

Alumnus Eric Hoeksema: At Home in Ukraine

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Eric Hoeksema and his wife, Stacey, and their children Hans, Petra, and Fritz serve in Hungary and Ukraine for half of the year.

ALUMNUS ERIC HOEKSEMA: AT HOME IN UKRAINE

It's interesting how God directs our lives, says Eric Hoeksema ('03).

"I hadn't planned to go to Dordt, but I ended up there, and that decision made a significant impact on my life and the direction my life would go."

As a Dordt student, he took courses in history, theology, and agriculture—growing up in McBain, Michigan, he'd worked on farms and was interested in agriculture. As a freshman he went on a short-term mission trip to Mendenhall, Mississippi, during spring break, and three agriculture majors he met mentioned they were going to Ukraine over the summer.

"They invited me along on this trip, and I decided to go," he says. "I was the only non-ag major on the trip, but I had a strong background in agriculture."

They spent four weeks in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, the far western province of Ukraine. They toured farms and met with farmers, sharing American agricultural

practices and also learning about how Ukrainians approached agriculture. Dr. Ron Vos, professor emeritus of agriculture, planned the trip, although he was unable to travel with the group.

The next three summers, Hoeksema went back to Ukraine with Vos. After graduation, Hoeksema kept going back; he even moved to Ukraine for a year. Since 2008, he and his family have lived in Europe—mostly Ukraine, until recently—from January to August and have returned to the United States during the fall months.

"Transcarpathia, Ukraine is a special place," says Hoeksema. "It's separated from Ukraine proper by the Carpathian Mountain range. It's a crossroads place, so it has minority groups of Russians, Hungarians, Slovaks, and Roma. It's culturally fascinating."

It's the first place Hoeksema ever

traveled to abroad, and he's spent more time there in the last 20 years than he's spent anywhere, so it feels like home.

"I'm interested in the people and culture of Transcarpathia, Ukraine. For much of its history, it belonged to Hungary, so there's a large Hungarian minority living there. It only became part of Ukraine following World War II."

Hoeksema and his family have spent most of their time working with the Hungarian minority, living in Hungarian villages, and building relationships with Hungarian-Ukrainians. In 2006, he started International Christian Community Development (ICCD), a non-profit organization that teaches English in Western Ukraine, Hungary, and surrounding countries.

"We use the English language as an avenue to open doors into people's lives and to build relationships," he explains.

They lead English Bible studies for university students and young adults, teach conversational English classes and conduct English clubs, organize and lead Bible retreat weekends for young people, and more.

"In the summertime, we partner with Christian schools and church congregations in Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Croatia and, starting this summer, Poland," he says. "We organize English camps where we bring in volunteers and teach English. We do devotions, games, crafts, activities, and more for an entire week at 10-11 locations."

During the winter months, they teach in schools and hold English Bible studies in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. They also work with the Roma population.

Through his travels, Hoeksema has maintained his Dordt connections. "My family and I go back to North Carolina every fall to work, where I help my Dordt roommate on his corn, soybean, and wheat farm," he says. "I also help my brother-in-law pick cotton."

Plus, in recent years, he connected with Professor of History Dr. Mark McCarthy, who took students to Ukraine as part of a research project.

Much has changed in the last few years for Hoeksema and ICCD. In March 2020, he and his family traveled to Budapest for what they thought would be a five-day trip to meet with some pastors and take their six-month-old daughter for a doctor's visit. Instead, the border closed while they were gone, and they couldn't get back to Ukraine. They stayed in Hungary for six months at a church that partnered with ICCD. Returning to the United States in the fall of 2020, Hoeksema and his wife learned that they were expecting a baby. They decided



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"We've received generous donations," says Hoeksema. "We ask the people we partner with what supplies they need. Then we fill up the van with staples and go."

to stay in the United States for most of 2021—the longest stretch Hoeksema had been away from Ukraine in years.

"In 2022, we planned summer camps all over Eastern Europe and were planning to get back to normal life in Transcarpathia, Ukraine," he says.

Those plans changed when, on February 24, war broke out with Russia. Hoeksema wasn't sure what to do or how big a conflict this would be.

"We didn't know if it would just be some missile strikes and that would be it," he says. "But some friends, a local pastor, and other influential contacts in western Ukraine advised that, especially since we have three small children, we should leave the country. They said, 'You can leave now, but you might not be able to leave later if things get worse.'"

So they returned to Hungary, staying once again in the guest rooms above the church where they'd spent six months during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When the war started, all schools across Ukraine closed. The boarding schools where ICCD worked turned into refugee centers, and students scattered. And Hoeksema's work with ICCD changed overnight.

"In the first weeks after the war started, we went to the border every day. There were tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees coming over the border, so we picked up refugees in our 9-passenger van and drove them to train stations or dormitories. We helped some arrange

housing, and we brought food to centers at the border. There were some intense weeks where we spent time on the Hungarian-Ukrainian border transporting food and supplies in one direction and then coming back with refugees, away from the border."

These days, Hoeksema spends more time in Hungary than in Ukraine, as he and his family wait for their Hungarian residency permits to be finished. Once a week, he fills the 9-passenger van to the brim with one ton of food and supplies—pasta, rice, oil, hygienic supplies—and drives to Ukraine. He drops off some goods at a Reformed Christian boarding school that houses 80 refugees and feeds at least 40 more every day; he makes a stop at an elderly couple's home, where 18 refugees from Kiev currently reside. Sometimes he drives the van to the Czech Republic and to Poland, partnering with a Reformed pastor in Poland who is working with refugees. He has also been working with a Christian organization in western Ukraine to bring supplies to a group of drivers who then take the food and humanitarian goods to central and eastern Ukraine—areas closer to the combat zones.

"We also got a surprise invitation to go back to Ukraine and conduct English camps in early June," he says. "It was a blessed week to once again minister in western Ukraine and connect with friends there."

Hoeksema has noticed a shift in population migration. Aside from some missile strikes at military bases and at key infrastructure points, Transcarpathia, Ukraine has largely remained peaceful. Still, people have been leaving that area.

"Many of the minorities of Transcarpathia, Ukraine who are of Hungarian descent are moving to Hungary. They speak Hungarian, and they might have relatives there and are able to get a job," he explains. "Right now, people from Eastern Ukraine, where cities and towns have been so destroyed that many people can't go back, are fleeing to Transcarpathia, Ukraine."

If refugees leave Ukraine, they can get support from host countries. "But if they're in Ukraine, the country isn't able to give support to its own refugees with the war going on. That gets overshadowed on the news; there's quite a need of support of refugees who are in



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Dordt's Ukraine Research Experience for Undergraduates was a 10-week summer interdisciplinary research program.

ALUMNI NOTES

Ella (Swart, '20) **Rynders** has been promoted to Creative Director at the Event Company in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Kendra Wieringa ('20) was recently hired as Happiness Coordinator at the Event Company, where she helps coordinate and oversee administrative duties, develop interoffice communications, and works alongside the leadership team to ensure the office runs efficiently and smoothly.

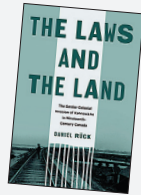
Brady Van Holland ('15) has been named head coach of the men's soccer team at LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas.

Joe Venhuizen ('13) was recently promoted to Senior Director of Membership and Programs at Envision Greater Fond du Lac, where he will continue to expand Envision's impact throughout Fond du Lac County by growing the chamber staff and engaging the member base.



Nate De Boer ('06) has been promoted to Vice President of Portfolio Strategies—General Accounts at Mutual of Omaha. He supports the growth and profitability of corporate invested assets through strategic portfolio construction and tactical asset allocation strategies that align with the goals, constraints, and risk tolerances of the organization.

Daniel Reuck ('98) recently wrote a book titled *The Laws and the Land: The Settler Colonial Invasion of Kahnawà:ke in Nineteenth-Century Canada*. Published by UBC Press, the book won the 2022 Indigenous history book prize of the Canadian Historical Association. To purchase a copy, visit ubcpres.ca.



Jonathan Andreas ('88) graduated with a Ph.D. in Educational Philosophy from the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Canada. His dissertation is titled "Education for Re-Indigenization: Toward an Econormative Philosophy of Education."



Jeri (Brower, '67) **Schelhaas** and **Rebecca** (Schelhaas, '02) **De Vries** took part in the musical production of "Mary Poppins" at the Sioux Center Summer Celebration in June. De Vries's 10-year-old son, Nico, also participated, making the musical a three-generation performance.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Through Dordt's Ukraine Research Experience for Undergraduates, students gained firsthand knowledge of the culture and politics of Ukraine.

western Ukraine as well."

The war in Ukraine won't go away for a long time, says Hoeksema. "Even if the war ends in the next weeks or months, and if Ukraine is able to successfully defend themselves, much of Ukraine will be destroyed. It's going to be a very long rebuilding process, and the people of Ukraine will need help and support for years, if not decades, to come."

Despite the war, Hoeksema has much to be thankful for. This summer, ICCD will hold English camps in Hungary, Romania, Croatia, and Poland. They have been able to start three Bible studies at universities in Hungary.

"We've been blessed with a 9-passenger van, we've been blessed with a lot of people wanting to support refugees, and we have a lot of connections around many places. We've been blessed with a unique opportunity to work closely with delivering supplies and working with refugees," he says.

He is grateful for the opportunities he gained through his Dordt education.

"Thanks to Dordt, I was able to get out into the world and experience cultures as well as meet people from all over," he says. "The friends, the communities, the professors—the great relationships continue to impact my life to this day."

As the war wages on in Ukraine, Hoeksema encourages those watching to "keep Ukraine and the people here in your prayers."

"The news cycle will only pay attention to the conflict for so long, but this isn't going away for a long time. Continue to support groups that are working here on the ground. And don't forget about Ukraine once the news forgets."

SARAH MOSS ('10)

LEARN MORE

To learn more about International Christian Community Development, visit iccdabroad.org.

