



For Immediate Release
June 3, 2022

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Media Release

Families helping families –Hunley Park teacher hosts Ukrainian family

**Hunley Park Elementary
School**

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Principal

North Charleston, SC — Tanya Burrill settled into life in the United States with her husband just a handful of years ago. The young couple met while teaching English in Ukraine.

Today, Burrill is an ESOL (English as a Second Language) teacher at Hunley Park Elementary School where she is living out her passion for helping those most in need. Burrill is also doing that in her personal life. She and her husband have opened up their home and are hosting a Ukrainian family who sought refuge from their war-torn county.

Burrill was born and raised in Dnipro, Ukraine. Her grandmother always wanted to be a teacher and Burrill was drawn to the profession as well. She went to school for English and earned her Master's in English Language and Literature.

"It is very common to learn English in Ukraine," said Burrill. "I taught young children while I earned a degree to teach adults. It was fun and enjoyable but I wanted to take it to the next level."

Americans are not strangers to Ukraine, and there are many English Language instructors. While teaching adults, Burrill met her husband. He eventually wanted to return to the states and she accompanied him to North Carolina in 2016 where there is a large population of Ukrainians. Many of them speak Russian and Ukrainian and Burrill was able to assist them in many ways.

"I was able to see what teaching English looked like in the United States," said Burrill. "We moved to Charleston a year later and I researched opportunities with Charleston County School District."

Hunley Park needed a substitute teacher and with the help of Chris Hagy, the district's ESOL Coordinator, she was assigned the position. Then COVID-19 hit. Burrill used that opportunity to begin the state's Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE). While Burrill completes this certification, she is enjoying teaching K-5 ESOL.

"When you meet Ms. Burrill, you know right away that she genuinely cares for people," said Principal Katchia Gethers. "She has a calmness and gentleness to her and makes everyone feel at home. That's a rare quality for a person to have."

When Burrill moved to America, she knew her challenge would be to find a way to teach English in the states.

"I have found a way and I love it," said Burrill. "Some of these children are vulnerable and face challenges American children may not. Having been an English learner myself I know how they must feel. Being able to help these students is like being a part of something really big. It's very rewarding."

Burrill's personal life has been too.

A country in turmoil

There are times when Burrill is homesick and wants to go home to visit her family. However, her emotions have been on a rollercoaster since February when Russia invaded Ukraine. Her parents, siblings, and extended family are all still there and she keeps up with them on group family chats, among other ways.

"Ukraine is a big country, so they are not in the worst of it," explained Burrill. "They are in a humanitarian hub and have not been occupied. The hospital there is treating wounded soldiers, and there are food distribution areas. We hope it stays that way until it is all over."

Burrill's family members have become accustomed to the random bombs that are dropped in their vicinity. There are constant alarms and the war has gone on so long they've memorized the sounds and understand when it is time to retreat for cover.

Others are not so lucky. Burrill has friends whose family members had to leave because they were in areas with Russian soldiers and tanks.

Burrill and her husband wanted to help where they could. They learned of a website called ukrainetakeshelter.com. The platform allows re-settlers to request room and board and offers an opportunity for citizens across the globe to open their homes.

"We've always been open in terms of our home," said Burrill. "We've hosted people before and when we learned of this international site helping Ukrainians who were seeking a place to stay, we knew what we needed to do."

The Burrill family is hosting a grandmother, an adult daughter, and an eight-year-old daughter. They evacuated Ukraine as conditions worsened. The family fled to the border and entered the United States through Mexico, eventually making their way to Georgia. Using the Ukraine Take Shelter website, the family contacted the

Burrill's and they have been living with them for several months. The young girl was enrolled in school at Hursey Montessori right away and thrived during her short time there.

Burrill said the little girl fell in love with the school where she was showered with love and gifts from students and staff.

"I told them they could stay as long as they needed to stay," said Burrill. "They don't speak English, have very little belongings, and no transportation. So we are serving as the middle man and helping them with anything they need to start their new life."

Principal Gethers knew Burrill's family was from Ukraine. When the attack on Ukraine began, Gethers started to ask her how she was doing and how her family was doing. Those check-ins were emotional for both of them.

"One day, when I was checking in, I noticed that she actually was smiling and seemed upbeat," said Gethers. "During our conversation, I found out that she had invited a family from Ukraine to live with her. She found a way to help those in need even when her own family was in need. I wanted everyone to know her story—to find hope in a world that causes pain and realize that the human spirit gets renewed every time we choose to love and lend a hand."

Burrill said the Charleston community has been amazing in terms of assistance and offers to help.

"We have had a lot of help from the community and my husband and I are fortunate that we have what we need to support this family," said Burrill. "We were even able to secure employment for the young mother so she can begin earning money."

There are some things that professionals in the community can help with, such as help with immigration filing, legal advice, and transportation.

"The grandmother has chosen to return to her hometown once it is safe to do so and the mother and child intend to stay in Charleston," said Burrill. "We may need legal counsel to help determine how all of that is going to work."

In the meantime, the Burrills and their new extended family are looking forward to summer where just maybe there will be less worry.

"If my family had to leave and needed a place to stay, I would hope someone on the other side would do the same for them and take them in," said Burrill. "We are honored to be able to help."

Community professionals willing to offer services to this family may contact Tanya Burrill at tetiana_burrill@charleston.k12.sc.us.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 49,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), music and other creative and performing arts, career and technical preparation programs, and military.