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Provincial grant helps launch South Asian Canadian Legacy Project

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Couple return to Romania to help refugees after 'miracle' recovery

Jessica PETERS
Abbotsford News

Mark and Coreen Biech have had one foot in Abbotsford and another in Romania for most their lives. But right now, their hearts are entirely with Ukraine.

The couple had been living in Romania for about 25 years when they came back to Abbotsford in 2020 for a visit with their three grown children, whom they adopted in the early '90s from Eastern Europe. Mark also wanted to check in with his doctor for some neurological issues.

It meant leaving behind their organization, Hope for the Nations, which "works to provide better life chances to children

affected by conflict, famine and poverty."

They had no idea the diagnosis that lay ahead, how the pandemic would affect everything, and that Eastern Europe would be so changed by the time they returned.

"The pandemic came in like a mist creeping through the grass," Mark said. Meanwhile, his condition deteriorated. He was quickly losing his balance, muscle strength and independence.

At one point, he did not have the strength to lift a blanket off his own chest, and he began to lose his ability to talk. By the time the diagnosis came – early-onset aggressive Parkinson's disease – he had been using a wheelchair for a year and a half.

Yet, doctors were able to get Mark on a medication that worked almost immediately.

"Within a month I was walking, dressing, brushing my own teeth – amazing," he said via email to The News.

But as he worked to recover his strength, something terrible was happening in Eastern Europe. They were compelled to return as soon as possible.

"Impossible! Can this actually be happening again? My Mennonite and German families had escaped the atrocities in Russia in the 1920s after the brutal murders of entire villages by the Bolsheviks. Most of my relatives who survived were able to get out and they immigrated to Canada," Mark said.

Continued on A3



Mark and Coreen Biech, an Abbotsford couple who live in Romania, are helping to feed Ukrainians who have fled the war. (Facebook)

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Charges being considered against officer whose police dog injured suspect

Independent Investigations Office has filed report with BC Prosecution Service

Vikki HOPES
Abbotsford News

The province's police watchdog says an officer might have committed an offence during a March 2021 incident in Abbotsford in which a man was injured by a police dog.

The Independent Investigations Office (IIO) announced Thursday (April 13) that it has filed a report with the BC Prosecution Service for charges to be considered against the officer.

The incident took place at approximately 8 p.m. on March 6, 2021, when police were investigating alleged property offences. They located in the 3700 block of Davie Street a man believed to be linked to the crimes.

The IIO said a member of the Integrated

Lower Mainland Police Dog Service assisted in arresting the man, who received serious dog bites while being taken into custody. The man was taken to hospital for treatment.

The IIO – which investigates officer-related incidents that result in serious harm or death – was notified of the incident on April 12, 2021.

Chief civilian director Ronald J. MacDonald reviewed the evidence from the IIO investigation and determined there were “reasonable grounds” to believe an offence might have taken place in relation to the use of a police service dog.

In order to approve any charges, the BC Prosecution Service must be satisfied that there is a substantial likelihood of conviction and that prosecution be required in the public interest.



The Independent Investigations Office of BC has filed a report with the BC Prosecution Service for consideration of charges against an officer whose police dog injured a suspect in Abbotsford. (Black Press Media file photo)

Couple providing hope amidst the devastation

From A1

When the couple heard that Ukrainians were fleeing to Romania, they knew where they needed to be. But Mark wasn't sure if he was physically ready.

“Coreen said to me, ‘If you don't push yourself to help others during a war, when will you push yourself?’ That put a spark in my soul...”

The family has faced struggles before. They adopted their children just after the revolution when Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was assassinated.

They lived in Abbotsford for a few years before returning to Romania as missionaries in 1998. When they returned to Canada on furlough four years later, their middle son was diagnosed with cancer. He had one year of treatment here and one in Romania, and is healthy today.

Even while Coreen was Mark's caretaker through his illness, she was juggling work with Hope for the Nations and travelling back and forth from Romania.

When it was time for both of them to go, they raised funds with the help of Hope for the Nations, and made their way to the Black Sea region of Romania to meet their team.

“While en route, we sent them

the green light to connect with up to 100 Ukrainian refugees who were being picked up by Romanian families at the border to be offered free accommodation,” Mark said.

“Our initial plan was to purchase food and supplies for their urgent needs during this crazy time of trying to figure out what their next step would be.”

However, they found that the families were isolating themselves and couldn't read the Roman alphabet.

They were down to using hand gestures to communicate with the refugees, mostly younger women with children, older mothers and grandmothers who were already feeling alone and vulnerable.

“For the most part, they just want to curl up, lock the door, and wait to go home,” Mark said.

The organization didn't know what foods the refugees liked and couldn't ask about allergies. Coreen realized they could use pre-paid grocery cards, which are now available in Romania.

With the hard work of their medical coordinator, they had the cards ready and the families organized by the end of the week.

“We organized days, times, and places to meet with over

100 Ukrainian refugees in parks where the children could play while we worked on the pre-paid grocery-card distribution,” he said.

And that's when the real magic happened. Ukrainians who had been isolated and afraid were connected with other Ukrainians. Mothers were able to share stories with each other, children were able to play. One girl who had looked so sad upon their first meeting was laughing and playing with another child her age.

“There were many stories, many tears, hugs, and so much emotion,” Mark said.

An older lady approached Coreen and in very broken English said, “I never, in all my life, thought there would be a day when I would be standing in a foreign country receiving such generous help from someone I don't even know.”

Their original goal was to find and help 100 refugees for at least three months, but their plans are expanding to include another 100.

Their coalition partner is a Canadian registered charity and the campaign can be found at hopeforthenations.com. They are also active on YouTube and Facebook.



A young Ukrainian child watches as helpers with Hope for the Nation in Romania hand out grocery cards to families who fled the war in Ukraine. (Facebook/ Hope for the Nation)

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