

Schomberg resident connects with Ukrainian youth to teach conversational English

The ongoing war in Ukraine continues to affect the lives of people there in so many ways. Other than the obvious social and military consequences, many ordinary young Ukrainians have had their lives put on hold as their hopes, dreams and aspirations are paused during these tumultuous and difficult times.

This all seems it would be distant and disconnected to an HR Manager at Maple Leaf Foods, living in Schomberg, half a planet away.

In actual fact, it has changed Jill Barber's outlook in many ways.

You see, in addition to her job in human resources, Barber has a secondary role at Maple Leaf Foods: she helps in leading their Raise The Good in the Neighbourhood Volunteer Initiative, which provides Maple Leaf Foods team members two days per year to volunteer in the communities they live and work in.

In her research, Barber came across an organization called ENGIN, which has a simple and powerful mission. According to the not-for-profit, they help Ukrainian youth connect with the global community by empowering them to speak fluent, conversational English. Our work breaks down borders to catalyze Ukraine's postwar reconstruction and longer-term economic and social development.

Our one-of-a-kind model is human-centered, personalized, and authentic. Through 1-on-1 conversation, we facilitate mutually beneficial relationships between students and volunteers, creating a virtuous cycle of growth and understanding. And by doing this at unprecedented scale - 40,000 participants and counting - we're bridging cultures and fostering a more interconnected, empathetic world.

A few months ago, Barber connected with 23-year-old Kateryna in Ukraine, and their weekly conversations have changed Barber's outlook.

As an ENGIN volunteer, I have been meeting weekly with Kateryna, a graduate from Zaporizhzhia, to help her practice English. Kateryna and I have become good friends and I feel I benefit from our relationship almost as much as she does. Our sessions give me a front-row seat to the effects of the war, and I do my best to support Kateryna through the challenges she faces every day.

Barber has been deeply moved by Kateryna's story and their closeness continues to grow.

She explains: This initiative goes beyond addressing short-term needs, focusing on enhancing spoken English to provide Ukrainians with broader academic and professional opportunities. ENGIN aims to empower individuals, opening doors to new jobs, bridging educational gaps, and facilitating the resettlement process for refugees impacted by the war.

In my sessions with Kateryna I not only contribute to her language goals but also gain insights into Ukraine and the profound effects of the war on her family. Her brother and partner are both soldiers in the war. She never knows when she'll see either of them again. It's a meaningful experience that goes beyond language support, fostering understanding and connection. I'm honoured to be part of it, and I wanted to share my experience for others who are seeking a volunteer opportunity that allows them to connect from home and make an impact on the lives of young people.

If you're interested in learning more about the work ENGIN is doing in Ukraine, or wish to volunteer and join the conversation, go to www.enginprogram.org.

By Aladin Jarrah