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Gardner-Webb Nursing Alumni, Adjuncts Learned Skills in Classes to Help Ukrainian Refugees

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON MAY 17, 2022



- ▲ At left, Adam and Marielle Combs, and, at right, refugees wait for transportation out of Ukraine. For the mothers and children, this is where they say goodbye to their husbands and fathers, because the men had to stay and fight the war.

Drs. Adam and Marielle Combs Answer Call for Help; Land in the Right Place at the Right Time

Drs. Adam and Marielle Combs, of Goldsboro, N.C., recently returned from a trip to help Ukrainian refugees in Romania and Moldova through the anti-human trafficking organization, Exitus (<https://joinexitus.org/>). However, for these 2021 alumni of Gardner-Webb University—and adjuncts in the Hunt School of Nursing—the story actually began four years ago.

Looking back, the couple understands that they were led all along their journey to be exactly where they needed to be...and when. Marielle has been a nurse for more than 20 years and a nurse educator for 13. Adam entered the nursing field in 2013 and began teaching in 2017. Their education equipped them to make a difference in the lives of Ukrainian families fleeing their homes.

“I know it sounds cliché, but really God nudged me towards human trafficking,” explained Marielle. “And this was two years before I even knew I wanted to go for my DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice). I just knew that I was interested in human trafficking, but I didn’t know anything about it or how I could plug in.”

Then, in 2019, she and Adam entered the DNP program at Gardner-Webb University. When it came time to choose a topic for her dissertation, Dean Tracy Arnold of the Hunt School of Nursing asked students

to come up with three ideas. “I named two education things and then this human trafficking thing,” Marielle recalled. “She thought human trafficking was a great topic.”



Adam told Marielle that Arnold’s enthusiasm was a sign. “I felt like God is leading us this way because once you finish your dissertation, our ministry is going to be in some way with anti-trafficking,” he reflected.

Her dissertation was titled, “Human Trafficking: Empowering Healthcare Providers and Community Partners as Advocates for Victims (<https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/nursing-dnp/23/>).” The unique topic caught the attention of nursing educators, and Combs was invited to present at two national conferences. The paper was also published in the “Journal of Holistic Nursing,” the official journal of the American Holistic Nurses Association, which focuses on advancing the science and practice of holistic nursing and healthcare.

Because Marielle is also a nursing instructor at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro, the college wrote a story about her accomplishments, which was picked up by the media. Incidentally, Adam is an instructor at Wayne Community, as well.

“A local doctor reached out to me and said, ‘I’m in a group for human trafficking and I would love to talk with you and see if there is any way we can partner,’” Marielle related. “We met with them on a Monday and on Wednesday we were loading a truck up for Kentucky for tornado victims, and all of a sudden, we are going to the border of Ukraine to get orphans. It happened very quickly.”

Adam explained that Exitus has a team that works with adoption agencies and orphanages in Ukraine. People in the United States adopt the children, and Exitus recruits nurses to fly back with the children, who sometimes have life-threatening medical conditions. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, there were about 20 parents in the process of finalizing adoptions. The team’s mission was to get these children out.

Adam and Marielle were set to fly into Romania on March 7, less than two weeks after Russia attacked Ukraine. The couple’s presence on the plane is another miracle, because their passports had expired. “I called the 800 number to get us an appointment at any of the 15 or so offices where you can get a 24

hour passport renewed,” Adam revealed. “They informed me that they had no appointments at any of their offices for the entire week.”

They called the CEO of Exitus and also made a call to a local politician, which Marielle said she wouldn’t have known to do if it hadn’t been for her Health Policy Class at Gardner-Webb with Dr. Yvonne Smith. In the class, the students had to look up their elected officials. Marielle knew who to call and how to give her “elevator speech” about what she needed. With the help of the politician, they made a quick trip to Atlanta, Ga., and received their passports just in time.



- ▲ A small church in Moldova needed help assisting the Ukrainians who were crossing the border. At left, refugees wait for transportation. Center, the first thing the Exitus Team did was sort through supplies that were placed haphazardly in a tent. At right, the Exitus Team met with the staff at the medical clinic to determine their needs.

They landed in Romania—where the temperatures were between -6 and -3 degrees Celsius (21-26 degrees Fahrenheit)—and waited for the ground team to go and rescue the children. They thought everything was in place for a fluid transfer of the children, yet the team was unable to work it out with the orphanages. Because of the war, the Ukrainian government couldn’t help, and the team didn’t want to do anything to alert the Russians, so they had to leave the children. Exitus is still working to get them out of the country and has a children’s home in Moldova for the rescued orphans and other children fleeing Ukraine.

Despite the disappointment of not getting the children, the Exitus team helped in other ways. They answered a call for help from a church in Palanca, Moldova, trying to assist refugees at an unofficial border crossing.

When Adam and Marielle arrived in Palanca, they immediately saw a difference between the two areas. “They had a lot of resources up near Serit in Romania, but Moldova is one of the poorest European countries,” Marielle said. “They had three tents set up and thousands of refugees coming across.”

One of the tents was a small one where supplies had been stored haphazardly. One of the first things the team did was to sort the items in the tent, so that the Moldovans could locate supplied easily. Then,

they were asked to do a needs assessment of the small clinic in the city. Again, Adam and Marielle were thankful for their Gardner-Webb DNP classes.

“Needs assessment—we never thought we would use it, because here in the United States, we have so many resources,” Marielle informed. “I could never see myself using what I learned, because it is already available.”

Furthermore, they weren’t supposed to be in Moldova, but here they were and their specific skills were needed to help provide services to the volunteers and the refugees. Their report was given to the Exitus CEO to obtain the resources to improve the situation. Marielle now serves as the Nursing Education Director for Exitus. PBJ Learning (<https://pbjlearning.com/about-pbj-learning/>), a company that provides educational products to fight trafficking, also asked Marielle to serve on their advisory board.

Since arriving home, Adam and Marielle have discovered another connection. “North Carolina and Moldova have had a partnership for the last 20-plus years since the Soviet Union broke up,” Adam related. “It began as a military to military partnership, but has grown into educational, business, and medical. I had the opportunity to meet North Carolina Secretary of State Elaine Marshall at a luncheon, where she discussed the partnership. We are now seeing that it was a God thing we ended up in Moldova working with a team at the Palanca border. With the N.C.-Moldova Partnership, it will allow our team to connect with Elaine Marshall’s office to help the people of Moldova and the Ukrainian refugees.”

Find more information about Exitus or make a donation, here (<https://joinexitus.org/>).

Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina’s recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to six professional schools, 14 academic departments, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.