

Aurorans stand in solidarity with Ukraine at citizen-led rally



Jake Tubaro has done more than his fair share to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

But despite raising nearly \$4,500 for the Red Cross through the sale of buttons emblazoned with the Ukrainian flag, he still felt it was not enough, so he and his mother, Suzanne Cummings, put on their winter gear on Sunday afternoon and joined dozens of area residents at the Aurora Cenotaph for a march and rally in support of Ukraine.

Organized by Laura Hanna, the rally departed the Cenotaph just after 2 p.m. and marched north along Yonge Street to Town Park where a vigil was held.

"The turnout is incredible. The outpouring of love and support means so much," said Hanna from the Town Park band shell, where she stood alongside local dignitaries including Mayor and Council, MP Leah Taylor Roy, and MPP Michael Parsa. "I know we have all been grappling with the recent events in Ukraine and trying to find ways to process what has been happening but doing that together is very helpful."

"In recent weeks, with tremendous sadness, I have taken some comfort in seeing images of global solidarity and thought, 'Why not in Aurora, too?'" The fact that you're all here shows how much you care and I think it is those human values of love, kindness, and respect that ultimately will lead Ukraine and its people to triumph."

These words were echoed by participants, including Anna Kroeplin, an Aurora woman of Ukrainian descent who has cousins now fighting back against the Russian invasion.

"It is terrifying, just horrendous, and you just pray for everybody," said Ms. Kroeplin as those taking part in the solidarity march rounded the corner of Metcalfe and Wells Streets towards Town Park. "It is not just family, it's all these women and children, and the men who have to stay to fight. You're just praying for all of them because Putin has been so unpredictable with what he's bombing and what's being targeted. Ukrainians are such a tight community, but we just feel for absolutely everybody and we fight hard."

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Alexander, another participant in the rally, offered the perspective of being a resident of the former USSR before coming to Canada.

He said he sees the Russian invasion as an attempt to bring back the USSR and "I want this thing to stop. I want the USSR to stop."

"I wanted to show that support," said Alexander. "This is the best thing I can do now."

Leading the dignitaries on Sunday afternoon was Mayor Tom Mrakas who said he too was "deeply concerned by the violence and loss of life due to the invasion of Ukraine."

"The images we see across our screens on a daily basis are simply heartbreaking to witness," he said. "The Town of Aurora stands with the people of Ukraine and their democratically elected government and all the Ukrainian Canadians who call Aurora home. We condemn Russia's unprovoked attacks and echo the international community's calls for de-escalation and the immediate resolution to the conflict."

"Over the last few weeks, we have witnessed the unity of the Ukrainian people and their incredible bravery in the face of enormous violence. As a community and individuals we can demonstrate our support through our voices as we are today but also through our actions. We are witnessing an incredible effort of organizing across the world here in Canada. Many established organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross, Canada Ukraine Foundation, and UNICEF are deploying active campaigns to provide the resources to Ukrainians. There are also local initiatives, clothing and supplies by residents, that ship to Ukraine. Even a bake sale by a granddaughter of a local resident that has raised over \$2,000 for relief aid."

"I encourage us all to do what we can to support these efforts and it is my sincere hope that a path to peace can be found swiftly and all Ukrainians here in Canada and around the world know that they are not alone."

This hope was shared by MPP Parsa who spoke off the cuff following Mayor Mrakas.

"It is important that we stand in solidarity because an attack on democracy on one is an attack on democracy for all," he said. "We need to stand united. There are over 375,000 Ontarians who are of the Ukrainian origin and they also need to hear our voice, that we stand in solidarity with them. They have families back home and they need to know that we stand shoulder to shoulder with them. It's through tough times that we show our true characters and the Town of Aurora? the residents here, the leadership here, has shown that we're not only there together during good times but during difficult times we stand united as well."

"At all levels of government, we stand shoulder to shoulder with you and we hope for a day when we never have to see this sort of tyranny, aggression and oppression again."

The Federal level of government was represented by MP Taylor Roy who not only spoke in solidarity with the people of Ukraine but also, as the mother of two girls adopted from Russia, of the Russian people who oppose the war.

"This is a humanitarian crisis," she said. "This is heartbreaking to see what is happening, that we have war once again after 78 years of relative peace in Europe? a sovereign country being invaded by its neighbour. The images we have seen? when you look at the people of Ukraine, it is not about our government, it's about the people. For the Russian people as well, I don't believe that most of the Russian people want this war, either. I believe we have to be very sensitive to the Russian Canadians as well as our Ukrainian Canadian colleagues. Everyone is suffering right now because of the absolutely horrific deeds of Putin and it is the Government of Russia that is the problem here, not the people."

"It is just wrong for another country to come in and say that this should belong to them because they want it to rebuild an empire? I am deeply sad and disturbed by what is going on, but I am also somewhat encouraged that we have all of us out here today and these things have been going on across Canada and across the world and recognize that we need to come together and the energy of all of us together can make a difference?and Canada has really made a great impact on what has been happening in the G7, in the European Union, and try to put in sanctions and make life very difficult for Putin until he leaves Ukraine. We will stay with them"

until the very end.?

Following the vigil, including a prayer led by Pastor Jacob Perro of Northridge Community Church, young Jake was back at work, distributing his pins to local leaders and collecting even more for the Red Cross in the process.

?He started with a goal of \$500 with 50 buttons and he's done 1,000 buttons and got \$4,400 so far raised,? said Suzanne. ?He's been watching the kids leaving their homes and he wanted to make sure that wherever they got where they were going they would have the stuff they needed.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter