

MSM student's ribbons raise money for Ukraine's children

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



Catholic schools teaching about war, praying for Ukraine

Catholic schools in Arkansas are also praying, raising money and learning more about Ukraine. They include:

- **Christ the King School**, Little Rock: A schoolwide rosary for peace in Ukraine was held during the second week in March. During morning prayer each school day, a decade of the rosary is prayed for Ukraine over the intercom.
- **Our Lady of the Holy Souls School**, Little Rock: On Fridays, students are wearing blue and gold stickers or ribbons. The school is also doing a silent lunch in observance and a rosary in each class. A collective living rosary will be held on the playground in three weeks.
- **Immaculate Conception School**, North Little Rock: Stations of the Cross were offered for Ukraine March 4. Junior high social studies teacher Sonni Runnells gives a daily update to her seventh and eighth-grade history students. "We are studying World War II right now and the rise of dictators, alliance systems and appeasement. It's apropos, to say the least, as we are watching and comparing the parallels," she said in an email.
- **Subiaco Academy**: Religion teacher Deacon Roy Goetz compiled a Prayer for Peace with intentions, a Gospel reading, meditation and prayers that was sent to the student body. He has prayed it with students in his seventh, eighth and senior religion classes. An intention for Ukraine was added to their Lenten Stations of the Cross.
- **Ozark Catholic Academy**, Tontitown: Students are discussing Ukraine in their history

and government classes, as well as watching “Frontline” PBS episodes on Putin and the crisis. Ukraine and its people are also being prayed for during school Mass intentions.

Pivotal moments in recent Ukrainian/Russian history

Some recent moments are pivotal in the long history between Russia and Ukraine that have led to this invasion.

- In February 2014, protesters overthrew President Viktor Yanukovich, who was friendly toward Russia, and the interim government signed a trade agreement with the European Union, according to *The New York Times*.
- Two months later, Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula and the secessionists Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic broke from Ukraine. About 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers died in the eastern region of Donbas.
- A cease-fire, known as the Minsk Accords, was signed in 2014 and 2015 by Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany.
- In April 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was elected president of Ukraine and vowed to restore Donbas.
- Since 2021, Russian president Vladimir Putin has tried to stop Ukraine’s movement toward joining a military alliance with the U.S. and its allies, the Times stated.

The timeline of events, updated by the *Times* March 1, stated, “Mr. Putin demands ‘security guarantees,’ including an assurance by NATO that Ukraine will never join the group and that the alliance pulls back troops stationed in countries that joined after 1997. Many Russians view the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, as the birthplace of their nation and cite the numerous cultural ties between the two countries.”

“I’ve heard stories of girls having their sixth birthday parties in a bunker. I just, I can’t even imagine that,” Ratycz said. “But also they’re not even the ones doing the fighting. All the adults are doing this stuff and they might not even know what’s happening. You know, they’re just trying to have a birthday party.”

Mount St. Mary Academy junior Anya Ratycz watched the Little Rock bridges light up blue and yellow Feb. 26 in support of Ukraine, her family’s heritage.

The small, local Ukrainian community donned the country’s colors and waved flags in support, but Ratycz said she wanted to do more after Russia’s unprovoked invasion Feb. 24.

“As we were just together, I thought, ‘I wish I could do something, just day to day,’” Ratycz said, whose family is Ukrainian Catholic, but attends Christ the King Church in Little Rock and the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church.

So, as Ukrainians more than 5,600 miles away armed themselves for war, Ratycz armed herself with a glue gun, safety pins and rolls of blue and yellow ribbon. She and her mother, Alexandra Ratycz, started off making 10 ribbons for their Ukrainian friends.

The 16-year-old ran with the idea, creating ribbons along with about 10 to 15 other students to sell for \$1. During their lunch and homeroom period, starting after Ash Wednesday Mass March 2, the students made the ribbons and sold them after the mother-daughter rosary the

next day. Many donated more than asked, with \$620 raised as of March 7.

"I was expecting maybe \$100 at most, so it's mind blowing," Ratycz said March 4, while making more ribbons with her friends.

All donations go to UNICEF USA, (unicefusa.org), specifically for Ukraine's children.

"We're a school so I feel connected, especially to those children because they can be younger than us, they can be our age, but it's a whole different experience being a child. I've heard stories of girls having their sixth birthday parties in a bunker. I just, I can't even imagine that," Ratycz said. "But also they're not even the ones doing the fighting. All the adults are doing this stuff and they might not even know what's happening. You know, they're just trying to have a birthday party."

As of March 3, one million people have fled Ukraine as the fighting continued. It is the largest ground war in Europe since World War II. For Ratycz, she said it's been a time of confusion as to how "we as human beings can allow something like this to continue." Both her paternal and maternal grandparents fled Ukraine during World War II.

"They fled persecution similar to what is happening now. That's a weird, crazy loop that's happening," she said. "My grandmother, my mother's mother, she came here with her two sisters. And so two of the sisters actually went to Canada while she came to the U.S. So she was in New York, I believe. And she actually got a job working as a translator at a library because she knew German, Polish, Ukrainian and English."

Friends at Catholic High School have also offered to sell the ribbons, and Ratycz said as long as they keep finding places to sell them, "we'll just keep making them."

Mount St. Mary Academy social studies teacher Rachel McLemore said students moved to action like Ratycz are living out values from the Religious Sisters of Mercy who founded the Little Rock school. In her classroom, students are discussing history as it unfolds.

"I think first and foremost, the potential for devastation and people's lives upended by what was happening was the initial thought," said McLemore, recalling as she watched news coverage of the invasion. "But then turned pretty quickly to 'OK, I need to be looking at as much information as possible, making sure I'm looking at information that's trusted or verified in some way. When we get to school tomorrow, there will be questions from all of my students in terms of what's going on."

The discussions fit naturally, as her AP U.S. history classes were wrapping up their World War II unit and moving into their discussion of the Cold War, and students in AP Human

Geography finished a unit on political geography. McLemore moved up her Russia unit in AP Comparative Government.

"They're not getting any sort of depth as far as the background goes. It's either written for an adult audience, people assumed to know something about the Cold War, or with the focus, rightly so, on today," McLemore said of media coverage. "I think being able to provide that context to help the student digest what they're seeing is really important."

Discussions revolve around why Ukraine is important to Russia, why the invasion happened,

sanctions and how the international community works together.

"It's really cool to be able to look at our history and see kind of how the events are playing out now. It's kind of like the same things," said 16-year-old Ella Burdine, a student in McLemore's AP U.S. History class. "We can see how it's happened before. We can kind of see how the policies that were made in the past are affecting and coming actually into play now. I also think it's really cool to be able to openly ask her questions."

Classmate Clara Principe, 15, said the discussions have helped her see what's going on clearer.

"(Russian President Vladimir) Putin's intentions, like why he would do it; that just doesn't sit right with me," Principe said. "You can't just walk into another country and just take over. ... That made me realize how unfair and unjust this whole thing is."

Two concepts McLemore most wants to get across to students is how power consolidation in Russia has led to reduced political participation and the "dire consequences" of not being civically engaged, as well as being an educated media consumer.

"The kids are bringing in 'I saw this on TikTok' — are you being a responsible digital citizen as well?" McLemore said. "Are you fact-checking, cross-checking sources? ... We're going to continue to live through events that are in that public eye, 24-hour media consumption and they need to be aware of how they're consuming media and spreading information."