feel much more worse than if you do something."

The first thing he says he did was write a couple of songs; he's been known to play his guitar while the family parrot, Tony, chirps along on his shoulder. But soon his efforts turned to supporting the Ukrainian military.

And it hasn't been easy. In order to get around steep bribes charged by corrupt Ukrainian customs agents, Mitkov-Baklanovsky says, he's relied on strangers

he met via Facebook to transport truckloads of supplies from London to Kiev – a nerve-wrecking solution.

"He could not sleep that first night," Putra says. But to their relief, every shipment has reached its destination thus far.

Most of the supplies he has sent were purchased from SAM Medical Products, a U.S. military supplier. The company, based in Wilsonville, has also donated free supplies to Mitkov-Baklanovsky and offers him a discount on items he purchases, says Corina Bilger, SAM's director of global sales. She says Mitkov-Baklanovsky has bought "very large quantities" from them.

"He is the sweetest man in the world," she says. "He's practically buying our products and then giving them away."

Putra explains the Ukrainian army is weak, and many fighters are volunteers.

"It's just boys from the country. They have no military training," Putra says. "A lot of casualties in Ukrainian army now is from their own weapons."

In addition to an ill-equipped military, medical clinics and government agencies are unable to properly house and care for more than 1 million displaced Russians and Ukrainians who have fled from war-torn cities in the east.

Dimitry Mishchuk's Portland-based nonprofit, Giving Hope, was founded in

2013 to create a children's home in Ghana. The Ukraine native says that when the conflict broke out, he "knew the need was great and urgent." Giving Hope began to collect and crowd-fund donations for the effort. With the support of churches and other community groups, his organization has sent five 40-foot containers filled with clothing, linens, toys and medical supplies to volunteers and churches in Ukraine that are helping the refugees. His goal is to send eight more containers by the end of 2015.

"There are medical clinics in Ukraine that haven't gotten any new equipment in over 20 years," he says.

Mishchuk says the generosity of American churches and local businesses has helped the effort immensely, with Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods donating grain and other food, DoubleTree Central Laundry donating a truckload of linens, and Providence Hospital donating medical supplies and offering financial assistance.

Small trucking company Brothers Express hauls containers full of donated items to the Port of Seattle for send-off, free of charge.

"It's not only brought together the Slavic community in Portland, Vancouver and Ukraine; the local community is working together more," Mishchuk says. "Before everyone was kind of grouped by religion and beliefs, but now everyone – Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, non-believers – it's brought