



Photo by Gillian Francis

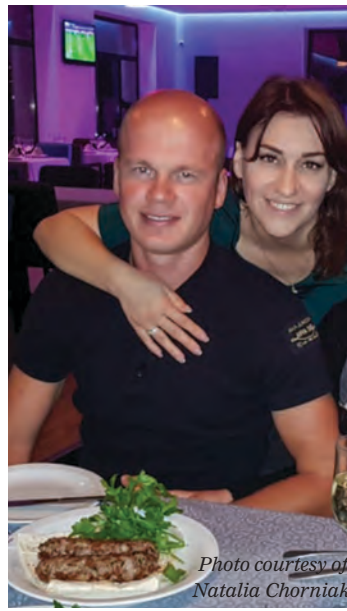


Photo courtesy of Natalia Chorniak



Photo by Gillian Francis

Liliia Vasylenko, left in first photo, immigrated to Pincher Creek from Ukraine six years ago, and Natalia Chorniak two years ago, both after meeting Canadian men. The women talk with their parents back home every day, but worry that if more phone and power lines are destroyed by Russian forces, they might lose contact altogether.

Natalia has a special bond with her younger brother Mykhailo, in middle photo, who has opted to stay behind in Ukraine and fight. Kremenchuk, the city he lives in, is well prepared for a Russian invasion with assembled troops and bomb sirens, but Natalia still spends many sleepless nights worrying about him.

Liliia is passionate about sharing her Ukrainian heritage with her son Alex, who was born in Canada. At right, the two are shown wearing traditional clothing called Vyshyvanka, a national symbol of Ukraine. The colours and patterns in the embroidery on each shirt differ depending on the region the wearer originates from.

## Ukrainian women recount harrowing stories of wartime hardship

*'We are peaceful people. We don't want this war. We don't want blood. We don't want to hurt no one.'*

By Gillian Francis  
Local Journalism  
Initiative Reporter

It's been over a month since Liliia Vasylenko has heard any news of her older brother, who's in Ukraine fighting against Russian forces.

Originally from Ukraine herself, Vasylenko immigrated to Pincher Creek six years ago. She has been anxiously following the war from afar, checking in with family and friends living overseas regularly to make sure they're safe.

But her brother Vitalii is the one person she hasn't been able to keep in contact with, as per military rules.

The last time she spoke with him was Feb. 24, the day Russia invaded, and Vasylenko remembers it like it was yesterday.

"He said, 'Sorry. I love you and I can't speak anymore, but you don't have to worry. Everything is fine,'" she recalls.

"And I just say, 'OK, if something happens, I promise I'll take care of your son all my life.'"

She has no idea where he is, what he's been doing each day or whether he's safe, she adds.

"I just can pray for him," she says.

Vasylenko grew up in Poltava, a city about two hours southeast of Kharkiv and three hours from the Russian border.

She comes from a military family.

Five of her cousins are also in the army, in addition to her brother.

Her family had a scare a few weeks ago when one cousin went missing for four days, but he was eventually confirmed safe. His phone had been destroyed in action, she explains, and it took him time to find a replacement.

"It's very scary," she says. "It feels like a very bad movie or bad dream and you wake up and nothing happens because it's hard to believe it can be in the 21st century like that."

Growing up, Russians and Ukrainians had good relations in Poltava, she says. Vasylenko's second language is Russian and she has friends who relocated to St. Petersburg and Moscow for work. She spent a decade working for a Russian insurance company.

"We never had these fights with Russia," she says. "Ukrainian people, I don't see in them that they hate Russian people, even after what they do to our country."

It's a political issue rather than a personal one, and decades of escalating government tension has finally reached a boiling point.

Kharkiv was one of the first cities to fall to Russian forces. The vibrant and historic city, which once hummed with life, has sustained so many bombings that it has been reduced to little more than a pile of

rubble.

Vasylenko paints a bleak picture: families huddled together in dark homes, turning off the lights so as not to attract attention from bombers; streets devoid of schools, daycares and hospitals; teenagers concocting Molotov cocktails to throw at tanks; ordinary citizens who never believed they would fight a day in their life, now ready to lay down their lives for their country, armed with nothing but sticks.

She worries that Poltava could be next. Her hometown has received a significant amount of refugees heading inland from Kharkiv, fleeing Russian forces.

Her parents, Alexander and Natalia, both teachers, are helping out as much as they can, gathering food for displaced people. Her mother is helping set up a makeshift school.

The community has come together to offer clothes, medicine, blankets, diapers and baby formula to the incoming crowds of people.

Vasylenko tried to convince her parents to come to Canada where they would be safer, but they did not want to leave their home country.

"They say, 'No, it's our land. Don't cry, because we're fighting for our grandkids, for their future.'"

"They're not crying," she adds. "They're strong and positive and they can make a joke."

Another Pincher Creek resident, Natalia Chorniak, says her mother has chosen to stay behind as well.

Chorniak and her son Valerii immigrated to Pincher Creek two years ago, after she met her husband, Earl Duffield, who is from the area.

Chorniak is from Ternopil, a city in Western Ukraine, roughly 2½ hours southeast of Lviv, but her mother, Galina, and younger brother Mykhailo live in Kremenchuk.

Kremenchuk has not fallen to the Russians and, being in the same region as Poltava, it's also beginning to receive a large influx of refugees from Kharkiv. The city has military forces ready to fight and has sirens in place to warn residents of bombs, but Chorniak says she's still worried.

Like Vasylenko, Chorniak has been trying to convince her mother to leave. She has an older brother in Poland her mother could live with, but her mother has remained intent on staying.

Still, she's hopeful she'll change her mind. Russian troops are willing to kill anyone, she says, infants and the elderly included.

For now, Chorniak's mother will remain with her brother Mykhailo, who has agreed to stay and fight. He's currently helping gather

See UKRAINIAN WOMEN,  
continued on page 4



Vasylenko began taking her son, Alex, to Ukraine each summer to visit her family when he was a baby. Here, Vasylenko's family friend Evgenia holds him in her arms. Vasylenko and her husband, Benn Ingram, stand beside them on the left, and her cousin Vlad stands with wife Natalia and their son Max, on the right. Vasylenko says she's worried that if Russia were to win, she might not be able to return to visit them again, as it would be too dangerous.

Photo courtesy of Liliia Vasylenko



A small group of locals made their way through Pincher Creek last Thursday dressed in blue and yellow, waving a Ukrainian flag. From left, Dennis Madsen, Alice Wagenaar, Mike Swystun with baby Theo and Jen Carpenter. Swystun feels a connection to the cause. His great-grandfather immigrated to Canada from Ukraine over a century ago.

Photo by Gillian Francis

# My Little CORNER



Live • Laugh • Love

An editorial column  
by Shannon Peace



## Don't miss your chance to CURL WITH THE PROS!

How would you like to hit the ice with Team Koe lead Ben Hebert from Chestermere or second, and vice-skip, John Morris from Canmore?

### BID NOW

For your chance to play!

The winning bidder's team of three will choose their professional skip, rock colour and who throws first.

The second-highest bidder's team of three and professional skip will take on team one.

**Game time is 2 p.m. on Saturday, April 2 at the Pincher Creek Curling Club**

**Bids are accepted in \$50 increments on the Pincher Creek Curling Club Facebook page Bidding closes at noon on Thursday, March 31**

All proceeds go toward the fund for the new curling club building

**Questions? Call Bryan at 403-627-8266**

Thanks to the Canadian Angus Association, which sponsors Team Koe, for their help in making this happen.

## BA2 subvariant now in the driver's seat

The BA2 subvariant of Omicron is now the dominant strain of Covid in Alberta, with about 60 per cent prevalence in recent PCR test screenings.

Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health, said last week that we can expect to see transmission trend upward in the coming weeks as this variant is more transmissible.

"So far there is no evidence of it causing more severe disease than BA1," she said.

Hinshaw advised those at risk of severe outcomes to revisit their precautionary measures and that booster doses are particularly important for those aged 65 and older.

She said the most important data to watch now is the positivity rate. Alberta's average positivity rate for the week ending March 22 was 22 per cent, while the south zone average was 31 per cent.

Hospitalizations and ICU admissions in the province both decreased in that time period, while hospitalizations went up in the south and ICU numbers went down.

In those seven days, the Pincher Creek area reported the highest rate of new cases per capita in the south zone.

Active case numbers are no longer being publicly reported by Alberta Health.

For the March 30 complete update, please visit our website at [www.shootinthebreeze.ca](http://www.shootinthebreeze.ca).

## UKRAINIAN WOMEN,

continued from page 3

supplies for evacuees.

Chorniak still remembers when she first heard news of war. It was Feb. 24 around 8 in the evening. She says she was shocked and didn't want to believe it was happening.

Since then, she's seen old friends who left the country return to join the military and fight. One of them, not yet 40, has already died in battle, she says.

Many of Vasylenko's friends have fled inland to Western Ukraine near the Slovakian border. Her friend Mariana hid with her two daughters in the root cellar of their house in Kyiv for three days before leaving the city altogether. Another friend had a young daughter who stopped speaking due to the trauma inflicted by the bombings.

Chorniak and Vasylenko first crossed paths at an English language class in Pincher Creek and the two have been helping each other navigate the transition to Canadian life.

Chorniak says moving to Canada was a huge culture shock for her. Initially, she didn't want to stay, but she is gradually beginning to adjust. She has found work as a baker and is learning to drive. Her son has found seasonal employment in the roofing industry.

Vasylenko is expecting a second child with her husband, Benn Ingram, and their four-year-old son Alex has spent his whole life in Canada.

Both women have placed their faith in President Volodymyr Zelensky. They are confident in his leadership and admire his decision to remain with his people in Ukraine rather than abandoning ship.

"I remember when he said he would like to be president. I was thinking, first time, it was a joke. I didn't think it was true," says Vasylenko.

With Zelensky providing a voice of reason amid the chaos and with NATO backing Ukrainian fighters, the two women hope for a swift victory. For now they have no choice but to watch the war unfold from afar and lend their support to their cultural community within Alberta.

They're not alone.

On the afternoon of March 24, a small group of friends made their way down Hewetson Avenue and on to Main Street in Pincher Creek, waving a Ukrainian flag, showing solidarity.

Dennis Madsen, one of the participants, says he hoped their presence would help raise awareness of the situation and prompt people to donate to the cause.

"They're just suffering under an illegal invasion by a criminal dictator and it's just a tragedy, forced to flee their homes," he says. "It's not something I think anyone thought they would see anymore in modern times in Europe."

Madsen has a soft spot for Ukrainians. His hometown of Redwater, just north of Edmonton, has a large population of Ukrainian immigrants. Growing up, he had Ukrainian neighbours, made friends with Ukrainians at school and ate a lot of

delicious Ukrainian food. Ukrainian is even the town's official second language, he says.

Mike Swystun, another participant, has Ukrainian heritage. Mike was named after his great-grandfather, who immigrated to Canada from Ukraine in the early 20th century, originally settling in southern Saskatchewan.

Growing up, his family maintained the connection to the culture. His sister did Ukrainian dance and he has fond memories of eating Ukrainian food for Christmas dinner.

But participating in the walk, he says, was less about connecting with his culture and more about just being a good person.

Alice Wagenaar, who joined the men, says the events unfolding in Ukraine remind her of what happened 80 years ago.

"It's incredibly sad and criminal," she says. "My mother lived in Rotterdam during the bombing by the Nazis, so there's some real parallels here."

Vasylenko and Chorniak also view Russian president Vladimir Putin's actions as criminal, saying he has thrust two countries into a war that neither wanted.

"It's not true what Putin says. It's absolutely lie," says Vasylenko. "We don't need his help. For what? We were happy. People absolutely enjoyed their life in their country."

"We are peaceful people," she adds. "We don't want this war. We don't want blood. We don't want to hurt no one."



A positive voice in southwestern Alberta

Winner of multiple awards from 2016 to 2021  
Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association

Small Business Award of Excellence winner 2013 & 2020

### EDITORIAL

Share your stories and news ideas! Submissions, letters to the editor (limit of 500 words please) and photos are always welcome.

403-627-9510 403-904-2227

[news@shootinthebreeze.ca](mailto:news@shootinthebreeze.ca)

[civic@shootinthebreeze.ca](mailto:civic@shootinthebreeze.ca)

Editorial deadline is Friday at noon

Shannon Peace, Publisher

Cary Robison – Editing, Accounting, Tech

Brenda Shenton – Admin. Assistance, Photography, Distribution Management

Jaiden Panchyshyn – Design, Social Media Management

Jenaya Launstein – Community Reporting, Photography, Distribution

Gillian Francis – Civic Reporting, Local Journalism Initiative

Sean Oliver and Mia Parker – Community Reporting

Farley Wuth, Joyce Sasse, Mysti Ayers, Darcy Makin – Contributing Writers

Gary Andrews and Last Stop Delivery – Distribution

Canada Shootin' the Breeze is a recipient of the Government of Canada Local Journalism Initiative grant 2021 and Aid to Publishers grant 2021

### ADVERTISING

Display ads, obituaries, personal ads, business directory ads, notices, classifieds, national ads, themed special sections, flyers

[ads@shootinthebreeze.ca](mailto:ads@shootinthebreeze.ca)

403-904-2227 403-627-8829

Advertising deadline is

Friday at 2 p.m.

Shootin' the Breeze is published every Wednesday — Serving Pincher Creek, Crowsnest Pass and Piikani Nation — Individual copies \$1.25 Plus GST

Local Subscriptions \$45/year Plus GST  
Post office boxes in Town and MD of Pincher Creek & Crowsnest Pass

Regional Subscriptions \$50/year Plus GST  
Rural post office boxes only in Alberta, BC and Saskatchewan

National Subscriptions \$60/year Plus GST  
Urban addresses in all provinces and rural outside AB, BC, SK

Online Subscriptions \$35/year Plus GST  
Everywhere, around the world

PROUD TO BE LOCALLY OWNED AND LOCALLY STAFFED!

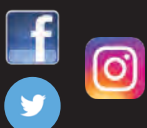
Office hours 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday (Currently closed to walk-in traffic)

697A Main Street | Box 811, Pincher Creek, AB T0K 1W0

[www.shootinthebreeze.ca](http://www.shootinthebreeze.ca)

403-904-2227

[publisher@shootinthebreeze.ca](mailto:publisher@shootinthebreeze.ca)



COPYRIGHT NOTICE:  
No content (news, photos or advertising) may be reproduced without the express written consent of the publisher.