



Season 4 | Episode # 28

How to Help Ukrainians with Disabilities

Galyna

Part 1

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, we have worked closely with our Joni and Friends In-Country Coordinator and ministry partners to evacuate and care for Ukrainians with disabilities. Having rescued and relocated more than 600 Ukrainian nationals, Joni and Friends continues to provide long-term support, including safe housing, food, hygiene products, medical care, and trauma recovery.

Joining us today is Galyna, our Regional In-Country Coordinator in Eastern Europe who is sharing her story of God's care for those with disabilities throughout Ukraine and the plight of people in war. Welcome to the podcast, dear Galyna. It's so good to have you.

Galyna:

It's great to be here. Just thank you for giving me the opportunity to come and share what we have been doing together and also just to share the story of what's happening right now in Ukraine.

Crystal Keating:

Well, we are honored to have you. It's so good to see you face to face. You know, Galyna, your country has been under siege and courageously fighting for its freedom since late February. And the conditions have greatly impacted everyone in your country and even more greatly people with disabilities. So, take us back to earlier this year when you began the process of evacuating the disability community to safety in other countries.

What was that like for you to feel the weight of protecting your own life and also those around you who likely could not flee without assistance? That must have been very difficult.

Galyna:

First of all, I'm very grateful to be here. I am honored to be here and have a chance to talk to you face-to-face. And also, I'm very surprised and grateful to the Lord. Because when the war started, I expected two things. The first, that my family and I, we could die. And the second thing that we could be sent to the economical, depressed regions of Russia, and actually people from southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, they were sent to Russia already.



But that was me, like my husband, my father, me, we do not have disabilities. We can walk. We can move without any problems. But the biggest problem was what to do with people affected by disabilities. What to do if people cannot move, if people are in the wheelchairs, and if they live not just in the house? You know, when they can leave the house easily. But what if they live on the seventh or ninth floor? And you know, when we have this air alert, the people like the neighbors, they are thinking first of all about their families, about their children. You can't use the elevator when there is the air alert. And so that's why if you are on the seventh floor, you have to take your wife or husband or mom or dad or child to go down seven floors then into the shelter.

And then after the air alert is over you have to go up. It's way too difficult. I remember one lady in the south of Ukraine. She called me, and she was asking for the evacuation, and she said we live on the 14th floor. At first, I was taking my son with cerebral palsy downstairs.

But it's way too hard. Right now, we are just staying. What happens? It happens. And this is just the people with like physical disabilities who cannot move by themselves. But what if the people have hearing problems or visual impairments, you know? Like we have to speak about them as well. So, this was really heartbreaking. We needed to do something about it.

Crystal Keating:

Right. You did. And so how were you making the decision, you know, you're caring for your own life, for your father's life, for your husband's life, but now you're thinking outside of yourself to what about all of the people with disabilities in this country? Where did your mindset shift from, ok we need to get out to, I need to help others get out? What was that like for you?

Galyna:

You know the first two, three days as the war started, it was difficult even to imagine what you would be doing in a day or two. First what really helped me is just to accept the fact that, okay, you and your family can die anytime.

Full stop. After you accept this, it's much easier to move on and to start doing something and not just to sit at home being depressed. Just start moving and doing something. I spoke with my dad and my husband, and we also were thinking like, if we should be evacuated or shouldn't be evacuated, but then it was our decision that we are staying.

I just remember it was the first day of the war. I went to work and at Agape Ukraine, we had patients. Agape Ukraine provides physical rehabilitation, occupational therapy, speech therapy. Secondly, it's providing shelter for people with disabilities whose relatives just, you know, went somewhere on a business trip or who are sick and have to go to the hospital. And the third direction that we work in is training Christians to become physical therapists.

Crystal Keating:
Amazing.

Galyna:



Yeah, praise God that he allows to do that. And when the war broke out on the first day at work, we just told all of the patients that they have to leave because we knew that when they come back home, they can decide what they are doing, staying, leaving.

And then I was returning back home and, it was shock. Yes, I have been learning history and I knew that we could have been expecting something like that from Russia. But still, you always hope for the best. You always hope that that will not happen. Like if you have cancer in the future or if your child gets a disability, or if your house will be destroyed. You always hope that you won't get into that problem.

But here it is. And then I remember when I got into just one shop and I started talking to the woman who was selling the goods there, and she said, my son right now is in the south of Ukraine. And it's very difficult because at that time Russians were attacking from the south, very heavily. And she said, just please pray for him. I promised her that I will.

And then I went on the streets, and I saw the people from our city who were preparing for the war. They were making these roadblocks. They were putting sand into the sacks. Like, the women were cooking some food and bringing that food to the men who were, you know, making the roadblocks.

And at that moment I realized that you have to stay here in Ukraine. That was just, you know, a quiet voice that you have to stay. You need to do the work here. And you know, I didn't expect at all that we would be involved in the evacuation of people with disabilities.

Crystal Keating:
Okay.

Galyna:
A lady from Germany, Martina she called the founders of Agape Ukraine, and she said we want to take you to a safe place.

And then Natalia said, we cannot go just by ourselves. We have many people. And so, Martina asked them, how many people do you have? And at first, they said, well, maybe five or 10. And then, well maybe 17, and then well maybe a little bit more. And we ended up with 35 people, 11 of whom were with really serious disabilities in the wheelchair.

They were paralyzed. And several more, with more slight disabilities. Then we decided that it would be much easier to cross the border if we get some letters of support from the local government. And as I used to work for the Governor's office, I said, okay, let me just go because I know the people and maybe we'll try to do something. And so, then we got these letters of support, and then I just went with this group to the border.

Crystal Keating:
So just to reiterate, here you are. This is the first few days of the war. You have basically resolved in your heart, I may die. And so, I'm going to live and I'm gonna live and move forward in God's



grace. And you connected with people who basically felt the same way. We could die. But we are gonna save as many as we can. And so, you made a plan to work with the border agencies and the governance there to bring this group of people to the border.

Galyna:

But as I said, we didn't plan. It was just, you know, okay, here you see the need and you do it. We didn't plan anything. Like, we didn't expect that we would evacuate so many people.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. You were just doing the first thing.

Galyna:

Yeah. Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

By faith, you were gonna take how many 35 people were in the first caravan?

Galyna:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Okay, so let's walk through what did that look like for you. How did you get transportation? Where did you go? Why did you choose a particular border to evacuate to?

Galyna:

Well, the process was really complicated. On the one hand, we cooperated with the organization in Germany, and they provided transport. But the transport would come just across the border and wait for the people, but not going any further into Ukraine because for the reasons of safety. They were afraid to go further. So, the drivers from Germany cross the border and wait for us on the Ukrainian side. The drivers from Agape, they would take our vans.

Crystal Keating:

Accessible vans

Galyna:

Accessible for people with disabilities vans, put the people with disabilities and their relatives and then just go to the border. Then near the border, the people with disabilities will just be transferred from vans to German transport, and then they had to cross the border.

Right now, it takes three or four hours to cross the border just to come through all of the procedures at the Ukrainian-Polish border. At that time, we had so many people. That was one of the most difficult things for me to see. When women with tiny kids, people with disabilities were just standing in line and waiting to cross the border on foot because they didn't have any transport and it was difficult.



Even if some buses or cars were getting to the border, they were full. This was just terrible. And so, on the one hand, we had these people. On the other hand, we had transport with the people with disabilities. So, they had to wait for hours.

And we asked Anna who represents Ron, the organization in Poland, to arrange some hotel so that the people could stay for the night. Because you know, if you are in the wheelchair and you travel for, I don't know, 48, 72 hours -

Crystal Keating:
Exhausting.

Galyna:
It's exhausting. And then you have bad sores. And then you have problems with blood pressure and with urine system and with everything. And that can just kill you. So, before you bring somebody with high spinal cord injury to a safe place, that person can die. And that's why we just had to look for some options for them to stay for the night. And this is how we worked it through.

Also, Martina was arranging the facilities in Germany. And then also, Jan van den Bosch from the Netherlands connected us with the organization Soft Tulip. And so then Soft Tulip was helping us to bring some groups to the Netherlands and it was also just a miracle how that worked out.

Crystal Keating:
So Galyna you've brought this first group of 35 to the border, and they're going to places like Germany and to Poland and even some to the Netherlands.

Galyna:
Switzerland

Crystal Keating:
And Switzerland, all of these countries where God is opening up places of refuge for them. How did you make the decision then to say, okay, now I'm gonna go back and we're gonna do this again?

Galyna:
So, after the first trip, other people started calling.

Crystal Keating:
They must have heard about what you were doing.

Galyna:
Yeah. Because we shared this information with some churches and some other people. And so that is why they started calling us and asking for the evacuation.

And then we followed the same process. Okay. You know, I went to get the letters of support from the government and some people helped to make the lists. And then we contacted with Martina, and we sent her the list of the people and she found the transport and everything.

And so, in such a way, there was the second group and then the third group, the people from the city of Brovary. It's a city in Kyiv region.

Crystal Keating:
Oh, Kyiv?

Galyna:
And yeah.

Crystal Keating:
And that's where a lot of the activity was.

Galyna:
At that time, yes. At that time Russians were shelling heavily and there were a lot of soldiers. You look through the window and you see Russian soldiers, you know, digging out these trenches. So, you, you just don't want to stay around.

Crystal Keating:
That is terrifying. Galyna let's talk about your own feelings as this is all going on. You've shared openly that you were wrestling with God in prayer throughout these first few months of the war. As people are contacting you, you're on the phone constantly. You're coordinating care. You're dealing with your own frustrations. Galyna, what do you wish people knew about what it's like living in Ukraine with the war going on?

Galyna:
Well, first of all, you never know what can happen in the next minute or two minutes and that you can die any time because the bombing can be near your house, or some missile can struck your house.

Therefore, I just would love to say appreciate what you have right now. Even if you have problems, life is not the bed of roses. So just appreciate what you have. Because the things like getting up early in the morning, doing some exercises, going to work, even having some quarrel with your wife or your husband.

It can be something that you would be missing a lot if you have, or you are separated with your family. So just appreciate what you have and be grateful, the shower, warm shower, the food on the table. Like before the war started, we were praying, oh, thank you, God, for this new day. But we didn't mean it.

We were taking this for granted. Right now, when we thank God for the new day, we really thank God for the new day. So just appreciate it and I hope that the war will never come to you, and you will never have such a destruction.

Crystal Keating:

That's a great perspective. Many of us who have so much to be grateful. And as we've often heard, he who has been given much, much is required. And so even to pray that God would help us to see what is it that you've given us, Lord, so that we can use it for your honor, for the good of others, and to give ourselves away.

Thank you.

Galyna:

Thank you.

Crystal Keating:

Friends, thank you for listening to part one of our conversation with Galyna. Be sure to subscribe so you can hear part two next week as we wrap up season four of the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. And if you would like to help meet the urgent and ongoing needs of Ukrainian refugees with disabilities, we'd love for you to partner with our ministry.

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