



Local photographer selling photography to support Ukrainian family

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SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY



Andrii and Olena Buznia of Ukraine with Ryan Darling and Mila Bridger in Ireland. COURTESY PHOTO

Local photographer Mila Bridger has opened her heart and the door for others to help a Ukrainian family in need.

Ms. Bridger, a native of Poland, is recognized both nationally and internationally for her work in creative portraits and lifestyle photographs. She has photographed local entrepreneurs, musicians and designers and has created numerous photo shoots all over the globe. With a background in European Art, she brings an exciting approach to the art of photography. Known in Southwest Florida for her creative portraits and imagination, she also serves the community by volunteering her time and services to major fundraisers.

When the invasion of Ukraine began, she knew how vulnerable people can be during a time of crisis as she was born and raised in eastern Europe. Her native homeland has seen its heartache over the years. She rallied friends on social media to book tours, rooms and hotel stays in Poland, not to travel there but to create income for the small business owners.

When she and her husband, Ryan Darling, were traveling in Ireland two months ago on vacation, they met a Ukrainian family on the train, much to their surprise.

"We were going in same direction, but they were looking for a place to stay while we were looking forward to trying some Guinness and sightseeing," said Ms. Bridger. "It hit me hard. Really hard. Family of four — looking for a place to live as they can't be in their own country — a family who saw and witnessed things we can't imagine in our worst nightmares, this shouldn't happen to anyone. I knew I had to do something more."

Ms. Bridger vowed to keep in touch with this family and try and help them get on their feet. She knew one way was to help raise money to pay rent for the Ukrainian family while they try to find jobs in Ireland.

"Mermaids Dreams" is a photo series by Ms. Bridger and a new photograph called "Ukrainian Mermaid" has been added. She is offering the new photo along with a photo called "Stop the War" to anyone who wants to help; both prints include a letter of authenticity and 100% of the proceeds are going to help the Buznia family. Ms. Bridger said her goal is to pay the rent for the family for several months so they don't have to worry about a roof over their heads.

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Andrii Buznia and his wife Olena along with their sons Michail and Anatoliy (8 and 10 years old), fled from war-torn Ukraine but before the invasion. They were a normal family, they had everything they needed and now they are starting over from scratch. They arrived in Dublin searching for jobs but said they know it will take time to earn enough money to feel secure. They chose a larger city to relocate to because one son has a heart condition that needs to be monitored at a cardiologic center.

"Olena told me that it's one thing is to lose your house, but it's another thing to lose your life," said Ms. Bridger. "All I could do at that time was hug her while my eyes filled with tears. I promised her that I would do everything, everything in my power to help them get their life back."

The Buznias lived in Mykolajiv, Ukraine, until the Russian invasion began. On Feb. 24, they were awakened at 5 a.m. to their house shaking from Russian shelling nearby. They slept underground for five days before deciding to flee. They travelled to Moldova by bus, then walked 15 kilometers (nearly 10 miles) to Romania while carrying their bags. From there, they traveled to Ireland because they knew how to speak English.

"We can't just stand by," said Ms. Bridger. "Even though we can't help everyone, we can help this displaced family and we can make a difference in their lives."

Ms. Bridger and her husband helped pay the family's first month's rent while in Ireland and are working hard to raise enough money to pay for several more months. Rent is \$1,100 per month; food and living expenses for a family of four are an additional \$2,500. The goal is to help as long as needed.

To purchase poster prints for \$150 each with 100% of the proceeds going to help the Buznia family, visit www.milabridger.com/help-ukraine

For more information or to contact Mila Bridger, call 239-877-2485. |

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