

On a Mission to Ease Suffering in Ukraine

Like many Americans, Oded “Ody” Norkin was stunned by the Russian invasion of Ukraine last February. While the world watched it unfold, he wondered how to help.

As Vice President of Michigan Flyer, LLC, and owner of Skybird Okemos Travel, Ody has been helping to transport folks from point A to point B nearly 40 years. Long before this, having been born in Israel, he'd served in the Israeli Army, where he met Rachel, his wife and business partner, since 1976. He also worked for the Michigan Department of Management & Budget for many years.

While Ody had never set foot in Ukraine, he had ancestral ties there. His paternal grandparents, Sara and Moshe Norkin, were gunned down in the Odessa (Ukraine) Massacre of 1941.

“As the Russians advanced on Odessa, I figured I could help people get out, particularly the elderly. I could rent a van to help with evacuations,” he says.

First Trip in March 2022

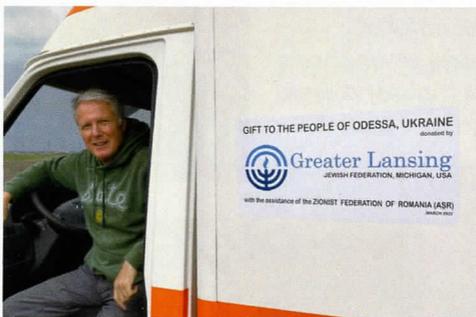
Rabbi Hendel Weingarten at the Chabad House of Greater Lansing put him in touch with Rabbi Avraham Wolff of Odessa, who said there was a great need for ambulances to transport the elderly and infirm.

So, last March, Ody withdrew cash from his bank account to buy an ambulance and flew to Bucharest, Romania. There, he met a rabbi who introduced him to Marco Katz, head of the Romanian Zionist Association, to help find a suitable vehicle.

Meanwhile, Ody also helped deliver survival equipment to people in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, transport refugees to Bucharest, and get other refugees onto flights to Israel.

Once he and Marco acquired an ambulance through a local doctor, they faced a potential bureaucratic nightmare in obtaining the license and title. Ody turned to Lansing attorney David Mittleman, who contacted U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin, who called Romania's ambassador to the U.S. Together, they quickly got it done.

Next, he and Marco transformed the ambulance into a trauma-level vehicle, filling it with emergency equipment,



Ody Norkin with the ambulance bound for Odessa.

including monitors and defibrillators, before taking it on a long drive past 21 roadblocks to Odessa.

Once Was Not Enough

Back home, others were working to support the mission. Rabbi Weingarten told Amy Shapiro about it, and as head of the Greater Lansing Jewish Federation, she had a website created for anyone who cared to donate.

As word of the humanitarian mission spread, hundreds of individuals from the Greater Lansing region and overseas soon made contributions.

So, in April, Ody bought a second ambulance — this one destined for the city of Dnipro in eastern Ukraine — then flew to Romania and met

up with Marco Katz. They again overcame bureaucratic obstacles, outfitted the vehicle for trauma service, and delivered it.

“These are not Jewish ambulances,” Ody notes. “They were donated to help those of any faith or no faith at all. They are there to help our fellow human beings.”

“I am absolutely in awe of the Ukrainian people — all these women facing up to agonizing decisions about leaving their husbands behind to flee the country with their children, and all the men from age 18 to 60 who took up arms without question when they were told stay and fight.”

On top of the roughly \$35,000 collected so far, local Rotary clubs, health systems, and business and community leaders have since committed to donating thousands more in cash and medical supplies. “This is all incredibly heartwarming,” he says.

Accordingly, he recently bought a third ambulance through an online auction in Italy. As of this writing, Ody was planning another trip to Romania in late June to prep the emergency vehicle for trauma service, possibly in the heavily bombarded city of Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Rejecting praise for his role in these humanitarian missions, Ody says, “There are many amazing people involved who I'm profoundly grateful to have met and worked with along with way. I'm just the delivery guy.”

If you'd like to make a donation to support Ody's mission, please visit www.jewishfederationlansing.org. ●