

Ukrainian student travels difficult road to Wayland

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PLAINVIEW—A tear of joy ran down Mariia Syzonekno's cheek when the 19-year-old freshman from Dnipro, Ukraine, walked into Gates Hall to begin her journey through Wayland Baptist University.

But just getting to the university may have been the hardest part.

"I have no words, I think," she said. "I am so excited about how it happened. I can't imagine that this has happened to me."

Having traveled from her home in eastern Ukraine to Poland before making her way to the United States and specifically Plainview, Mariia was greeted at the door by Debbie Stennett, coordinator of international student affairs.

She received a Wayland T-shirt and a bouquet of sunflowers and yellow roses. Stennett explained the sunflower is the national flower of Ukraine, and the yellow rose is symbolic of Texas.

Flanked by Sherman and Tammy Aten, the Wayland alumni who connected her with the university, Mariia was also welcomed by Shaney Brewer, director of undergraduate admissions, and Coralyn Dillard, director of health services, along with the admissions office staff.

Couple helped student fulfill her dream

The impromptu welcome was the culmination of a years-long effort by the Atens to help Mariia come to the United States to study. The couple's

international music ministry brought them into contact seven years ago with the student. Her father, Sergei Dnipro, is pastor of Central Baptist Church in Dnipro.

“They have become kind of our adopted family,” Sherman Aten said.

About three years ago, Mariia mentioned to the Atens that she would like to study in the United States, so they went to work trying to make that happen. In fall 2019, she was accepted to another university, but she never made it there.

“COVID hit, and things just started to dwindle,” Aten recalled.

The pandemic would not be the only setback. Mariia remembers the night that bombs began to fall—first at the airport and then closer to her home in Ukraine’s fourth largest city. It looked like her dream of studying in the United States would be a casualty of the war.

But a meeting the Atens held with Bobby Hall, president of Wayland Baptist University, changed all of that.

“I didn’t try Wayland,” Aten admitted. “But I talked to Bobby Hall a few months ago and told him what was happening. He said, ‘We would love to make something happen.’ He and Dr. (Claude) Lusk (Wayland’s senior vice president of operations and student life) have made this incredible thing happen. So, that’s why she is here.”

“We have long been so proud of the international music ministry of our alumni, Tammy and Sherman Aten,” Hall said. “In conversation with them about Sherman becoming a Wayland trustee, they made me aware of Mariia’s circumstance in war-torn Ukraine, and we discussed how we might work together to bring her to Wayland.

“The Atens’ lengthy ministry in Ukraine coupled with their dedication and

that of others has brought us to this day, and we praise the Lord that Mariia is now safely with us here in Plainview.”

‘The Lord was putting it all together’

Mariia was overwhelmed by her journey to Plainview as well as how God brought everything together.

“It is amazing, and I am so excited about how it happened,” she said. “I can’t imagine that this has happened with me. I was so excited when Sherman wrote me an email that Wayland Baptist University wanted to invite me. I do not have the words to explain what I thought.”

Equally amazing is her recent journey. Mariia was supposed to travel to Kyiv to secure the papers necessary to come to the United States, but that trip became impossible. An alternate plan was developed and carefully executed.

“Like clockwork, the Lord was putting it all together,” Aten said. “Mariia would have to get to the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw.”

With her father not permitted to leave the country and her mother remaining behind to care for her younger sibling, Mariia had to make it to Poland on her own. She embarked on her journey more than a week before her arriving in the United States.

“She had to take a bus trip to Warsaw,” Aten explained. “It was a 17-hour trip to the border, traveling over horrible roads. The roads were already so unbelievable. I can’t imagine what they were like after being bombed.”

She faced another setback when she reached Poland.

“She made it to the border, but there was a 10-hour delay there,” Aten said. “We don’t know what that was about, but she did make it to Warsaw for her

appointment.”

The next miracle was a smooth appointment at the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw.

“Her visa was accepted and approved,” Aten said. “She had to wait a couple of days for her passport.”

Mariia had never flown before. Her inaugural flight took her from Poland to Paris, to Minneapolis to Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. That’s where the Atens picked her up, but even that was a challenge. The Metroplex received more than nine inches of rain, causing street flooding. Through the storms, they drove to the Atens’ home in Granbury.

After a few hours to recover from jetlag, they began the last leg of Mariia’s journey. They drove to Plainview, where she was greeted Tuesday afternoon, Aug. 23.

“It’s just amazing,” the student said.

“We had been working on this for two and a half years, but it wasn’t going to happen until people like Dr. Hall, Claude Lusk and Debbie Stennett stepped in,” Aten said. “It’s all about God’s timing.”

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