

**CATHY** Most Minnesota students went back to school today. Their moms and dads making them pose for an official back  
**WURZER:** to school snapshot. Among the students, a group of young Ukrainians who recently arrived to Minnesota for a chance to pursue their education in peace. MPR reporter Nina Moini spoke with the three students and the woman who's looking after them while they're here in Minnesota. Anita is on the line. Hey, welcome back.

**NINA MOINI:** It's great to be here, Cathy. Thank you.

**CATHY** What Drew you to this story?

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Well, I've been looking for ways to continue covering this growing new Ukrainian community here in Minnesota, understanding of course that this war is ongoing. And this woman, Ana Prisacari, the guardian here contacted us. She's got a blog that the kids are keeping. And she wanted to share that blog and we really wanted to explore this story more. And just the different ways that people can and are helping.

Obviously Ana is making a huge commitment here as you'll learn in this story. That's not for everyone, depending on what's going on in your life. But the hope was that it could really maybe inspire more awareness around the different ways that people are still able to continue on helping. We know that that's a question many people have asked themselves as this has been going on.

**CATHY** I remember we spoke to a woman early in the conflict who previously worked in the Peace Corps in Ukraine. And  
**WURZER:** she was working to help young adults fleeing Ukraine set up lives as refugees. So I'm wondering, do they consider themselves refugees?

**NINA MOINI:** I think in many ways Cathy, maybe not legal status but in the way that they were displaced had to leave their homes because of war. Although they always did want to come to the United States, it was a dream of theirs. One of the students, Irina, the youngest, her school was destroyed. So these are common experiences to refugees. Another one of the students, her home was destroyed. So they moved to a different area of the country that maybe the conflict was less hot at that point.

So they've had these experiences and they left their homes and they're adjusting to somewhere new. But you know what Cathy? They do hope that they'll be able to at least have the option to go back, which we know, of course, is something many refugees can't do right.

**CATHY** I think we should listen to your story.

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** OK.

**CATHY** All right. Here we go.

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Sitting side by side on a couch, three teens wearing traditional embroidered Ukrainian clothing hold hands tightly. A bit nervous to be interviewed.

[NERVOUS GIGGLING]

**SUBJECT:** Exciting emotions. There's been so many emotions.

**NINA MOINI:** They just met a couple of weeks ago, thanks to Ana Prizikari's desire to help those experiencing war hold on to their education.

**SUBJECT 2:** I want to make sure they feel safe here, because every day was unknown day for them.

**NINA MOINI:** Some of Prizikari's own family is from Ukraine. She moved to the United States at 15 years old, eventually earning her PhD and working for Amazon.

**SUBJECT 2:** So I really know what the value of education is. I came not speaking any English.

**NINA MOINI:** Prizikari brought the teens to Minnesota using the federal program Uniting for Ukraine, which required her to support them when they arrived. Their families agreed to let Prizikari become legal guardian for the year for 15-year-olds Zlata Vileha and Dima Nizhnik, and 14-year-old Irina Kononenko.

The two oldest are ninth and 10th graders attending the International School of Minnesota in Eden Prairie on scholarships. And the youngest, Irina, will go to Minnetonka Middle School West for eighth grade when school starts next week. She's excited.

**SUBJECT 3:** I speak with my friend and speak with American people.

**NINA MOINI:** The older kids say they've already felt a warm welcome at school, where Dima says they're learning in English. He calls it a dream come true.

**SUBJECT 4:** I understand that it's very important and big opportunity.

**NINA MOINI:** For all three students, including Zlata, it's also an opportunity to focus on schoolwork when that's become almost impossible in Ukraine.

**SUBJECT 5:** Just listen to how rockets and bombs just fly under your head. And it's really scary. When I just flew to America, I have nightmares.

**NINA MOINI:** Dima remembers schools being destroyed, families fleeing their homes, and the noise.

**SUBJECT 4:** We have air alarms every day the whole day. It was very hard.

**NINA MOINI:** The students stay in regular contact with their families in Ukraine. And Prizikari says she's working to get mental health resources for them as they settle into life in Minnesota. They've already made some happy very Minnesotan memories, like catching a Twins game and visiting a friend's cabin. She adds they might even check out the state fair.

**SUBJECT 2:** You tried a lot of different foods here here.

**SUBJECT 3:** Yeah, I like bacon. We don't have bacon.

**NINA MOINI:** It's unclear we are how many Ukrainian refugees from the war are in the state. The Minnesota Department of Human Services says the federal government doesn't alert states when Ukrainians arrive. However, the state estimates at least 500 Ukrainians have arrived here since March and sought state resources.

Officials with DHS say there are more than 1,000 entry applications filed with the same program which brought the three Ukrainian teens to Minnesota. Prizikari says whether the students return to Ukraine after the school year depends largely on the situation there at that point.

**SUBJECT 2:** School disruptions, most, if not all, parents already know what it means with COVID. But war adds a very different angle.

**NINA MOINI:** But home is never far from mind. The students are doing their own part to give back while they're in Minnesota, planning a fundraiser to send water filters back home. And before the interview ends, Irina says it was important for them to wear their Ukrainian clothing for the interview.

**SUBJECT 3:** [SPEAKING UKRAINIAN] It is wear for holidays.

**NINA MOINI:** Zlata adds.

**SUBJECT 5:** It's very important for us. And the pictures that we send for our family, we just support that we stand with Ukraine. We're always with them.

**SUBJECT:** Nina Moini, MPR News.

**CATHY** Good story there, Nina. Say, where are their parents?

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** So their parents are back home, Cathy, in Ukraine. They're able to be in contact with them. And Ana, their guardian there, spent a while sort of making connections to try to find students whose families would be willing to send their children over here.

And she says a lot of people actually said, no, just because there is so much uncertainty right now that they didn't want to send their kids away even amid a war. People and families still wanted to be together. So these three students are being extremely brave and dealing with so much.

Their parents had to take them to the airport in Poland, where Ana had to go pick them up and bring them back since they're minors. So she's their legal guardian, but they are in touch regularly through technology. And again, they're just very excited to be here, although, as you heard, they are dealing with some struggles, in addition to what maybe the kids around them are already dealing with after two years of COVID.

**CATHY** Yeah. And they talked about the violence, the air raid sirens going off. I mean, my goodness, what about the trauma they've been through?

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** They have been through a lot. And they're in the thick of all of these feelings and emotions right now. But it's been really uplifting for them to be here. They're so excited to work on their English.

And Ana says it's actually been pretty challenging to try to locate resources for students who are experiencing war here in Minnesota, to find resources like that. But they have a really great supportive community. And I think they're going to be able to do that and make a lot of happy memories here.

**CATHY** There's a robust Ukrainian community, of course, especially in Minneapolis. Are they connecting with those individuals?

**WURZER:**

**NINA MOINI:** They are. Ana is going to have sort of a welcome party for them later on this month. And the two older students at the international school, that's actually a boarding school. So they're going to be spending lots of time there and hopefully making a lot of American friends too. They're very excited about that.

**CATHY WURZER:** So I would love to check in with them in a few months to see how they feel about school in the US. Are you going to do that?

**NINA MOINI:** Definitely. Definitely. I think they're really open to that. And they do have a blog that they're keeping that, again, we link to on our story on the website that people can go and check that out. And you know what was really neat, Cathy, was that they were so excited to use their English. And what they're struggling with as they're here, you could see that they speak really good English, but they're struggling with the Minnesotan accents.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh yeah.

**NINA MOINI:** So I think that it's going to take a little bit of time. But I think that they're at that age where hopefully they'll soak up a bunch and it'll be exciting to see how that progresses throughout the school year.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, my goodness. Yeah. And did they start school today like so many other people?

**NINA MOINI:** So yeah, I talked to them last week. So the two oldest had started school. But Irina does start school today. So happy first day of school to her and to everybody else-- such an exciting time.

**CATHY WURZER:** And we have about 40 seconds left. For folks who want to know more about the program that brought the students to Minnesota, tell us about that.

**NINA MOINI:** So Uniting for Ukraine. So this is a program that the Biden administration set up in the spring as the invasion was really escalating in Ukraine. It allows 100,000 Ukrainians to come to the US with this specific immigration status, Cathy.

And the deal here is that someone has to say I will support you financially when you come here. So that's a very privileged thing to be able to do. And DHS told me that there have been around 1,300 of those applications from Minnesotans. But again, of course, it's unclear if that's really going to pan out for everybody.

It's hard to know how many people are here. But the community is growing and the need for help, in a lot of different ways, is still there.

**CATHY WURZER:** All right. Again, good report, Nina. Thanks so much.

**NINA MOINI:** Thanks for having me.

**CATHY WURZER:** That's MPR Reporter Nina Moini. To read more on the story or see photos of everybody involved, go to our website, [MPRNews.org](https://www.mprnews.org).