

Marlene Lang: True inspiration from many places

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Once in a while you meet someone who stands out. Someone you can learn from who isn't trying to teach you. Someone who steps on your proverbial toes. I met one such woman recently. She had a name I'd never heard before: Roksolana.

Dentist. Photographer. Chicagoan. American. Ukrainian. International election observer. Feeder of orphans.

Her mission, when she travels, is not leisure. She delivers baby formula. Roksolana Tymiak-Lonchyna lives in Hinsdale, where she practices dentistry two days a week. She's been making medical team missions to her parents' homeland -- Ukraine -- since 1991, often with her husband, Vassyl, a surgeon.

Our June meeting was sparked in March of this year, when I heard National Geographic had published an article about Ukraine's Orange Revolution. "I'll have to pick up a copy tomorrow," I thought. Tomorrow I was flying out of town. I hit one of O'Hare's handy news and magazine stands at 6 a.m. I couldn't find a copy. I asked the clerk. I was disturbed that the young man had to ask me what National Geographic looked like, before he went to look for it. No copy. He didn't think they carried National Geographic. Probably no room in the newsstand due to the wild popularity of Maxim.

A tall and handsome man standing next to me had overheard the conversation; he reached into his briefcase. "It's your lucky day," he said. I was ready to assault him with my purse, when he handed me the bright yellow-framed magazine.

"Thank you," I said. I would have given him my phone number, but I think he was an angel. I read the story fiendishly on the plane, looking for word of the thousands and thousands of orphans I'd heard ran the streets of Ukraine's cities. Orphans and street children had weaseled into my heart and taken up residence years ago, when I visited Sao Paulo, Brazil. I wanted to live there and give them all baths and feed them and read them bedtime stories in Portuguese, but I had my own babies to feed and bathe, and my then-husband was not as zealous as me about making a difference. We wrote checks, instead.

The NG article was informative and well done -- but said nothing of orphans. Days later, an Internet search of "orphans Ukraine" turned up Roksolana, a Chicago dentist who supports a fund for infant formula through the sale of a book she wrote about her experience as an international election observer during the recent revolution. Wow.

All proceeds from the book -- published in Ukraine, I later learned -- buy formula. The books are not shipped; they come back on her return trips. Roksolana told me she buys the formula herself once in Ukraine and delivers it herself. "That way I know it's getting there. Going through customs, it could be stolen," she explained. She'll send you her book, "Conscience Calls," for \$30. The fund is handled through Sts. Volodymyr and Olha Parish in Ukrainian Village.

"That way I don't need to establish a nonprofit," she said. She's obviously a little too busy for bureaucracy.

I sent a check, with a note of well wishes. She e-mailed me a thank you, and we decided that since I was a journalist, we should meet. She is a photojournalist herself. Tymiak-Lonchyna

began taking pictures of Ukraine's orphans when she traveled. The team makes stops at the state-run "child asylums" where they treat the children and pregnant women. She has exhibited her work in Chicago and Philadelphia. Funds from the exhibit, of course, buy formula.

Realizing her camera could do much more if only learned how to best use it, she earned a certificate in photography from the College of DuPage. Her photos are beautiful and haunting. I knew she had a journalist's heart when she told me about the little girl born with no arms. She held the doll-faced child's photo up in front of me, over our café table, as she spoke. She said she had shown the photo to a group, face-only at first. Oooooos and ahhhhhs. Then she slid her hand down, revealing the missing limbs. Silence.

"One woman told me I shouldn't show pictures like that," she said, with a feisty, "people need to look at the truth" expression. Uh huh.

On a recent trip, she learned the girl's family had been able to reclaim her. Now 6 years old, Inna manipulates a computer mouse with her feet, she said. "She has learned to make pierogies with her feet, too," she said.

How could it be? The thought of a little girl making perogies with her feet, inspiring? Uh huh. Like the Chicago dentist who feeds babies in Ukraine. On her next medical team trip in September, she plans to find a fourth orphanage to supply. "I see needs all the time. You just have to seize the moment." Lesson taken.

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