Iryna Lazuta

Many of us may not know much about the Ukrainian School hosted at St. Stephen's Parish. Held every Monday evening, the school helps keep Ukrainian culture alive in the hearts and minds of those who cherish their heritage. This article highlights Iryna Lazuta, whose dedication, along with the support of many others, helps make that work possible.

When arriving in Canada as a newcomer from Ukraine, Iryna expected a distant and unfamiliar world. Instead, she found sincere, open people whom she felt spiritually close to, both in the Canadian parish community and among other newly arrived Ukrainians. The Ukrainian School had existed before she became involved, but it had been inactive for some time. One day, Netty Kost asked if she would help restore its activities. At that point, Iryna said***, "I never imagined how important the school would become in my life."*** Together with other caring people, she reopened it. Iryna took responsibility for the organizational work, including preparing the program, finding teachers, enrolling students, and managing the daily tasks the school needed to function. She now coordinates the school by staying in close contact with parents, students, and teachers and helping organize classes, schedules, holidays, and events. She also teaches children financial literacy***. "Working with them brings me joy as I watch them grow in confidence, explore Ukrainian culture and history, and learn to trust in their own abilities."***

This year, the students, which included children from the Life Capital program (some of whom attend our Ukrainian school), participated in a financial literacy tournament in Ottawa. The children prepared very diligently, and their hard work brought excellent results. The team won five prize places, including first and third overall. Three students received laptops, and the entire team earned the right to represent Canada at the international tournament in Geneva, which will take place as part of the International Forum. We are very happy for the children, because this is a great honor and a wonderful opportunity for them.

Trained as a teacher, Iryna later gained business experience through life circumstances and a desire to grow**. "Learning has always been central to my life: I teach others while continuing to learn myself. I value personal development and look for ways to move forward, even in difficult circumstances."** She also enjoys many hobbies, especially cooking, which was a source of income while living in Ukraine.

"My family is my greatest treasure, they are my meaning, my support, my strength, and my wings!" Family values are one of the core principles of Iryna's life. She has been married to Volodymyr for 31 years and have two children. ***"He is truly my other half."*** Volodymyr trained as a teacher, but life led him to work with his hands for many years and Iryna says ***"he truly has golden hands, and that is more than a figure of speech."*** He can make nearly anything he sets his mind to, and his work is valued both in Ukraine and here in Canada. Their eldest son, Viktor, lives in Calgary with his wife, Vasylinka. They are both chefs, and Viktor also creates artistic tattoos in his free time. Their youngest son, Oles, lives with them. When the school needed a Ukrainian history teacher, he stepped in to help. He now teaches the subject and has a gift for making history so engaging that children listen with great enthusiasm. Both of their sons have sung since childhood, and music has always been an important part of their family.

The Lazuta's no longer have any immediate family in Ukraine - only cousins and friends. Even so, Iryna's heart lives in two countries. Canada has become a new and good home for the family, and Ukraine will forever remain the place where their roots are. She cares deeply about the fate of Ukraine. Her goal is to preserve and pass on Ukrainian identity: language, culture, history, and values***. "I sincerely pray to God for peace in the world and for the transformation of human hearts. I hope that my grandchildren will live in a world that reflects the best of God's creation. If I were to say what truly matters to me, the answer is very simple: to remain a decent human being in any life circumstances. Life taught me not to wait for someone else to make the first move. If I see that I can be helpful, I simply try to help. If that brings benefit to children, the school, or the community, then everything was worthwhile."***

Editor's Note: Iryna Lazuta (on Parish Council as director of Cultural Education) with my encouragement, shared her story with me so we could learn more about the wonderful activities taking place in our parish and the people who make them possible. Special thanks to Iryna for this inspiring contribution.

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