Partnership in a Crisis: Humanitarian Aid in Bakhmut, Ukraine

By Natasha Wanchek

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in eastern Ukraine from 1999-2001, I was the first volunteer in Bakhmut (then Artemivsk) and worked for a small NGO called the Environmental and Cultural Center Bakhmat. My projects included an eco-tour for teen reporters that focused on the “wonders and horrors of Donbas”, a teacher partnership with sister city Omaha and support for Local Environmental Action Plans. I also participated in events at local orphanages and facilitated a teen “eco-club.” I was welcomed by NGO volunteers and the community.

When I was a PCV, few people outside of Ukraine would have known where Bakhmut was located. It was a charming city of about 70,000 people with nearby salt mines and a champagne factory that both offered tours. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, however, people know the name. As seen in news stories throughout 2022 and early 2023, Bakhmut has been part of the frontline in the war with Russia for months, and the situation - especially in winter - has been catastrophic.

In spring 2022, I started raising funds for Bakhmut Ukrainian, a local organization with a strong track record since 2014. Before the full-scale invasion, their funding came from within the community. After the invasion, they were up against a tragic situation: infrastructure was destroyed by Russia, and there was limited food, water, heating and basic supplies. Needs they identified included medical supplies, medicines, food, sleeping bags, clothing for people in hospital, generators, solar battery chargers, water filtration straws and more.

I was exploring joining a local Rotary club or an e-clubs for peace (when time permitted) when Partnering for Peace introduced me to Rotary’s Disaster Response Grants. I was grateful to hear of the funds that Rotary members had raised throughout the world in support of Ukrainians and its refugees. I met with a Rotary club in NYC near me and with District 7710 who were familiar with the Disaster Response Grants. We completed a DRG proposal in October with support of the Dnipro City Rotary Club and Bakhmut Ukrainian NGO as the beneficiary,

Bakhmut Ukrainian had opened an aid warehouse with humanitarian supplies in Dnipro. The Dnipro City Rotary Club met with NGO members and stayed in contact throughout the project, including after delivery, to review receipts and delivered products. An additional partner was brought on with the Ukrainian American Coordinating Council (UACC) assisting with logistics.

The $25,000 DRG provided food, medicine, generators, sleeping bags, lights, and other humanitarian aid supplies for the benefit of Ukrainians who stayed in the Bakhmut region or became internally displaced due to the war. Supplies were received by the NGO in Dnipro in January and February 2023, which eventually supported 400+ families and multiple communities.

Comments from Andrei Atlantov, Dnipro City Rotary Club

> “We have invited the guys which represents Ukrainian Bahmut. They told us about their activities, and I was really impressed, also like everyone in the room. Guys are real heroes, they have been delivering supplies to the most dangerous places in the country since 2014.” *(Oct. 14, 2022)*

This project had cooperation and support from the many Rotary members in NYC, Raleigh, NC and RI, Dnipro City Rotary Club, with Partnering for Peace pulling it together, logistical help from the UAC, and the dedication of an amazing Ukrainian NGO. The result was humanitarian aid for hundreds of families in eastern Ukraine when it was most needed.