

Ukraine Exchange Student At Jersey Community High School Thanks Her Community For Their Support

July 12 2022 3:40 PM



GRAFTON - In the spring of your junior year, an average teenager might be touring colleges or thinking about a summer job. But for Kateryna Savienkova, an exchange student from Ukraine attending Jersey Community High School, making plans was impossible. On June 3rd, the war in Ukraine had reached day 100 and Kateryna was still

unclear where she would spend the next year of her life. Today, Kateryna has completed a full academic year of high school in America, an opportunity she worked hard to receive and one where she made the most of every day.

Living with her host family, Jim, Carla, and Roanna Newton, in Grafton, Kateryna has made the most of her time. At school, she participated in cross country, and bowling, and was an honor roll student.



Back in her home country of Ukraine a much different story played out for her family and friends. As the war continued, devastating images came in each day.

“Sometimes it was unbearable.” Kateryna explains, “The continuous anticipation of seeing your own community, school, favorite park or cafe being destroyed. The first few weeks I couldn’t believe it was true.”

As the war continued the conversation changed to what would be destroyed next.

“It is so horrible how you can get used to it," she said.

Fortunately for Kateryna, her family is safe. Her parents and grandparents on her mother’s side are in Western Ukraine, Ivano-frankivsk region. They left Kharkiv a couple of weeks after the war started and are currently living in a friend’s summer house. It’s harder to learn about her classmates, friends, and teachers. She doesn't know where exactly they are but believes they are all over Europe, some still in Ukraine and some in the regions of the war.

“I’m wishing them all the luck. What I know is that all of them are optimistic about our future. They’re planning to win, to come back and build up our beautiful Ukraine.”

Kateryna describes her parents as amazingly strong and positive people.

“They did not expect any of this to happen. The war has made them mad, confused, and sometimes lost.”

Kateryna shares these feelings. Unfortunately, war is not something new to their family. In 2014, the family experienced a similar tragedy when they were forced to flee their home in Luhansk when Ukraine came under attack. Only recently did her family settle in Kharkiv only to relive the same horror eight years later. But Katerynas's parents believe in victory and hope it will happen soon. They have no plans to leave Ukraine and will continue with their lives as best as possible.



For Kateryna, the longing to be with her family has never ended. While she may be separated from her loved ones in Ukraine she is far from alone. During her stay in America, the Jerseyville community and surrounding area have embraced her and cared for her in ways she never expected.

“I love these people so much,” she said. “Not only my host family but the entire Jersey community has become my big real family. I have friends, mentors, and people who I will look up to forever.”

On April 8, 2022, the Jerseyville Community High School and the surrounding area celebrated United with Ukraine day. Kateryna described the day as powerful.

“All these people gathered together to show that Ukraine is in their thoughts and souls. We were one strong body working together and relying on each other. We were world citizens on this day.”

Even before the war, Kateryna was trying to teach her classmates about different cultures and what it was like for her growing up in Ukraine. International Day of Education was on January 24. That week, Kateryna made many presentations about her country to her classmates and staff at JCHS.

Once the war began her message changed to “Don’t stay away, be aware, it matters!” JCHS responded with love and support. “I gave as much as I could to the community, trying to be useful in this situation, but I know that I got even more from them.” Kateryna's experience in America has taught her to trust people.

“It was not easy to open up to strangers and share my pain. I learned how relationships work and how people can change your life when they want to. These people entered my life and brought so much love. I will never let them go. We have so many great things to do together in the future, this is only the beginning.”

As her junior year of high school came to an end, the United States and the organizations that support Kateryna’s exchange program finally came through with answers. Her visa was extended and she will be allowed to attend Jersey Community High School for the 2022/23 academic year.

She will continue to receive the benefits the FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange Program) program allowed for her and she has a safe and loving home to care for her during her stay.

“My parents and I were very happy when we found out. We are very thankful because right now there is no proper education or life for me in Ukraine. Sadly, it's easier and better for us to be separated for another period of time.”

Expect to see more of Kateryna throughout the city of Jerseyville. Borderless Friends Forever (BFF), the exchange organization that works closely with host families, high schools, and students like Kateryna felt that she was in the right place.

"Kateryna is surrounded by love and grace in Jerseyville,” said Crystal Allis, Executive Director at BFF in Cary, N.C. “We have been so impressed by the community there and the beautiful way in which you have all supported her. She has already grown so much throughout this year thanks to your support. Here at BFF, we know she is in the exact right place to continue her journey."



Kateryna is now living in Jerseyville with her new host family the Chins. Zoe Chin is a teacher at Jersey Community high school. Along with her husband, Tony, and their 2 children, Abby (14) and Connor (16), the family has opened their home to Kateryna for the next stage in her adventure.

“We are honored to host Kateryna this year. She has fit right into our family as if she has always been here,” the family said.

Kateryna's move to Jerseyville will allow her to spend more time after school with friends and participate in additional activities that the distance living in the country with the Newtons wouldn't allow.

“We are excited for the Chin family and know that Kateryna is in good hands. Having an exchange student is very rewarding.” Carla Newton explains, “Our experience with Kateryna has been memorable in so many ways. The war in Ukraine could never have been anticipated and under the circumstances, these last many months have been extremely emotional. But we would do it all over again in a heartbeat. We were there for Kateryna during a time when she truly needed us. We are bonded and will be a part of her family forever.”



The Jerseyville community went above and beyond to support Kateryna, her family, and those suffering in Ukraine. Community members collected and made monetary donations, and students and staff in the Jerseyville school district listened to Katerynas's story and reacted with compassion on United With Ukraine day, and other businesses donated services to help Kateryna during her stay in the United States. Kateryna would like everyone to know how grateful she is for their kindness, care, support, and involvement. "You changed my life in the best way possible!"

Kateryna may not be returning to Ukraine anytime soon, but the message she will take back with her someday will be as strong as she is. "I'll tell them that I learned a very important lesson, "people are powerful."

"People can get together and literally change this world. And we, Ukrainians, need to learn this from them, my Jerseyville family.

"Don't blame others and don't keep suffering from injustice. Be kind and go for it, and take some action. It's amazing how much we can do together, just amazing."