

## Bridging Understanding | N's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

**Warning:** The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

---

### What is your connection to Ukraine?

**N:** I'm Ukrainian. I was born in and grew up in Kyiv. I didn't plan to leave my country and go to some other country.

### What led you to McMaster?

When the war started, it was February, and in March me and my mom left the country and settled down for some period. It was Slovakia. It's just because it's the nearest country, nearest to our border on the west.

And then, we just started to think, what will we do next and at the time I still worked for my university (in Ukraine), but remotely because of the war. I found a website called Science for Ukraine and it had scientists and academics from all over the world.

It gave information about opportunities for short periods of time for students, faculty and researchers. And I found two opportunities, one was in Latvia and one was in Canada (at McMaster). I reached out to the researchers in Latvia and Canada. After some emails, a professor from McMaster was the person that I met first.

I think it was for a cultural initiative to invite people from Ukraine to participate in a program. I think they adopted this program for people from Ukraine, specifically.

I applied for a visa and it arrived on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June.

When I came to Canada, it was like another world actually, because before I had never been to this part of the world. I had never been to America or North America. Never. And I had never lived for a long period of time in other countries, even as a tourist in European countries. It's not the same. It's, you know, not like being a tourist for a week.

I remember the struggles. I came in the evening, I came to the place and my head was ... just like, you know, because of this. I felt pressure to do well here.

The people here really helped me, and I was not alone. Three of us arrived in Canada, one student, me and another researcher. Three of us, we didn't feel alone, we tried to help each other.

Also, it was helpful that at that period of time the Canadian government provided a program for Ukrainians and there was help when you came to an institution. It all was very efficient.

When I came to McMaster, what I can say about our centre and this lab and students, I didn't hear anything inappropriate, they didn't ask any uncomfortable questions or something, they really tried to help.

And I think now I can say that I found friends here, real friends. Also, there are plenty of opportunities to be involved in the community at McMaster. When I applied for a post-doc scholarship, I joined some clubs, like the choir in the first semester and it was really nice, and I also met new people.

I joined a Ukrainian club, too. I met other people, and I think it's really great that at McMaster you can just come and meet people.

**What do you wish your fellow students in Canada knew about your journey to McMaster / your story?**

Maybe my story, specifically that I was forced to come here. I'm really happy to be here, to work here and to meet people, but it was not my choice. Before,

my life was normal. I had a job that I liked, I lived in my apartment in the same city as my parents, and me and my family had plans for the next three years.

For the first four months when I came to Canada, I thought I was just here for a period of time and then I will go back home to my life. But the war is still not over and the longer it continues, the more I think that maybe I should think about a new life, new country.

I think that's the one of the hardest and biggest choices of my life. I had to quit my job in Ukraine, I heard you should come back, or you should leave. I know that many people live there and it's their choice, but I just don't feel comfortable.

My family is in Ukraine. I came alone. Also, I'm married and my husband is in Ukraine. This is a very sensitive topic because my husband can't leave the country. He can't and he doesn't want to. We have lived in different worlds over this period.

We have this law, that men are not allowed to leave the country without special permission. It could be for your job or for some other reason, but even if he can leave the country for a short period of time, he doesn't want to leave the country at this time.

### **Why did you want to stay close to a university?**

I audited some courses at McMaster, but I came as a post-doc. I'm thankful to all the professors who just let me do it.

I wanted to be close to a university because I actually liked my life working at a university in Ukraine. In Kyiv, I graduated and worked as a manager when I started my PhD program. It was a non-academic job; I was a manager for the lab. After obtaining my PhD, I began working as an assistant professor.

### **Tell me about something that inspires you.**

First, it's people and it's community and it's students. Then it's creativity, you can be creative in your work, in your research, in your ideas.

You can be free, not 100% free, but at some point, you can be free. You can decide how to study something.

When I talk with my professor, I can say I have an idea, can we do that? And they support me. OK, we can do that, maybe we should think about it in a different way. You can reach out to this professor and ask. You just need to find a supervisor or mentor and they will help you. I find this very inspiring.

**Is there something from your time at Mac — or a moment or a place that helps you get through this difficult time and sustains you?**

I think it's the people — I don't want to come in and struggle and complain about my life. No. But even in everyday communication, I feel supported. This is what helps me. I think communication and live communication are the greatest resources you can use.

I like being on campus. I can compare it with our campus in Ukraine and it's much better. Mostly, I come here to the lab. But, of course, I go to other places when trying to find a new place like the student centre. It's a nice place with a lot of variation of food, coffee, quiet places, it's really great. I heard there's a nap room, but I have never seen the nap room.

**Is there something you wish your fellow students knew about you or your life?**

I don't know what to say, but I can talk about my research, my study. I don't know what to say about my life. I'm just very ordinary. I try to make my life ordinary. I can't think about this every day because it's too stressful. So, I just try to make it ordinary. When I meet someone for the first time, I don't mention that I'm from Ukraine, I don't mention there's a war. After a period of time, I can talk about it.

I try not to make it the first impression, label of me, that I'm this girl from Ukraine, I try to show myself as a person first.

I don't want people in Canada to see me through this prism, this glass, this situation. I want them to know me as a person. I don't want them to feel sorry

or change how they act.

**Let's talk about support and community. Where do you look for support?**

I look for support, not just at McMaster, but in Hamilton, too. I found some people, mostly they're women from Ukraine. And, I feel this support because we are in the same world, we are in the same situation, and we understand each other. We don't need to explain it all.

I found moral support, mental support. I can tell them about my situation with my family. They understand my situation and they don't judge me. I feel judged because many people from my country, didn't leave the country and they don't want to leave the country, and they live in a situation that's not safe every day. Like my parents. I feel guilty at some point because I'm here and I'm safe. And sometimes I think I should be there. It's pressure, even if no one is telling me to do this, it's just me. I feel it.

I speak with my mom every week. We have a video call with my mother and father every week. They're OK, as well as they can be. They tell me that I should stay here.

**Is there a person or a community here who means a lot to you?**

I think it's the professor who helped me come here. This professor helped me a lot. I know this professor's family now.

**What would you like other students who find themselves in similar circumstances to know?**

Try to do your best. Believe in yourself. Believe that you can do everything. For me, inside, for me, when the war started, when you realize that you can lose everything, it's only you in your brain and in your heart, you can do anything that you want. It's a challenge, you realize that you can do anything.

I understand that I was lucky, but it was also, partly, also something I did. I was lucky to find this opportunity, these people, this job. I know people who landed here, and they didn't know anybody and didn't have this opportunity to continue their job and had to start everything from scratch.

A lot of things are new, of course. I find what I can do here, I also can do something for Ukrainian language through my research. I see the importance of my work here.

**Let's talk about hope: Is there someone or something in your life that gives you hope for the future?**

It's difficult to talk about the future. I lost my ability to think about the future, unfortunately, or to plan for long periods. Before, I hoped the war will be over. Now I don't know when it will be, what will be of my country. I can't really plan anything. I don't see it clearly. I hope that everything will be OK, I don't know how, when.

**What kind of supports do you find most helpful?**

First of all, financial funding – I received a scholarship that has allowed me to stay and work here. Also, support just to understand how it works in Canada, what you need to do, bureaucracy, what you need to do and how.

Thank you to all the people who helped me, the profs, supervisors, all the people at McMaster who really helped me.