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## NEWS

# 'Look in the eyes of the kids': A Tallahassee doctor's faith journey to help Ukraine refugees



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As Ukrainian children fled their homes into the unknown to escape the Russian invasion, their eyes and facial expressions told the same sobering story:

Fear, uncertainty and sadness.

"You look in the eyes of the kids..." Tallahassee family physician Dr. John Turner said.

"It's hard for me to explain, but every single kid I saw anywhere had the same exact expression. Imagine a child having to leave everything they had, their families, friends and wondering if they'd ever see their Dad alive again.

"That is basically the look of every single kid; like thousands of kids."

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Turner, 32, spent three days last week at the Poland/Ukraine border, offering medical aid, clothing and support to refugees crossing the border. Those fleeing are mostly women and children because Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 are being ordered to stay and fight the invading Russians.

According to UNICEF, a Ukrainian child has become a refugee almost every single second since the start of the war last month. Overall, about 3 million people have fled during that

time, according to the United Nations. Many refugees — about 1.8 million — have escaped to Poland.

## **'I had no set plan'**

Turner — a graduate of Lincoln High, Florida State, FSU's medical school and a physician at Tallahassee Primary Care Associates — has always felt compelled to help people when and where needed. His strong faith has also fueled that passion. He was part of missionary groups that previously traveled to Africa and Nicaragua.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on Thursday, Feb. 24, Turner knew immediately he wanted to help on site. However, he said, "I had no set plan," other than flying on his own into Poland and driving to the Ukraine border.

He did not have any personal contacts in Ukraine. His emails to missionary groups and other organizations had gone unanswered.

What Turner had — after initial trepidation — was the blessing of his wife, Rachel. The couple has three young children ages 5 and under. He also had the support of family and friends that quickly raised \$5,000 and donated clothing, toys, food and supplies.

"At first I said no, there's no way you are possibly going," Rachel admitted. "But a day or two later, a peace came over me. I told him 'You know what? I think you are supposed to go.' I just felt no matter what, he'd be OK. He does have a heart for people and he does love to help."

Even though following his instincts and trust in God, Turner finally connected via email en route to Poland with a German group of physicians and nurses. They had booked a room in the same hotel as Turner and were part of a larger Christian ministry.

"Truly a blessing because our plans happened to line up perfectly," Turner said.

## **'A crazy experience across the border'**

After landing in Warsaw and taking a 2 1/2-hour train ride to Krakow, Turner began to see firsthand the impact of war. The train stations and Turner's hotel were packed with Ukrainian refugees — mainly women, children and some elderly men.

Anyone from Ukraine is allowed entry, even those who do not hold valid passports, Polish officials said.

Turner then met one of the German doctors, rented a vehicle and drove nearly three hours toward the Poland/Ukraine border. The pair checked into the refugee staging area and bused the rest of the way to the border. Turner described the ride as "surreal" because they were the only two people on the bus returning to the border.

The plan was to join the Campfire ministry, which had two tents set up in the highway median strip, 100 yards inside the Ukrainian border. It appeared to be the lone international aid organization available.

"Even trying to cross the border was a huge ordeal," Turner said.

Prohibited from walking into Ukraine, the pair hitched a car ride with two men from the Czech Republic headed to Lviv to pick up a stranded Ukrainian student. One hundred yards inside Ukraine might as well have been 100 miles. It took more than an hour to cross the border due to multiple checkpoints, including one that needed updated paperwork.

It was a different world across the border. For the Ukrainian refugees, the last few feet to safety in Poland was arduous. Emotions overwhelmed many.

"It was a crazy experience across the border," Turner said. "Cars were lined up for miles, people were lined up for miles. Some had been standing in line for 30 hours. It was freezing conditions, literally, snowing the whole time. I am proud because we did some good work. What was so striking, however, was once the refugees crossed into Poland, the support was so amazing. There were tons of volunteers, translators, supplies.

"The Polish people are so amazing."

## **'Children onboard'**

Turner went into humanitarian mode, working for the next 24 hours.

He offered medical care, smiles and support, passed out donated clothing, blankets, food, hot tea and toys to the children.

"They were so happy to receive even the smallest gift," Turner said. He added there were cars that drove through Russian occupied areas in Ukraine with signs in windows that said "Children onboard" in hopes they would not be killed.

Death was present, however.

Turner said one elderly woman collapsed while standing in line. Turner's group started CPR until EMS arrived. Unfortunately, the women "died there in the cold."

It was gut-wrenching, Tuner said. Returning across the border into Poland proved to be difficult, too, for Turner and Company. The foray to travel the 100 yards in a van lasted nearly five hours.

Undeterred, Turner's journey included a hazardous three-hour drive in blowing snow to his hotel. He also made stops at the Krakow train station to help refugees and a second trip into Ukraine with his German counterparts. The group traveled 60 miles to the city of Lviv to assist with medical care. Turner's lone meal one day was a slice of bread.

Still, he was energized by the chance to help.

Turner also documented his trip on social media to update family and friends. He was able to telephone and text message his wife.

"I am proud of John's willingness to follow God's call to help the Ukrainian refugees," said Jack Turner, John's father. "The stories he has told me and photos he has shown make this war and the related suffering so real.

"It is absolutely heartbreaking."

Turner still gets emotional when he thinks of the Ukrainian children.

Their eyes. Their expressions.

Turner also realized the cruel contrast between war and peace, desperate circumstances and beauty, during his stay. Even as Turner safely departed Poland and returned to his Gadsden County home last Sunday, he later learned the Russians had fired on a military base between Lviv and the border where he had offered medical aide.

War does not discriminate.

"It was so bizarre because you might see soup kitchens, bunkers with sand bags, soldiers. And there's other areas we passed in Ukraine that are absolutely beautiful, with gorgeous churches that have golden domes, and you kind of forget you are in a war zone," Turner said.

"It was just a totally different feeling and emotions. But this is what, the largest migration of people in 80 years? People are scared and they need help. The conditions are horrible. But I will also tell you the Ukrainian people are resolute.

"Unless Russia does something crazy, I am not sure they can win a conventional war."

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