



Ukraine's Homeless Children

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



PETER GOLDRING

I have over the years visited Ukraine seven or eight times, in locations from Dansk, Odessa, Poltava and of course Kyiv and have seen first-hand the great social need there. My wife Lorraine and I first met Leanne Swekla-Barvinska while she was on a visit to Edmonton.

UKRAINE'S HOMELESS CHILDREN

While Leanne is from Edmonton, she has spent little time here in the past decade. When in Edmonton she tirelessly meets with volunteer organizations and individuals, seeking support to sustain her work in Ukraine.

Feeling a calling from God she has moved to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, where she spends her time as a wife, mother and rescuer.

Her passion is the children who live on Kyiv's streets. While Edmonton has 2,600 counted homeless people, no one has bothered to

count the homeless children of Kyiv – but they are estimated at up to 12,000 (of an estimated 150,000 nationwide). These children face fear, poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS, addiction and the very real possibility of being sold into slavery as prostitutes.

For the past 12 years Leanne's work has brought her into contact with thousands of youth on Kyiv's streets. In 2004, during the Orange Revolution and the repeat presidential election I had the opportunity to meet with her and her now husband Arkadiy. I joined her late one night as she brought hope and encouragement to the homeless children living on the streets.

Leanne is not alone in the work on Kyiv's streets. There are many organizations working with the children, both sectarian and non-sectarian, but the need continues to be great.



Leanne and Arkadiy with their children Jenny and Zhenya, both of whom were rescued from state-run orphanages.

Many of the children are not orphans, but have left homes or been removed from



where the parents drink, use drugs or they are neglected or physically and sexually abused.

It was in September 2000 that Leanne felt God's calling to go to Kyiv to work with the street children there. She wanted to show them unconditional love, the same love she says God also has for them.

She began her time in Ukraine by working with Centre Ezra, part of a humanitarian aid group set up in 1996 to save children from the streets of Kyiv. The work entailed rescuing children from the streets, caring for orphans in government-run orphanages and shelters, mentoring children and teaching others how to be mentors. Leanne says it is a privilege to be able to do what she does.

In December 2004, while in Ukraine for the Presidential election, I went on a late night soup run with Leanne and her team to find the homeless children. They would come out from under buildings where they were huddled to try to keep warm and to sleep. One notably could not have been older than 10. He was hungry and in need of a personal hug from Leanne. There is such a great

need. Leanne and her husband Arkadiy are so obviously caring people, epitomizing charity and giving.

In 2007 her work expanded when she got married. Leanne and Arkadiy have been not only husband and wife to each other but parents to orphan children rescued from the streets, their son Zhenya (8 years old) and their daughter Jenny (10 years old). By taking

children into foster care the children keep and maintain their rights for future government assistance. Leanne and Arkadiy intend to continue to expand their family to include as many as 10 (or even more) foster children.



In 2004 Peter joined Leanne on her rounds of the streets of Kyiv, providing hot food for hungry, homeless young people.

In order to take in more children Leanne and Arkadiy have discovered the need to have larger

accommodations – actually a legal requirement for them to have their own residence, at a time when real estate prices in Ukraine have skyrocketed and mortgage interest can be as much as 30% annually – which has led them to turn to North American donors asking for support. They have found what they consider to be the perfect house and are looking for support so that they can afford the \$250,000 price tag.

Leanne and her husband are also leaders in



their church, Irpin Bible Church and involved in that congregation's community outreach.

As part of their work they provide food for the children who continue to be on the streets, work with those who are in the government orphanage, and as well as bring them to permanent Christian orphanages. They also keep in touch with those who have left the streets to be reunited with their families or sent to orphanages around Ukraine. As well they connect with other community organizations working with children, strategizing on ways to work together to get the children off the streets and reunited with their families or if that is not possible with adoptive families.

Recently Centre Ezra and Social Services have partnered to start a pilot project called "The Center for Abused Children" providing children and their families with an Emergency Hotline they can call to be helped – legally, socially and psychologically. The director has a team of experienced people working with at-risk families. Leanne points out that strengthening families means not only working with the children but with their parents as well. Her role in this is to work with the director, helping with correspondence to North American supporters,

encouraging and mentoring the director and her team and helping with teams and guests that come from overseas. She also works directly with the children, teaching object lessons and doing crafts.

As well as being involved in work with orphans and street children, Leanne has increasingly become involved in church work. There are many family-oriented small

groups meeting throughout the week, but nothing is specifically offered for the children of the parents in these groups. She wants to train teams of people to go and work with the children. By training these people there will be also be people that will be available to work at the Center for Abused Children, especially camps and other summer events.



Leanne meets with mothers and children on a regular basis to teach object lessons and do crafts together.

Leanne stresses that their work with the orphans continues and will always be a huge part of their work. She hopes she and Arkadiy can inspire others to take children into their homes and change their lives, therefore affecting the future of Ukraine.

In Edmonton our homeless teens have a number of government sponsored programs and agencies they can turn to for help in getting off the streets, in getting their lives

back together. It is not easy, but it can be done. For the homeless children in Ukraine the challenges are much tougher and support is not as plentiful. As the country struggles through its democratic evolution still being substantially influenced by Russia, Leanne and Arkadiy are having a powerful impact making a difference in the lives of children who have to a large extent been forgotten by society. They can't do it alone.



Leanne and Arkadiy are hoping to purchase this house so that they can expand their ministry opportunities. Ukrainian law requires them to own their residence before they can adopt any more children.

Update: To contact Leanne check out her website at <http://www.freewebs.com/ukrainestreetkids> or <http://www.ihsmissions.com>.

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This brochure series is intended to highlight special issues that Member of Parliament, Peter Goldring, has been involved in. If you wish to comment, please take a moment to fill out the survey below, write or call to the address above.

Your Opinion Matters...

Obviously part of the problem in Ukraine is political, but do you feel it is important to help those in other countries if at all possible?

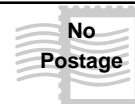
Yes No

Should such international aid be the responsibility of the government?

Yes No

Comments: _____

Name: _____
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