

# Every number has a story – my journey to Novartis as a Refugee

The current refugee crisis is one of the world's greatest humanitarian challenges. Svitlana shares her story of her journey to Novartis and how her work as part of the Giving and Volunteering team is opening the doors to refugees and other marginalized groups and allowing our people to make a difference by helping those who are most vulnerable.

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## Impossible decisions

The unimaginable started the day before my son's ninth birthday. We had been preparing for a party at our home in Kyiv and had invited lots of his friends, but the morning before the celebrations we woke to the sound of explosions. After calling everyone in our family to make sure they were safe, my husband and I and with our son and our cat we drove out of the city. There were traffic jams everywhere and you could see how scared everyone was. People were walking the streets with their luggage because they didn't know how to leave. There were no buses or trains, the city was completely locked down. It took us 26 hours to get to the border and, by then, it had been announced that men were not allowed to leave the country. At that moment there was another impossible choice to make: do you stay together as a family or separate? We decided to remain together.

Finding somewhere to stay was so difficult because everyone was trying to flee, so we slept in our car for three days until friends of my husband's colleague offered us a room for free in Lviv. That was the first time we realised how kind people could be, and we stayed there for one month. Back in Kyiv it was becoming impossible to get food and stores were emptying. At the time, I was working for a large agro-industrial holding and I was able to help our family by arranging food packages in places where they had production sites. However, at this point, we realized that this was not a safe environment for our son. So we made the impossible decision to separate as a family so that myself and my son could leave Ukraine.

## The kindness of strangers

I started to search for a place where we would be safe and where I could work. I thought I would have a better opportunity of finding a job in Switzerland, so I took my husband's car and drove 1700 kilometres with my son, the longest journey of our lives. I found someone on a portal offering support to Ukrainians and they gave us a place to stay. It felt like the whole world was so supportive. I had never expected this kind of generosity. It was unbelievable how much help people were offering and how welcoming they were.

When we arrived, I had to figure out how to register, where to apply for refugee status, and what the procedures were in this new country. Within a couple of days of arriving my son started at a Swiss school, which was incredibly stressful because he didn't speak German. Although he had basic English, he was struggling. While you are trying to figure all of this out, you know your family are back home without electricity or running water and you must find a way to try to keep supporting them too. You mentally struggle with hoping that the situation will only last a few weeks, whilst also knowing that you probably should make a mid-

to long-term plan.



Svitlana, Junior Project Manager, Giving & Volunteering

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**Svitlana**

## **A new career, mentorship and the importance of giving**

I started searching for jobs, sending my CV everywhere. I was so motivated to work, but it's not easy when you have refugee status. Employers are hesitant because they are investing in training and hiring someone, not knowing how long that person will stay. For the first time, I really learned the importance of networking, making connections and not being afraid of reaching out to people. Through a referral from someone I met who worked at Novartis, I was invited for my first interview and, after subsequent interviews, I received my temporary job offer. I joined Novartis in August 2022 as Project Manager Specialist for Technical Research and Development and later, in January 2024, started the role I hold now as Junior Project Manager for Giving & Volunteering.

Initially, it wasn't easy for me to talk about what I had lived through because I didn't want to be known as a refugee. There can be a misperception that you're not educated or that you don't have experience of working for big, international corporations. However, my manager trusted in my potential and my ability to become a valued member of her team. Honestly, it was challenging because Pharma was new to me, but I was offered different courses and training to help me integrate. It felt incredible to finally be financially independent and

part of society. I received lots of support and training throughout the hiring process and felt truly welcomed by my team.

What really made a difference for me was having a mentor. I was going through the worst period of my life, and my mentor, Caroline, helped me so much psychologically - she boosted my self-confidence and offered her lasting friendship.

Thanks to my newfound networking skills, I have made wonderful connections like Estelle, who is the Global Head of Giving & Volunteering at Novartis. She supports me in my current role where I lead the company's efforts to hire and upskill refugees. I talk with and support people who are forced to flee their homes globally, because I understand their experiences and challenges. I had to find so many solutions by myself, without help, and wished I had someone who had already gone through such an intense change in life. Because of this, I am determined to make things easier for others seeking assistance. There's more work to do, but the impact this program has is incredible; opening the doors to refugees and other marginalized groups and allowing our people to make a difference by helping those who are most vulnerable.

## Reflections

Before the war began, I had goals and achievements, but when you go through something like this, they don't matter as much. What matters is that everyone is alive and safe. So now I am here while my husband still lives in Kyiv. This is our life, our normal routine, and sadly my son is growing up without his dad. Everyone has their own story; sometimes we just need to be heard and given the opportunity to talk about our experiences. Thankfully I have the support to do that here.

The current refugee crisis is one of the world's greatest humanitarian challenges. That's why we've scaled our approach to go beyond monetary and medicine donations, including skills-based volunteering, housing, mentoring, education, employee giving and community activities to refugees around the world.

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