

My journey from Ukraine to Japan - A wish for peace that I want to convey now -

by Anna Sharhorodska, Advocacy Group, Plan International Japan, 16th February 2023

My name is Anna. I joined Plan International Japan in December 2022.

I was born and lived all my life in the city of Mariupol in Ukraine. But I had to leave my home because it, like my city, was destroyed because of the war in Ukraine.

In this terrible situation, I evacuated to Japan, which was my dream place.

I want to tell the story of how I started my life here and how I joined the Plan International Japan team. I also want to share my experience of teaching and volunteering in Ukraine, and also as my aspirations and dreams that I want to achieve here.

Part 1.

About my life in Ukraine. Studying and volunteering

I studied at Mariupol State University, by specialties of History (and Secondary Education) and Journalism. I chose history because I am interested in history and love children. And journalism because I like to write articles and want to convey only true information to the audience.

I took part in interesting practices, one of them was archaeological. We conducted excavations inside a medieval castle in western Ukraine and also traveled. This trip motivated me to join the Scientific Historical and Archaeological Society at the university, which radically changed my goals in life.

In the society, we strived to make the study of history easy and interactive. One of our most interesting achievements is creation of historical board games. We also organized excursions, human rights movie club meeting and other activities.

This was impetus for creation of the NGO "Cultural and educational platform "SENSE". Volunteering in this organization inspired me, because I felt that we were doing really important things. We were implementing projects to overcoming stereotypes, to preserve and disseminate culture and history. We tried to create a comfortable and safe environment for people with disabilities and children. We wanted to motivate young people to be socially active.

I participated in other projects and trainings about democracy, human rights, tolerance and other. I went to international exchanges to European countries. My student life was very creative, full of dreams and aspirations. And I continued to do this when I started working.

Work that inspires

I started working at the school during my last year in university. It was difficult to combine study, volunteering, and work, but it turned out to be possible.

At first, I worked only as a teacher's assistant (work with children with special educational needs). I supported children who, due to their health condition and mental disabilities, can't study on their own. The main task for a teacher's assistant is socialize the child and help with adapt in regular classes. And also it is very important for these children to master a program specially prepared for him or her. For me, working as a teacher's assistant was quite complicatedly. Despite a strong desire to help these children, it was very difficult to communicate with them and find special teaching methods that would not harm such a child.

And after graduating from university and getting married in 2020, my husband and I started working at Mariupol secondary school 15. We worked here until the start full-scale war in Ukraine. This school was one of the largest schools in the city, with more than 1300 students. There I held the positions of the teacher-organizer, teacher of history and law, and a teacher's assistant. I really enjoyed being involved in organizing various activities, events and holidays for the school children. This work was very interesting, creative and versatile for me.

I with my husband all-time improved our professional skills. We regularly participated in educational trainings, seminars, and workshops and tried to involve children in these activities. Our experience we shared with colleagues, NGOs, and applied in the classroom. The school administration was committed to innovation and

change in education, and everyone was involved. In this job, I felt inspired and self-growth, and I saw the possibility of a great future for Ukrainian education.

On the beginning 2022 I got a grant for a 10-month internship at a leading Ukrainian media outlet. In parallel with my work in school, I started working for the Mariupol news site 0629. Even then, I had many topics and ideas for articles. However, the full-scale war in Ukraine forced me to change all my plans. After evacuating from Mariupol, I continued my internship. But in a different format and on the different topics.

The city I wanted to live

The war in eastern Ukraine began in 2014. That year, Russia tried to control Mariupol with heavy equipment along with other cities. But the Ukrainian army soon managed to come back control above the city. We could hear the sounds of artillery shelling outside the city almost every day. And on January 24, 2015, a large tragedy occurred in Mariupol - shelled a residential area of the city by Russian equipment, killing and injuring more than 100 people.

Over time, we heard the sounds of artillery shelling more and more distantly, and in the central areas they were no longer heard at all. And the city gradually began to return for normal life. Back in 2014, many refugees came to Mariupol from territories, which temporarily under control by Russia.

Together with them, we built the city which we wanted to live in. Over the past eight years, Mariupol has been developing, opening for new institutions, businesses, parks and various recreation areas. Mariupol turned into a modern tourist city that was unrecognizable and was at the top of the rankings in various categories. Mariupol hosted large-scale festivals, concerts and various events that attracted people from other regions.

I loved Mariupol very much and I was happy about these changes. But at first it seemed strange to rebuild a city that was in a region of frozen war. The war was still ongoing and could break out with renewed power at any moment. When we left the city, we always passed checkpoints, saw trenches, soldiers and military equipment. This became a commonplace and no longer frightened Mariupol residents. However, recent news reports about the accumulation of Russian military equipment on the borders of Ukraine gave cause for alarm. But few believed that that a full-scale war will soon begin on the territory of Ukraine.

The end of Part1.