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Local company works to help Ukrainian orphans

By Diane Claytor



Sydney Paige Foundation board member Noah Sims (center), celebrity chef Rachel Ray and Ukrainian children in Kyiv. Photo provided

When Sharon Girdlestone left the comfort of her Orinda home last April, heading to Poland to help feed Ukrainians fleeing their war-torn country, she didn't know what to expect. The war had started, she had sold her business and she simply felt the need to help in any way she could. A former chef herself, Girdlestone connected with the World Central Kitchen (WCK), an organization known for providing meals in response to humanitarian, climate and community crises. Founded by Chef Jose Andres, WCK works on the premise that "food relief is not just a meal . it's a plate of hope, telling you in your darkest hour that someone . cares about you."

While there, Girdlestone prepared food with approximately 35 others from all over the world, feeding between 2,000-3,000 people per day. She worked in Przemysl on the Polish-Ukrainian border, spending time in both a commercial kitchen and a supermarket converted to a humanitarian center, cleaning, washing and disinfecting laundry, and helping feed people who had been forced to leave their homes. She met wonderful, generous people. She heard heartbreaking stories and saw far too much sadness and devastation.

But, she reports, "It was so worth it. Other than having my children, it's the best thing I've ever done."

Upon her return home, Girdlestone began her new job as director of development at Sydney Paige, a local nonprofit that provides high-quality backpacks, books and school supplies to kids in need. Courtney Brockmeyer, Moraga resident and Sydney Paige's president and founder, refers to Girdlestone as her unicorn. "She gets things done that I would never have even thought of or had any idea how to execute," Brockmeyer reports.

Two of the incredible, resourceful people Girdlestone connected with during her time in Poland - who both now serve on the Sydney Paige Foundation board - are Noah Sims, social media influencer and former Master Chef TV contestant, and Tim Cronin, a retired business executive whose expertise includes product development, operations, sales and marketing. "Both of these men," Girdlestone states, "have amazing hearts and traveled to Ukraine just because they wanted to help." Sims is still helping out, currently spending time in Lviv.

Reports indicate that when Russia first invaded Ukraine, there were about 100,000 Ukrainian children living in orphanages and boarding facilities. Today, that number has grown to more than 150,000 displaced children, many of whom have lost their parents in the war.

For 10 years, Sydney Paige Foundation has been helping homeless, low income and foster children, providing them school supply-filled backpacks. When she first started her company, Brockmeyer said that one of her missions was to enrich the lives of children in need, and, in fact, over 200,000 kids have been helped and one million backpacks and school supplies have been donated. Brockmeyer instantly knew that she and Girdlestone, who, while owning her own catering company, often fed homeless families, would make a perfect team, both sharing a passion for helping others.

With the impact of Girdlestone's trip still weighing heavily on her mind, and with the help of board members Sims and Cronin, Sydney Paige's latest donation campaign has a goal of providing at least 2,000 backpacks filled with highly requested school supplies and other essential items to Ukrainian orphans.

"The stories Sharon, Noah and Tim have shared are horrific," Brockmeyer says. "We all kept wondering what we could do." Acknowledging that these children obviously, first and foremost, need clothing, food and shelter, Brockmeyer reports that she always said Sydney Paige would go in as second responders, "getting these kids the supplies they need once they are able to return to school." Working with two aid groups, Sydney Paige has been told that kids absolutely need school supplies, "anything to give them some sort of normalcy," Brockmeyer states.

"We're small but we're trying to do what we have the power to do," Brockmeyer continues. They are asking for donations to fund the backpacks and school supplies. It costs approximately \$35 for a filled backpack; "That's only a small portion of what a family meal out would cost," Brockmeyer reports. "It would be wonderful to have individuals help us and amazing if companies want to donate in larger quantities. We'll send as many items as we get," she notes.

With access to free shipping via NovaUkraine, Sydney Paige is also looking for

donations of bulk hygiene items. "We could really use toothbrushes," Girdlestone proclaims. They have already received some hygiene supplies, as well as jackets and sweatshirts. As she saw during her time volunteering in Poland, the need is great.

Brockmeyer is fond of paraphrasing a quote from Helen Keller: "Alone we can only do so much, but together the possibilities are endless."

For more information or to donate to the Ukraine Backpack and School Supply Drive, please go to <https://donate.sydney Paige.org/ukraine>.

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