

STORIES

PULSE OF PEACE
IN DONBAS 

Ulyana Butsyak

**"People here and there
laugh the same way"**

On October 3, Ukraine celebrated Teacher's Day. CivilM+ spoke with **Ulyana Butsyak**, a teacher from a village in the Lviv region (western Ukraine). Ulyana is the laureate of the national prize for Ukrainian teachers, the Global Teacher Prize Ukraine in nominations "Choice of the heart". Recently Ulyana spent a month working as teacher and volunteer in a school in Shchastya village in the controlled territories of Donbas. The project 'Teachers-volunteers of Luhansk oblast' has been designed and implemented by a charity fund 'East SOS'.

First of all, I am a teacher. Being a teacher is something that immediately affects your daily life, family, and free time. My story of volunteering in Eastern Ukraine is exactly about this, about my priorities in life. Being a teacher is not only a profession, it's the essence of my life. I am sure that teachers teach and live primarily with the heart, and the mind only follows next. **I want to learn new things together with my students, develop freer and more democratic thinking and consciousness.**

Teaching should be based on your own example. I love the words of the Pope: "Personal example is the best sermon." Sometimes you don't even need to explain anything. This motto really helped me while being a volunteer. **I make many**

decisions in life now only taking into account this 1,5 month that I spent in Donbas. And sometimes this time seems to weigh more than previous experience.

What was happening in Donbas was not far away from the rest of Ukraine. Both me and our entire community were stirred up by the death of the teacher's son Taras Matveyev. He died saving two of his buddies. Since 2014, our whole school has been participating in volunteering, weaving camouflage nets, collecting food, it has become commonplace. I always asked: "How can I help?" It was clear that I was not a soldier or a doctor to go to Donbas. My students and I talked about our mission in life - that it is to do our job well, to be needed, to live with dignity and honesty, to be active and, most importantly, not indifferent. That we, too, are involved in everything that happens in the country. **The main thing is not to despair and not get used to the war.** When it comes to loved ones, it is much more difficult than if you only see statistics. This is not history, all this is still happening next to us.

In December 2020, I saw an announcement that Vostok SOS was looking for volunteers to work in Donbas. I wasn't very sure of myself, I thought: "Well, I'll fill out an application, but are we needed there, will it be my turn?". And after a few days I finally sent it. My relatives knew that I wanted to take part in everything, but many people wondered why I would go there, why there, as probably there is something closer? And why am I not afraid? Those questions were asked by different people, both pensioners, and young, but they all did not travel around the country much, they knew about Donbas from TV or the Internet. **And those who return from Donbas are laconic. It's not often that you can hear from them, and no one dares to climb into their souls, ask questions. I want to know, but it's scary to ask.** That's how I went to Shchastya, a city in the Donbas. And two days later, my colleague and I felt as if we had been living there for two years. The people who met us almost immediately became close. Their support, even just a kind word, was very helpful.

My intentions were the best, I wanted there to be a bridge between east and west. Whether it already existed or not, I did not know. And of course, I was scared too. Most of all I was worried about the language. There people speak mostly Russian, but I will sound unnatural in it, I will not be able to express my feelings. I thought to support myself that I was going to school, the people there are normal, and I, too, know how to control myself, and we will find a common language. But **I was worried about how I would cope with everything, emotionally. And how to show that we, those in the west of the country, are not scary. And how, after returning, to explain back home that the inhabitants of the East, Donbas, are the same people who have already gone through a lot and also want to live in a peaceful Ukraine.**

As a teacher, I wanted to participate in the dialogue. **There will certainly be changes, but in order to achieve a common goal, everyone needs to make concessions.** The educational process there is arranged correctly, and the children

are very sincere. But they practically had nowhere to hear the Ukrainian language, this culture around them was not enough. I would say that there is a lack of modern politics. And the school strives for this, and there is a law on the language, but this is

a long process. Important and long-lasting. But we also had something to learn from this school! I was impressed by how boldly and fully they use the autonomy of the educational institution, the law on education. They do not depend on the ministry or local government, they manage the process taking into account their situation and conditions.

I tried to bring to the method of education and communication with children what is valuable to me. We act freely in the Lviv region, but there is still some kind of fear reigning. **A child comes, and here is a lecture, you have to listen to it. Children do not feel that they are participating on an equal footing. They are afraid to argue, to express their position, to make mistakes. For us, this is already natural, we communicate with the children freely, and there they are afraid, because the teacher said something, and how can you object to him?** We, the volunteers, wanted to show that we were really in the mood to listen to them. We didn't come there to inspect. Little by little, every day we moved a little bit, and at the end of our volunteering we noticed that the children became sincere with us, and they feel that we are with them too. And more such bridges are needed so that people and public organizations come there every month. Children will then get used to it and open up completely.

In my school, I teach computer science, and in Shchastya I was a teacher-organizer, I was engaged in extracurricular activities and the educational process. This concerns leadership and psychology a little, but I love social and extracurricular activities and it suited me very much. For example, I have organized holidays, celebrations and cultural events. We celebrated the birthday of Taras Shevchenko and Lesya Ukrainka, and the Day of Heavenly Hundreds were celebrated, conducted quests, and disputes, and a week of good deeds, the children really liked it. Somehow they had a dispute about human rights and respect. And you know, the children prepared themselves in this way, tried to prove that they also have rights. **Both at school and at home, a person is already born with rights. But in that environment, not everyone allows them to use them, there is nowhere to apply the rights and children get used to it.**

School and education in general play a key role in all areas of life. Same goes for peacebuilding. Children will grow up and will carry through life what school and family have taught them. And here we are talking not only about knowledge, but about humanity and education. That would be a big state project, so that teachers would work on an exchange, people from the western regions would come to Donbas for a whole month, and teachers from the east should come here. They would have seen how beautiful we are here, and there are mountains, forests, and Lviv with amazing monuments. And we would go and see their life, and waste heaps and steppes. And **the main thing is that people here and there laugh the same way.** You would not need a TV or a politician to know what kind of people are in Donbas, what they are guided by and how they live. You see, no one will convince me of anything now, you will not impose any stereotypes or someone else's opinion on me. I have my position,

thanks to my acquaintance with people in Shchastya. **If such projects were constantly going on, if different people could take part – it would be important for the state, then a very solid bridge would probably have arisen long ago.**

For a month in Shchastya there were only a few people, maybe three or five, with whom there was no special understanding. We had already left, but they still did not understand why we were coming. But we found a common language with almost everyone. And this is only the beginning of the story - after all, then they came to me, went to the training, and for a week they came to visit us in the Lviv region. **They want to feel free in Ukraine, without fear and panic.** How glad they were! I asked: "Did you feel any pressure? Have you encountered insults that you came from Donbas and speak Russian?" No! All with an open mind, they warmly greeted them.

I think that people and teachers in Russia probably understand and feel everything, but they lack either willpower or confidence to overcome fear. There are also intelligentsia there, and people also saw the world. But fear still has a profound effect. I know how difficult it is to get over my fears. But if you make up your mind, then you are glad that you have overcome the barrier. Any person feels a lot, sometimes he wants to speak out, sometimes to complain. And a person can understand a person. Everyone wants peace, no one in Russia or anywhere else wants to live in conditions of war and instability. **I want to wish that we know how to overcome our fears and barriers separating us.** It's good that all people are different, human unity is in diversity.

For those who want to learn about Donbas, I can recommend a very good book. This is "I will mix your blood with coal" by Alexander Mikhed. He traveled for a long time, communicated with people, and listened to them. Not to analyze or somehow explain it myself, I simply asked passers-by questions and described various everyday situations. We asked in Happiness what is worth reading. During active hostilities, people had no time for that, and now writers, journalists, and public organizations have become more active. As everything calms down, I think we will have many different good books about this. **There is nothing better than real human destinies, and when they are described and published in books, then we will know the real history.**