

It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to support the most vulnerable around the world. Northsider Clare McPhillips (38) talks about her experience working in Poland with Plan International helping Ukrainian refugees.

Providing dignity to refugees fleeing war

I WAS born the year before Live Aid and during my younger years, growing up in Portmarnock, I developed an interest in humanitarian work.

I'd watch the various documentaries and news programmes about what was going on in the world and it had a real impact on me.

As in many Irish schools, at Portmarnock Community School, we would have had Trócaire boxes, and been a part of other charity work and so supporting charitable causes feels like part of our DNA.

Perhaps because of our own history, we have learned as a nation how important it is to support each other. Travelling a few years ago in Thailand and Cambodia, I saw the devastation caused by war and natural disasters and it really stayed with me.

I've always had a desire to work in the international development sector and it was the onset of Covid-19 that finally provided me with the chance.

The pandemic meant my work in airport retail slowed down so I took the opportunity to do a Masters in Humanitarian Action in UCD.

I started with Plan International Ireland in January and a month later, Russia invaded Ukraine.

I work in donor relations so I wasn't expecting to be part of Plan's emergency response team in Warsaw two months later, but they needed logistical and administrative support to cope with the influx of Ukrainian refugees into Poland, and I was happy to help.

The Plan team were responding to initial needs as well as setting up longer term programmes for the thousands of children needing integration into the Polish education system, liaising with Ukrainian teachers, as well as providing basic support for refugees, 94 percent of whom were women and children.

The refugees crossing into Poland were slowing down by the time I arrived but the numbers who had arrived were huge.

It was amazing to be thrust into the midst of an international team. There was one girl from Belfast and the rest were from all over the world.

Many were from experienced



Clare McPhillips was in Poland with Plan International.

response teams who travel from emergency to emergency, and it was incredible to watch the efficiency and compassion with which they worked.

I didn't have time to really think about adapting to living and working in Warsaw because there was such a sense of everyone just getting stuck in and working as hard as we could, all hands on deck.

I visited Rzeszow, a town close to the Ukrainian border to help distribute dignity kits. The town had taken in so many refugees, and many of the local organisations had offered their homes and welcomed Ukrainians to the community at unbelievable levels.

I visited a centre where Ukrainians were staying. Plan were distributing dignity kits that contained the basics such as underwear, sanitary and menstruation items, torches, masks, and towels.

When you see so many people without the absolute basics, it is very moving. Many Ukrainians had arrived with nothing, and I got the sense many had literally walked away from their homes, often leaving family behind.

The need was so great, one of our local partners handed out 700 kits in one afternoon. I was struck by how this could easily have been a community centre in Ireland and how easily it could have been me and my family.



Poland provided temporary shelter for women and children when the war broke out in Ukraine.



Ukrainian women feed their children while sitting on the railway tracks during their evacuation to Poland.

They were just living their life and suddenly everything changed. It's hard to comprehend the impact of this. I had about a week's notice to get packed up and head to Warsaw and when I reflect on everything I had to arrange and think about, knowing I was only going for two months, it's so hard to imagine how they must have felt.

I feel so grateful to have been given the opportunity to see the impact of Plan's work in person, to understand first hand just how much the support of donors means on the ground.

That something as complicated as arranging thousands of children to be integrated into an education system, and as simple as providing a pack of basic needs can mean so much.

I was so impressed by the Polish people. There was just such huge support from individuals and their

communities, and in the city centre there were constant protests against the war.

I went to the Polish war museum and it makes sense with their own history of invasion, how important it is for them to support their neighbours and show such incredible solidarity.

These two months have reinforced my passion to work in this sector in whatever capacity is needed. Sometimes I have to stop myself thinking I "just" work in an administrative role as I know from being on the ground that it requires so many people coming together to make an impact, and that working together is the only way we can make the world a more just and equal place.

Ireland has always been generous and the need for overseas assistance

is very real. It is always the most vulnerable and those with the greatest need who are affected but our support for overseas assistance has a positive knock-on effect all over the world.

Working in donor relations allows me to see the way the money is being spent and the direct impact it makes. Sometimes we think of the bigger side of aid but I saw the importance of the smaller gifts like a dignity kit too.

It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to support the most vulnerable around the world - from donors to staff, to partners and governments.

My deployment in Poland really made me see it takes a lot of people to pull together to get the job done.

• Find out more about Plan International's humanitarian world around the world at www.plan.ie.