

# faith

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**Warren's heartwarming story**  
*Taking in and sheltering  
a refugee family*

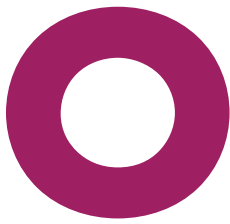


*Small town*  
**BIG**  
HEART

*Small town*

# BIG HEART





**On Feb. 24, 2022, the world watched in horror as the Russian military invaded Ukraine. Within the first few hours of the invasion, millions of Ukrainian civilians sought shelter from air strikes in their beloved cities. Olha and Dima of Kyiv began making desperate plans to flee to safety with their two young children, Vanya and Sasha.**

“We woke up at 5 a.m. to the sound of explosions. We rushed to a bomb shelter and were thinking, ‘We need to escape to another city!’” Vanya, who was just 11 years old at the time, recalls.

Meanwhile, back in Warren, Pennsylvania, Father Rick Tomason, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, received a text message. It was from Barbora Fabianova-Hajaso, a former foreign exchange student from Slovakia, seeking advice on whether she and her family of five should take in a refugee family.

Father Rick had coached basketball when Barbora was playing for Kennedy Catholic High School in Hermitage, and the two had kept in touch over the years as Barbora went on to play professional basketball in Slovakia.

“She has a true love for humanity, and I was very proud that she and her husband would open their home for a family in need,” Father Rick says.

## Hope

Within days, plans were arranged, bags were packed and documents gathered in preparation for Olha and her family to flee the country. Olha’s husband, Dima, was prohibited from traveling abroad due to a restriction that prevented men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the country in order to support the war effort.

“We had one hour to pack everything we wanted to take into three small bags. The hardest

part was saying goodbye to my husband, even though we both knew this was the best thing for our children. It was an emotional moment, even for the kids,” says Olha as she reflects on the chaos of leaving in such a hurry.

“I didn’t know when I would see my father again, which made saying goodbye to him very sad. I hugged him and told him I loved him before we had to go,” Vanya says.

They said their goodbyes to Dima amidst bombs exploding in the distance, hopped in a car, and headed to the border. Over the next few days, Olha and her children would sleep in train stations, walk and eventually make it to Slovakia to seek refuge.

“We received a phone call a week later saying that a family was on the way and would be at our house that night. I still remember the moment when we walked outside and saw Vanya and Sasha. They were pale and scared. They made this long journey, and I was relieved they could finally get some rest,” Barbora explains.

As Olha and her family began settling in at Barbora’s house, Father Rick started sending his own money to Barbora to help with expenses.

“I felt deep in my heart that I needed to do something. I couldn’t just tell Barbora that it would be a good idea to bring a refugee family into her home and simply sit back and brush my hands clean of it,” Father Rick says.

As Father Rick started to share

the story, many of his parishioners also wanted to contribute and suggested that he take up a collection at Mass. Father Rick set out a basket on that first Sunday, and the parishioners at St. Joseph Parish gave \$2,000. The following week, an additional \$4,000 was raised. St. Joseph Catholic School got involved with a penny drive that netted another \$4,500. Over the course of five weeks, people just kept giving, and, in all, close to \$60,000 was raised.

*“I didn’t know when I would see my father again, which made saying goodbye to him very sad. I hugged him and told him I loved him before we had to go.”*

Much of that money was sent to Slovakia to support other refugees, with some of it used to purchase medical supplies that Ukrainian widows would drive from the border directly to the front lines.

Eventually, Father Rick set up a Zoom call between Barbora and St. Joseph Catholic School so Vanya and Sasha could meet the students and learn about life in the United States. The call went so well that the school set up a second meeting a few weeks later.

Carrie Pearson, principal of St. Joseph Catholic School, was present for both calls.

“The students came up with questions they wanted to ask Sasha and Vanya about their experiences and life back home in Ukraine. This was a great opportunity for both parties as it allowed the children to relate to each other,” says Carrie.

## A new life

As time passed, Olha and Dima — who have been able to remain in contact by phone — realized their family’s safety and well-being would be best served by getting as far away from Ukraine as possible. They spoke on the phone for several nights putting together a plan. Determined to secure a better future for their children, they set their sights on the United States. However, they soon discovered that the US had no established channels for accepting Ukrainian refugees, making the journey seem impossible.

Just when it seemed that all hope for a journey to the United States was lost, Olha learned that many Ukrainians were flying to Tijuana, Mexico, and then crossing the border into California. This wasn’t the safest route, but it was her only way of getting into the United States. Due to

Father Rick Tomasone, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Warren, spots Olha, Vanya and Sasha as they arrived at the Erie International Airport last May.

Carrie Pearson, principal at St. Joseph School in Warren, held the microphone as then second-grader Landon Coppersmith asked a question during the first Zoom session with Vanya and Sasha.



the dangerous nature of this potential solution, Olha was hesitant. Father Rick offered to fly to Vienna, Austria, and accompany them. As they began planning their journey, the U.S. government opened the *Uniting for Ukraine* program, which provides a pathway for Ukrainian citizens to come to the United States and stay for a two-year period of humanitarian parole. All the family needed was an American sponsor.

That is how Father Rick found himself becoming the legal sponsor of Olha, Vanya and Sasha. The sponsorship process required significant paperwork and planning, but Father Rick was determined to bring the children to the United States to give them a better life. As he filled out the forms, Barbora helped Olha gather and update their legal documents to ensure a smooth process. Then, in a moment that seemed to occur both in slow motion and instantaneously, the sponsorship was approved and the family found themselves on a flight to the United States.

But the work wasn't done yet. Father Rick still needed to secure housing for Olha and her family. As he scoured the internet for apartments, he found that due to the time of the year, there

weren't many units available that would suit the family's needs. With time running out, Father Rick contacted a friend who connected him with someone who had an available apartment.

On May 26, 2022, Ascension Thursday, Father Rick stood anxiously at the gate of the Erie International Airport, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Olha, Vanya and Sasha. The family had embarked on a grueling 30-hour journey,

but as they stepped off the plane, the exhaustion on their faces was replaced with joy and relief.

"When they got off the plane, they looked so exhausted," Father Rick recounts. "But they were just so happy that I was there to meet them. It was such a wonderful moment."

## A welcoming community

Back in Warren, Olha, Vanya and Sasha were warmly welcomed with open arms. They were greeted with a tray of freshly baked cookies, lovingly prepared by Pam Nasman, a devoted member of St. Joseph Parish. Their new apartment, fully furnished by the generosity of Whirley-DrinkWorks, awaited them, complete with all the comforts of home. And to top it off, Olha was offered full-time employment at Superior Tire. The outpouring of kindness and support from the people of Warren was genuinely heartwarming and appreciated by the grateful newcomers.

Although the school year was ending, Father Rick had arranged for the children to enroll at St. Joseph School that next week. As the school bell rang, Vanya and Sasha

eagerly made their way to their classrooms, brimming with excitement and anticipation. As they walked down the hall, the surprise and delight on their peers' faces were evident as they realized the two children they had spoken to virtually were now standing right in front of them.

Vanya sums up the excitement of his fellow students, "A girl who was walking out of the classroom looked at me, surprised, and yelled, 'Vanya's here!' They didn't know we were coming to school with them."

Going to school in the United States didn't come without its challenges. While Vanya and Sasha had a basic understanding of English, there was a bit of difficulty communicating.

"We learned very quickly that utilizing Google Translate on Vanya and Sasha's iPads worked well, and over the summer, their English proficiency improved dramatically," Carrie says. "They are brilliant students, and you can tell they study and work hard outside the classroom."

## Christian charity

Father Rick has been deeply touched by the willingness of his parishioners and the wider community to give so much of their time, talent and treasure to welcome and support Olha and her children.



*"I am moved by the generosity of people for this family and the other refugee family who recently moved in. They didn't have to contribute, but they wanted to and did so anyway."*

"St. James emphasizes the importance of taking action to match your words in his letter. (Jas 1:19-27) He argues that merely wishing others to be warm and well-fed is not enough without corresponding actions to ensure their well-being. Without even talking about it, this community embodies this principle through their demonstrated care and concern for this family," says Father Rick. "I am moved by the generosity of people for this family and the other refugee family who recently moved in. They didn't have to contribute, but they wanted to and did so anyway."

Pam, who made the cookies for Olha when she first arrived,

has spent considerable time with the family and is overjoyed by the generosity of the Warren community.

"It makes me very proud to live in a community that would help people as we have seen with Olha and her family. One lesson we can all learn from this is that as true Christians, we must give and take care of those around us," Pam says.

As the conflict in Ukraine persists, Olha's fervent wish is to one day be reunited with her husband. Meanwhile, Vanya, exposed to the horrors of war at such a young age, expresses a desire for global harmony. He observes that before the war, many individuals took their loved ones for granted,

but now, they are learning to cherish them.

Before the invasion, Olha and her family never could have imagined that a small community more than 4,500 miles away in Warren, Pennsylvania, would open its doors to welcome and accept them. But that's precisely what happened. Olha and her family have been overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of the people of Warren, who went above and beyond to make them feel at home. Despite the distance and cultural differences, the Warren community has shown Olha and her family that the bonds of humanity can transcend any obstacle. †



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SCAN THE QR CODE TO READ MORE ABOUT THE EARLIEST DAYS OF ENCOUNTER BETWEEN OLHA'S FAMILY AND ST. JOSEPH PARISH AND SCHOOL.



SCAN THE QR CODE TO SEE STUDENTS AT ST. JOSEPH SCHOOL SINGING IN THEIR ZOOM CALL WITH VANYA AND SASHA