

# Ukrainian sisters take refuge in Redmond

By JOE SIESS  
The Bulletin

REDMOND — Ira and Kristina Sinohach, two sisters from Chernivtsi, Ukraine, left their home after the start of Vladimir Putin's war, embarking on a journey through multiple countries before crossing into the United States via Mexico on foot and safely arriving in Redmond.

The two sisters are thankful to have made it all the way to Central Oregon, and said their parents, who remain in Ukraine, are also relieved. After such a long journey, the sisters can finally catch their breath while they are hosted by the family of a new friend they met in southwestern Ukraine soon after the war began.

While volunteering for the We're Near team, a humanitarian organization that assists refugees, the sisters met 23-year-old Connor Steeves, who had been in the country since the beginning of January, teaching at the Borys Hrinchenko Kyiv University. After first leaving the country at the start of the war, he decided to return to volunteer, and that is when he met Kristina and Ira.

Not long after meeting, Ira and Steeves began dating and are now engaged. But staying in Ukraine was not safe, so the three of them decided to leave in April and travel to Redmond, where Steeves' parents live.

Neither of the young women can imagine returning to Ukraine anytime soon.

"Only one good thing, all people all around the world know now what Ukraine is and where it is," Ira said.

The day the Russian invasion began, Ira, 22 was sleeping in her home when her mother loudly and abruptly opened the door. "The war has started!" she told her daughter.

"I started crying, because it was a super-bad surprise," Ira recently recalled. "Honestly, for me, it was a big, bad surprise. I didn't know about it, and I didn't think about it."

Her sister, Kristina, 20, heard about the start of the war while texting with co-workers.

"It was maybe 6 a.m. and I wake up, because my phone has a lot of notifications," Kristina said. "Everyone texted, 'the war has started.' At first I didn't believe...I was so calm."

What shook her into action



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

**Kristina Sinohach looks over a message about a potential job on her phone June 9, 2022, while talking about the next day's plans with Connor Steeves and her sister, Ira Sinohach. The sisters left Ukraine after the Russian invasion and made their way to Redmond.**

is when her father called in a panic and told her to pack a bag and leave Chernivtsi at once.

"He was so scared, because he heard the bombs and he saw the war planes...he was so scared. I was not," Kristina said.

Heeding her father's words, she grabbed documents, electronic devices and anything she knew she couldn't live without, knowing she may never return.

Soon afterward, her uncle

picked up her and her sister and took them to a family home in a small village called Nedaboyivsy, about a half an hour from the Romanian border.

The sisters knew their family home was the safest place to be, at least then. The village was far enough from where most of the war was taking place and there was no major infrastructure, airports or military bases for the Russians to target.

"They don't have reason

to attack our village," Kristina said. "It is a more safe place, and we have a basement in our house."

Their journey to Redmond took them first to Poland. After a delayed flight in Poland due to a blizzard, they were able to fly out 24 hours later, reaching the Netherlands. From there the group flew across the Atlantic to Bogota, Colombia. From South America, they flew to Mexico City and then to Tijuana near the border with California.

Because of the sisters' visa status they were not permitted to fly directly to the U.S., so the group had to find a different flight path, and then cross into the U.S. at the border with Mexico. At the time, it was common for Ukrainians fleeing the war to cross into the United States via Mexico, and the group figured they would take their chances before it was too late.

In late April, the United States announced Ukrainian refugees were prohibited from crossing from Mexico as part of a new policy to cut down on the number of Ukrainians seeking to enter the country via the informal route on the southern border, the Associ-

ated Press reported.

After masquerading as tourists and then making contact with volunteers stationed in Mexico to assist refugees from Ukraine, the sisters crossed into California via Calexico.

Once in the United States, they were able to arrange transportation to Sacramento, where the two sisters have relatives. After staying with their relatives for a couple of weeks, they made their final trip up to Redmond, where the two sisters are currently being hosted at Steeves' family home.

"Our parents are happy we are in a safe place," Kristina said. "They miss us, but they are glad we are here."

Kristina said she misses Ukraine, her family and her friends, and is not entirely sure when she and her sister will be able to return, as the war is ongoing.

Ira and Kristina said they want people in Oregon to realize the war is still happening and is in fact getting worse.

In the meantime, while they wait for work visas, they are taking advantage of spring in Bend and exploring some of Oregon's bountiful outdoor beauty.

# Stretching, exercise help partially paralyzed rancher stay positive

By STEVEN MITCHELL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

SENECA — Since a car accident left him paralyzed from the waist down nine years ago, a strict exercise and physical therapy routine keeps fifth-generation Seneca rancher Alec Oliver in a balanced and positive mindset.

Oliver, 33, said he can still do many of the things he did before, from managing the day-to-day goings-on at the ranch to riding a horse. Still, there is much he misses out on.

Reconciling that, he said, requires a positive outlook.

"It doesn't do any good to sit around and dwell on things," Oliver said. "Everybody has struggles, everybody has different challenges,



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle, File

**Alec Oliver, a fifth-generation rancher, helps out during the Grant County Fair's Youth Livestock Auction last year.**

and nobody knows what it's like to be in somebody else's shoes."

Oliver said part of what

keeps him going is exercise and stretching.

He said he does a lot of exercises to keep his balance

**THE OLIVER FILE**

**Name:** Alec Oliver  
**Age:** 33  
**Residence:** Seneca  
**Occupation:** Fifth-generation rancher in Seneca  
**Honors:** 2021 Agriculturist of the Year

and his posture in a square position.

The exercises include leg stretches and stretches to his core. Oliver said stretching counteracts the adverse effects of sitting in a chair for 18-plus hours a day.

"If you think about it, if you sit in a chair in the same position for 18 hours a day and

how hard that is on the body, and how bad it is. So I try to counter that by doing different stretches," Oliver said.

Since he can't stand on his own anymore, Oliver has a standing frame that he tries to stand in for an hour or more a day. He said this helps him work on his balance and stay stretched out.

Also, Oliver has a stationary bike that he pedals with his hands and tries to ride each day that he is home.

Another thing that Oliver does is instead of wheeling forward in his chair all of the time, he wheels backward to keep balance in his shoulders.

He said finding ways to keep his shoulders strong, in shape and limber to increase longevity is extremely important.

**Horseback riding**  
Oliver said riding a horse is one of the most therapeutic things he does.

"Horseback riding a really good therapy," he said. "The weight and the motion you feel on a saddle when a horse walks is a very similar replication to actually walking."

As reported in the Capital Press last year, Oliver uses a lift to get on and off his horse, and he has a modified saddle made by a saddlemaker in Texas.

What horseback riding does, he said, is pump blood up and down his spinal cord to promote healing.

Many have found Oliver's story inspirational, including the nonprofit agriculture education group Oregon Aglink, which named him the 2021 Agriculturist of the Year.

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