

# He's taking his help for Ukraine to the next level



Jeff Kaminsky of Northbrook, president and founder of Project Aid and Rescue, hopes to deliver Ukrainians a merry Christmas. (Joe Lewnard/[jlewnard@dailyherald.com](mailto:jlewnard@dailyherald.com))



Jeff Kaminsky of Northbrook, president and founder of Project Aid and Rescue, is sending a shipment of toys and aid to the people of Ukraine for a merry Christmas. (Joe Lewnard/[jlewnard@dailyherald.com](mailto:jlewnard@dailyherald.com))





In November, Project Aid & Rescue coordinated the shipment of medical supplies and goods such as water bottles, backpacks, lunchboxes and children's fleece blankets — donated by Crate & Barrel in Northbrook — to families in Kharkiv in Ukraine. (Courtesy of Project Aid & Rescue)

BY DAVE OBERHELMAN (DOBERHELMAN@DAILYHERALD.COM)



Northbrook resident Jeff Kaminsky is trafficking in gifts, traditional and not, in mass quantities this holiday season. And to a war zone.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kaminsky has been driven to help people uprooted by the conflict and founded [Project Aid & Rescue](#).

He and Charita Shteynberg, who heads the nonprofit [World of Connections](#), have arranged for a donor to send a 40-foot shipping container of toys to Ukrainian children — 10 pallets of Christmas and Hanukkah toys and other humanitarian aid weighing nearly 20,000 pounds and valued at about \$450,000. It costs around \$12,000 just to ship the container, Kaminsky said.

Many of these children, he said, will be spending the holidays in bomb shelters and without heat.

“It's hard to completely think about Christmas and Hanukkah with everything that's going on, but with the holidays approaching we do have some donors that are willing to provide gifts and other things to enable children to experience the joy of the holidays,” Kaminsky said.

[Project Aid & Rescue](#) is a nonprofit composed of international volunteers who help Ukrainian citizens and refugees displaced by the war. It partners with organizations including [World of Connections](#), [Operation White Stork](#), [Friends of Be an Angel](#) and [Ukraine Air Rescue](#) in Germany.

Collectively, they've provided more than \$30 million in humanitarian aid, coordinated evacuations of thousands of Ukrainians to safety, and delivered urgently needed medical supplies and first-aid kits.

Project Aid & Rescue is in the midst of a seasonal fundraising campaign, “[Holiday Gift of Life](#).” The first price level purchases children's toys — \$50 “to create a smile for a child that has been bombed out and is living in a shelter,” Kaminsky said.

Most of the “presents” in this campaign, he said, are unimaginable to most Westerners — \$200 to evacuate a sick child out of Ukraine or \$1,500 to evacuate an entire family.

A gift of \$3,500 can evacuate 90 people by bus. For \$1,000, a family can receive a generator; \$2,500 can provide a generator to a hospital operating room. A \$10,000 donation can purchase an ambulance.

Information on the campaign is available at <https://givebutter.com/HolidayGiftOfLife>.

“The way we think about the holidays here in America is very different for the people in Ukraine this year,” Kaminsky said. “They’re less concerned about the toys, although a child always looks forward to a toy, especially during the holidays.

“The parents are thinking about how to keep their child fed, how to keep them from freezing to death, how to keep them from being sick, and none of this needs to be happening right now,” he said.

Compelled to help

“[Holiday Gift of Life](#)” is a stateside continuation of Kaminsky’s efforts from the spring, when he was right in the thick of it.

In March, 12 days into the war, Kaminsky hopped on a plane to Berlin. Using Google Translate on the fly, he burned up his cellphone securing medical treatment, finding transport vehicles and arranging hotel rooms for more than 1,600 Ukrainian refugees — mostly women, children, the elderly and infirm — before they secured more permanent lodging in Germany or fled to surrounding nations.

Initially helping organize the resettlement of 200 orphans from Odesa, he moved his base of operations to the Berlin Central Bus Station, where refugees arrived hourly.

Sharing his activities on social media with people back home, Kaminsky generated \$75,000 in donations to ramp up his work. When he contracted COVID, he choreographed missions from bed.

“People say, ‘Were you a Boy Scout?’ Actually, I was. I guess I’m one of those guys who runs in while everyone is running out and says, ‘What can I do to help?’” said Kaminsky, not surprisingly a member of Northbrook’s Community Emergency Response Team.

After more than a month in Berlin, he returned home. But he remained compelled to help.

“I had a decision to make. Am I going to turn this all off and stop, or am I going to take it to the next level?”

He took it to the next level. Building the nonprofit.

Kaminsky assembled a board of directors and applied for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, which was approved in July. He grew Project Aid & Rescue by fundraising and forming partnerships with like-minded international

organizations such as [World of Connections](#). Their combined specialties and connections enabled more direct involvement in humanitarian aid.

For Kaminsky, this essentially is a full-time job, plus overtime. Finding work-life balance is difficult.

“The war doesn’t stop on holidays, evenings and weekends,” he said.

So neither does he. With Kaminsky “quarterbacking” the teams, [Project Aid & Rescue](#), its partners and many donors have sent \$2.4 million in antibiotics to front-line hospitals, shipped hundreds of “Plan B” pills to assist Ukrainian rape victims, sponsored 12 bus evacuations and implemented many other lifesaving efforts.

Kaminsky even had the Ukrainian Ministry of Health’s director of advanced medical care on the phone to help coordinate the evacuation and treatment of injured Ukrainians.

A current initiative seeks to buy 100 used ambulances from European municipalities — each costing \$10,000 to \$15,000 — and buying 5,000 generators to supplant Ukraine’s destroyed power systems and infrastructure.

“What I’ve discovered is this is a war of donations and logistics,” Kaminsky said, “and people stepping up to help.”