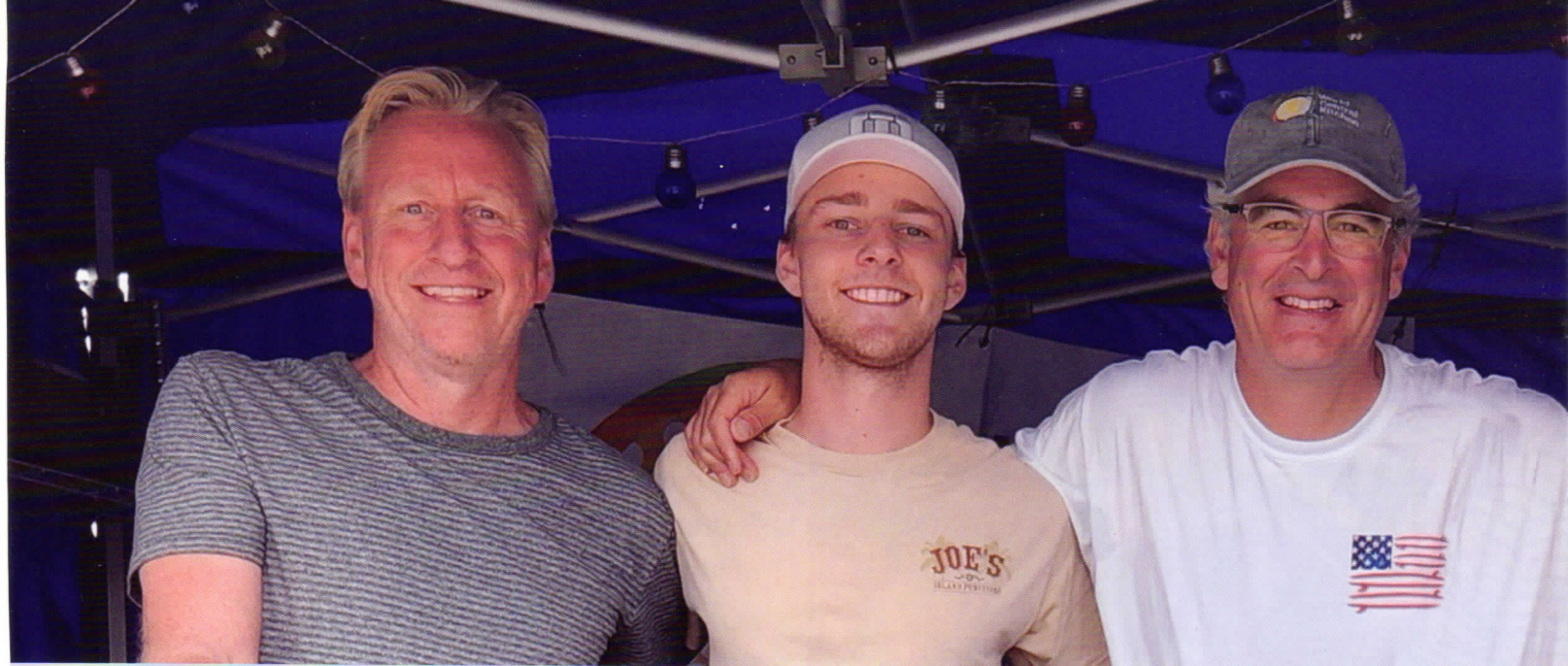


MISSIONS OF MERCY

Shamrocks Respond to Crisis in Ukraine





Bruce Adams '86, Brogan Adams and Chris Connors '86

CHRIS CONNORS '86 AND BRUCE ADAMS '86

A Coke and a (Feehan) Smile At the Ukrainian Border

As Chris Connors '86 watched the news of the atrocities and attacks on democracy in Ukraine, he felt he had to do something beyond mailing a check to a relief effort. "I had read about how disorganized some of the relief efforts were, especially in the beginning, so I figured it couldn't hurt to have another body there to help out," Connors says.

In the 10 months since the war began, volunteers have become the backbone of the relief effort in Poland, with more than 8 million refugees crossing the border from Ukraine since last February. Ninety percent of the refugees are women and children.

In April, Connors volunteered with World Central Kitchen (wck.org) in Medyka, Poland, an experience that convinced him he wanted to return. He asked Feehan classmate and long-time friend Bruce Adams '86 if he would go with him, and Adams gave a resounding yes—as long as they could take Adams's son, Brogan Adams, a senior at The College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. The Adamases had both known about Connors' first trip and wanted to contribute.

In June, the three of them traveled to Medyka, the busiest checkpoint along the Polish border, to volunteer with World Central Kitchen for a week. Founded in 2010, the organization provides fresh meals on the front lines of communities in crisis, whether caused by a natural or human-made disaster. According to Connors, the Ukraine-Polish border is the first wartime relief effort for WCK.

At the Medyka checkpoint, the border is chaotic and busy. Pop-up tents managed by organizations and volunteers from around the world line a muddy, cobbled corridor about 300 meters long. From these tents, volunteers greet the exhausted mothers, grandmothers,

and children as they walk the corridor, offering cups of coffee, sandwiches, phone cards, fruit, bottled water, baby products, and new luggage.

Once they've reached the tents, the only thing the refugees know is they've crossed the border, Connors explains. Some people fleeing the fighting on the eastern side of Ukraine had been traveling for months by whatever means available.

The American trio saw women carrying broken luggage, while their youngsters, some as young as three, four, and five walked alongside. These were mothers and grandmothers who don't know if they'll see their husbands, fathers, grandfathers, or adult sons again, Connors says. They may not know if they have a house to go back to—or they already know they don't.



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“Some of their suitcases were meant to be rollers, but they had rolled so long, the wheels had broken off,” Brogan Adams explains. By the time the families reached the border, the suitcases had long fallen apart and needed to be carried, often weighing upwards of 100 pounds. The men were humbled to realize they couldn’t help when they offered to carry suitcases—because they couldn’t lift them. “The grandmothers were stronger than all three of us,” Bruce Adams says.

Partway through the week of making meals with WCK, the trio decided to branch off from the main tent to set up their own associated tent with bottles of Coca-Cola, bottled water, and small toys, along with WCK meals. Brogan Adams had a bubble maker for added fun. They had collected money through a GoFundMe he had created before they left the United States that raised \$18,000, and these donations allowed them to purchase items.

The motivation? They had noticed when they arrived how grim the collective energy was—with no one smiling, either the volunteers or refugees. No surprise in the center of a refugee crisis, but the three Americans wanted to boost the mood if they could.

With their own tent situated near the front of the tent corridor, Connors, Bruce Adams, and Brogan Adams were some of the first to greet new arrivals.

Their goal was simple: to offer hope, kindness, and a smidge of levity to a very serious situation. They turned on the silliness.

“People weren’t in the mood to smile, but we almost forced them to just by being idiots,” Connors says. “We were the fun booth on that 300-meter stretch.” The refugees had to be persuaded to take the small tokens the trio was handing out. They were proud, Bruce Adams says, and they asked for nothing.

But the men discovered the simple act of offering a Coca-Cola to an exhausted traveler was more profound than they realized.

“Sometimes you might offer a bottle of water, and they would say ‘no, thank you,’ and then you’d offer them a Coke, and they’d just start crying,” Brogan Adams says. Coke, they learned, was a universal connector.



What has stayed with Brogan Adams upon his return is the strength of the people. “We got a chance to sit and talk to a couple of people. We don’t speak Ukrainian or Polish, so it was a struggle, but a few people had broken English,” he says. “Every single one of them said they were going to win the war and weren’t going to give up.”

For Bruce Adams, Independence Day and the freedoms Americans take for granted felt different for him last July, layered with a deeper understanding and appreciation. “Their brothers, their dads, and husbands are over there fighting, and these women may never see them again, and not one of them wanted to give up their freedom. It made me come back and look at things differently in America,” Bruce Adams says. Like his son, he was struck by the Ukrainian strength and pride.

Connors found himself reflecting on past wars and old newsreels that, to us, feel more like documentaries than real events. “It doesn’t look real, but going there made it real,” he says.

One of the best parts of the week was observing the support from around the globe. They met and talked to volunteers from all over the world – Portugal, Israel, Australia, and many other nations. “I think we get a little insular here and assume we’re the only ones helping,” Connors says.

Connors and Bruce Adams, friends since 1980, credit Bishop Feehan for four formative years that fostered integrity, respect, compassion, and service: foundational attributes for just such a trip. Working at a chaotic border crossing also takes a sense of personal empowerment and self-worth that Feehan helped develop. Getting on a plane to go to a war zone certainly fell way outside his comfort zone, Connors says. But the three agree it was a pivotal experience, made more meaningful by doing it with a best friend and a son.

As we move into the heart of winter, however, we need to remember the war isn’t over even if the recent news sounds more positive, says Connors. The suffering hasn’t changed, and the relief efforts still need donations and volunteers.



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