



GLOBAL DISASTER RELIEF TEAM STORIES

Alice Feldman: “The only difference between me and them is that I’m wearing a yellow vest.”

In the first two weeks of Russia’s full-scale invasion on Ukraine, Alice Feldman could barely get through the day. She was scrolling her Facebook feed, when she stumbled on a post from a long-time family friend Alex Smirnov: he was packing up bags with medical supplies and heading to Poland with a few friends to help with disaster relief efforts at the Polish border. Moreover, he had just filed the paperwork for a new non-profit that would help with medical needs, extractions, and humanitarian needs for those affected by the war.

Feldman knew immediately she wanted to get involved. She grew up in a Russian-speaking Jewish family—her father was from Kyiv and her mother from Uzbekistan. Feldman had known Smirnov since she was five years old: for years their families had organized post-soviet diaspora music festivals on the NorthEast coast. Smirnov’s daughter was Feldman’s best friend. “We had grown up playing at these festivals since we were kids,” she recalls. Now, Feldman and Smirnov along with their family and friends, have been running JetLAG together, a music festival in upstate New York that brings together over 2500 people every year.

After learning more about the new project, Feldman took a leave of absence from work at a Boston-based music booking agency, and started dedicating 12-16 hours a day to help out. At the time, Global Disaster Relief Team, the non-profit Smirnov had started, consisted of a group of five Russian and Ukrainian speaking medics and the team needed to recruit more medical professionals to deploy to the transit center in shifts. Feldman immersed herself in the work—initially as the program and operations manager, coordinating logistics and ensuring that the non-profit was running smoothly. Along with another volunteer, her friend Mishka, they found volunteers who helped create a database for keeping track of and screening potential medics which allowed them to assemble a pipeline of medics who could be deployed in shifts to staff the clinic in Poland.

To find volunteers to help with communications, tech support, insurance, legal arrangements, Feldman sent a message to the JetLAGcommunity chat. “We were able to do that because I reached out

to our festival community of volunteers,” she said. Within weeks, GDRT received over 300 applications from eager volunteers from all over the world. Since March, the organization has deployed 70 medical professionals – most Russian and Ukrainian speaking nurses, doctors, and paramedics to help with the relief effort. “You have to work together, think together on your feet and accept that the rules of regular life are suspended,” she said.

“A Constant Whirlpool”

In late April, Feldman landed at the Warsaw airport around 3 a.m. She immediately went to a large transit-site located in a large retail center Tesco in Przemyśl, the first receiving point for those fleeing Ukraine who had crossed the border at Medyka on the Polish border.

The following twenty hours, she spent at the shelter, helping nearly 1600 Ukrainian refugees, who were at the shelter at the time. “I was mostly numb to my emotions because I needed to help people,” she recalled. She’d go home—a house where she was staying with other GDRT team members—to get a few hours of sleep, but would rush back to work. “You feel guilty if you go home, you need to constantly be there because the need is so strong,” Feldman said.

Once she’d put on her yellow volunteer vest, questions and requests for help began pouring in. Whether it was finding a suitcase, getting a ride to Warsaw, transporting a pet, or even just getting a drink of water – she jumped in to meet any need that emerged. “The moment you step in you’re in a constant whirlpool, helping one person after another, sorting out their very particular needs,” she said.

But amid all the chaos and dysfunction of the transit center, Feldman felt strangely in her element. “I’m somebody who thrives and works in high stress environments,” she said, citing her experience running festivals and other large events. The festivals where she works sometimes don’t have cell phone service, or reception – it’s a high pressure environment, she says. “You have to be able to answer everything that comes up calmly and strategically,” she said. In a way, running logistics and problem-solving as part of the GDRT has been therapeutic. “When I’m alone, emotions come crashing in,” she said.

“I needed to do right by my grandma”

Feldman has felt a closeness and a kind of kinship with the Ukrainian people that arrived at the center. “It’s just people helping other people – literally the only difference between me and them is that I’m wearing a yellow vest,” she said. Sometimes, the strangers she encountered felt like an extension of her

family. “The old ladies and the old men that looked like my grandparents and sounded like them – those hit my heart really hard,” she says. Feldman’s father passed away six years ago, and she’s since grown closer to his mother—her grandmother—who is also from Ukraine. “It was partly why I wanted to do this – I needed to do it right by my grandma,” she said. In the face of one man from Zaporizhia, she could make out the features of her grandfather. “I keep seeing his face, and every second of our interaction, even though it was only six minutes of it,” she says of the Ukrainian refugee. And then there were the faces of children and their mothers, shellshocked from the trauma of fleeing their home. “The amount of suffering is so hard to even comprehend,” she said.

The other day, Feldman was at the train station, and she saw a woman yelling in despair: *Chto za bred zobachiy, kak tak mozhna s lud'mi?* – “What is this bullshit, how can you treat people like that?” It was a cry of despair and frustration over being shuffled from place to place amid trauma, logistical complications and absence of clear answers.

To bring some relief to the fleeing families, Feldman and her friend Mishka have tried to go beyond the practical needs. On their table are colorful toys that they give out to the kids. They’ve given the women essential oils in perfume rollerballs. “Those are things that have no purpose aside from being nice,” she said. “And that’s what people don’t have at all.” These gifts have brought tears to women and children, reminding them that even in the worst of circumstances they deserve small pleasures they can enjoy.

“I’m in it for good”

Back in the U.S., she’s immersed in preparations for JetLAG. This year’s festival will feature Ukrainian-led bands from North America and aims to raise \$50,000 for relief efforts in Ukraine.

But Feldman continues to support GDRT’s operations in Ukraine. The group has just received permission from the Ukrainian Ministry of Health Services to allow their doctors to practice medicine in Ukraine, and the group is also working on setting up a mobile clinic. As the needs on the ground evolve, Feldman has no plans of stepping away. The people will continue to need social services. Ukraine will need to be rebuilt. Feldman hopes that through capital fundraising, GDRT can become her full-time job.

“It’s not even a question, I’m in it for good,” she says. “When you’re here, it feels like there’s nothing else in the entire world that would make sense to be doing right now.”

