

Queen Margaret student uses his skills in Ukraine

At the start of the war in Ukraine, one Queen Margaret University (QMU) student felt compelled to travel to Ukraine to support civilians whose lives were devastated by the invasion.

Since then, his volunteering work has involved him evacuating women and children from Kyiv, trucking in supplies to the ruins of Kharkiv, and forming an extraordinary bond with a group of orphans from Odessa.

Before studying at QMU, thirty-six-year-old Gavin Menzies ran various businesses supporting young people in and around Edinburgh – in particular a local basketball academy. He noticed that many kids coming to the academy were struggling with issues he simply hadn't the skills to support or the knowledge to refer to the appropriate professionals.

This was the catalyst he needed to begin a master's degree in play therapy. Despite having no degree or experience in higher education, Gavin has such solid work experience with children, that he was able to secure a place on the Master's course. However, doing the course part-time was the only way he would be able to sustain studying at this level. This flexible option allowed him to continue

working at his business while developing the new skills he felt he needed to better support young people with complex needs.

However, at the outset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Gavin made the life-changing decision to fly over and volunteer. Within 14 days of the invasion, he was working to evacuate people from Lviv and Kyiv, and later returned in the summer to bring supplies to Kharkiv. Gavin said he felt like he had a responsibility to volunteer and help in whatever way he could.



Speaking about his experiences, Gavin said: "I had some time away from my university studies, in between work placements, when the invasion began. I had experience working in refugee camps already, so I spoke to my lecturers at the

University and told them that I was going to volunteer to help.

“I was involved in the evacuation of mostly women and children at the start of the conflict. I went into Kyiv and Lviv to help bring people out. I also raised around £15,000 to buy supplies for refugees that they might not have been able to take from their homes.

“There was a massive amount of aid that made it to the Polish-Ukrainian border, but which couldn't be taken onwards. Volunteers and aid agencies were required to transport it into Ukraine and get it to the people who urgently needed it. When I saw the overwhelming need for those volunteers, I felt compelled to do what I could. Initially, I was driving into Lviv with supplies. We had military liaisons the entire way, telling us where the supplies had to go, where it was safe to travel and what time we had to be out of the city by.

“We would take in supplies to these regions, which included a lot of cold weather gear at that time, and then we would evacuate the most vulnerable – mostly people who needed specialist medical care, women and children and disabled people. We would put them in our vehicles and bring them back with us across the border.

“I went over a second time in the summer to Kharkiv. By that time, everything was far more organised, and I linked up with a charity that was operating out of the remnants of Kharkiv University. We were supporting a lot of older people and doing what was, essentially, end of life care. A lot of them were people with no family and nowhere to go, living in a city that was getting shelled all the time – often quite indiscriminately.

“It was very difficult to see that first hand. However, these places were getting their water supplies trucked in, and if

our trucks couldn't get access, then there would be no clean water for anyone."

ORPHANS

While volunteering, Gavin met a group of 19 refugee orphans from Odessa. Lacking basic supplies, he was given a list of what they needed by the director of the orphanage, Gavin then equipped the orphans with provisions he bought from local shops.

Gavin provided more detail: "They were some of the youngest from the orphanages in that region. They had a few staff members with them, but the children travelled with only what they could carry in their backpacks. They had a lot of cold weather clothing with them, but little else, and nothing suitable for the hot summer to come.

"With some of the money I raised, I helped get them supplies I knew they would need from shops in Poland.

After returning to Scotland, Gavin stayed in touch with the orphans, and began to form an extraordinary bond with them. He exchanged video calls with them, and they would speak often. Gavin says the orphans cherished having someone there for them at such a difficult time.

Later in the year, Gavin found out the kids were likely to miss out on a proper Christmas and was determined to do what he could to help. He said: "At the time, the kids were staying in Poland. I had spoken to the Director of their orphanage, and he said he didn't have the heart to tell them not to write a Santa list."

Gavin asked to see the children's Santa lists and then followed up with some organisations he has been doing work experience with through his MSc Play Therapy Course. One

nursery in Edinburgh put out a call to local parents for toys. Before Gavin knew it, he had collected all the toys on the list.

It wasn't until Gavin got to the refugee camp that he realised the Polish government had moved all the orphan refugees from the war into one facility.

Gavin explained: "When I arrived, I saw there were around 650 orphans of all different ages staying in this complex together.

"I felt compelled to do more. I spoke to a few different organisations, and we managed to pull together £1500. I was able to go to Poland and with a bit of co-operation from some of the big toy shops, I got enough games and toys for every child in the complex. I managed to get it to them just before Christmas and they all spent Christmas day playing board games with one another."

This was not the first time Gavin has volunteered to support war refugees. Previously, Gavin has volunteered at refugee camps in Turkey. However, he says the skills he was developing during his studies on the MSc Play Therapy course at QMU helped him become a far more effective volunteer during the Ukrainian war – especially when dealing with vulnerable children.

"In other volunteer work I have done, the language barrier has been an issue at times. However, I have learned so much in my Play Therapy course that has equipped me to better support these refugees. Learning how to be present and actively listen helps give agency to these orphans. It allows them to take the lead and show you what they need. In lives that are changing constantly, having the stability of someone who is always there for them really makes a difference.

"These skills have helped me so much to be a better volunteer

and I will certainly be able to use and develop them with my work with children in Scotland.”

Queen Margaret University’s Principal, Sir Paul Grice, praised Gavin’s bravery and his determination to be a force for good. He said: “Gavin is an inspiration to those on the MSc Play Therapy course and to everyone at QMU. He has used his skills, energy and time to make a positive impact on the people of Ukraine during the most desperate of situations. We are delighted that the lecturers could support him to undertake such brave and important work during the course of his studies. Indeed, he epitomises the values of Queen Margaret University in his endeavour to make a difference in the world.”

Gavin is preparing to travel to Ukraine again later this year.

Not only does he hope to spend more time with the orphans he has built such a unique connection, but he also plans to continue his extraordinary volunteer work. As well as delivering humanitarian aid, Gavin has now started work with the charity ‘K9 International’ – which works to evacuate animals from Ukraine.



