

# LESSONS FROM UKRAINE

**Dr. Vasyl Taras** admits he's a little tired. War has ravaged his home country of Ukraine, and he's spending the morning trying to help a former classmate's daughter continue her studies in Italy.

Under normal circumstances, he says, he might not spend this much time on a kid from Ukraine. A professor in the Department of Management at the UNC Greensboro Bryan School of Business and Economics and founder of X-Culture – a popular program that helps students connect across cultures – Taras' to-do list is a long one.

But these aren't normal circumstances. "How can I ignore it?" he says. "It's good for her, I know I can help."

## Born to Organize

Taras was born in the Soviet Union in 1977 and describes his childhood as catching a glimpse of a monstrous empire. Some of his earliest memories are of a program not unlike scouts in the U.S.

"They'd indoctrinate you into the ideology," he says. "You'd become a pioneer and wear this red neckerchief. When you went to school, they would give you a star with baby Lenin on it."

Taras remembers first refusing to wear the scarf and how quickly that impulse turned into something bigger.

"We created this youth organization, sort of camping, but more education-related," he recalls. "We invited any foreigner we could grab – professors – to speak. Because the Soviet Union was collapsing, everything was disorganized. We were maybe 16, and we went to the mayor for a place to meet and ended up with a two-story building downtown – pretty successful for just being kids."

This desire to question things didn't come out of thin air – Taras says if you look up and down his family tree, you'll find plenty of individuals who fought against the Soviet Union.

"Much of my family disappeared during the time of World War I. My great grandparents were some of the most prominent leaders against the first Soviet Union then," he said. "A generation later, their children were at the forefront of the Ukrainian Resistance Army. About two-thirds of my ancestors have died somewhere in Siberia. Those who stayed kind of whispered about it."

## Academics Abroad

Taras' activism caught the eye of German visitors he'd invited to his youth organization. Impressed with what they'd built from scratch, they invited him to spend a year studying in Munich. These semesters abroad were just the beginning of Taras' journey in academia, not to mention his journey outside of the Soviet bubble. Fast forward a few years, and Taras eventually found himself in the U.S. for the first time.

"On my first visit to Wisconsin, it didn't look Imperialist," he said. "It was just a little town in Wisconsin. They were nice to each other, they weren't starving – they didn't even lock the back door when they left the house."

From there, Taras says he hopped from one university to another before finding a home at UNCG, where he's been since 2009.

## X Marks the Spot

In 2010, Taras founded X-Culture. Its recipe is simple: take students from across the globe, split them into virtual teams, and give them a problem to solve.

Though he's quick to downplay any career accomplishments, Taras has reason to be proud of the program, which has involved tens of thousands of students at hundreds of universities around the world. In recent years, X-Culture has even become somewhat of a research collaboration platform, where senior researchers coach younger academics.

When you learn a little about Taras' story and the desire to share information across borders, you don't have to squint to see what has become his life's work.

"I'm not the best researcher, but one thing I seem to be relatively good at is community organizing. (My youth organization) wasn't a big national thing, but it was one of the biggest in Ukraine, people off the street plotting against the Communist party and risking jail. So, yes, X-Culture, to some extent, is relying on that experiment. If you look at the program, we've had as many as 500 universities participate in a semester, we're on every continent, and it's done without any budget. Everyone chips in," he said. "Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought about building these bridges and connecting countries and improving cultural intelligence. And even sometimes, I think if we can lower the chance of the next conflict by 1 percent, I'll be happy."

## 'Where Do We Stop?'

Taras might be one of the most well-connected educators on the planet. He is combing through a few of the hundreds of emails he receives on any given day from across the globe as he ponders the predicament involving his former classmate's daughter.

"I have contacts in Russia and Ukraine, and we started a pen pal program, but should we do more? Start summer school for kids in Ukraine and around the world? Maybe I should roll out a full-scale program on an industrial scale with thousands of professors. Businesses can help, I have those connections. Should I roll out a program for humanitarian aid? I could raise money," he said. "So where do we stop? Maybe that becomes the question. I still have to teach classes. So it is a constant pressure."

These are not normal circumstances. And despite Taras' fatigue, it's hard to listen to him and not think about what else could be built from scratch. How can you ignore something when you know you can help?

"This stupid war," he says. "I don't know. It's a situation where you feel obliged to help." ■

*Written by Pat Holmes*

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**Dr. Vasyl Taras**  
Professor

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