# BETTERING LIVES ONE LANGUAGE COURSE AT A TIME

**Carrie Sandholtz's BYU education and language skills change lives for refugees in Spain.**

**by Emma Rostrom (Editing and Publishing '24)**

Sitting across from the director of *Fundación Madrina*, Carrie Sandholtz contemplated the weighty question: "Are you sure you want to do this?" Sandholtz had been teaching beginner and intermediate Spanish courses as an adjunct faculty member at BYU before temporarily relocating to Madrid, Spain. After moving across the world, she anticipated the rewarding but challenging new task of teaching Spanish to Ukrainian refugees.

## TAKING ON A NEW ROLE

When Sandholtz arrived in Madrid with her husband so that he could teach at a local university for the winter 2023 semester, she started searching for a volunteer position that would fill her time and hone her language skills. She did not have to look far; members of her new ward immediately put her in contact with *Fundación Madrina* (Godmother Foundation), an organization dedicated to serving vulnerable populations in Madrid. Given the fact that she spoke neither Spanish nor Ukrainian natively, and the previous instructor had quit after finding it difficult to connect with the refugees, Sandholtz knew she had her work cut out for her when she accepted the teaching position.

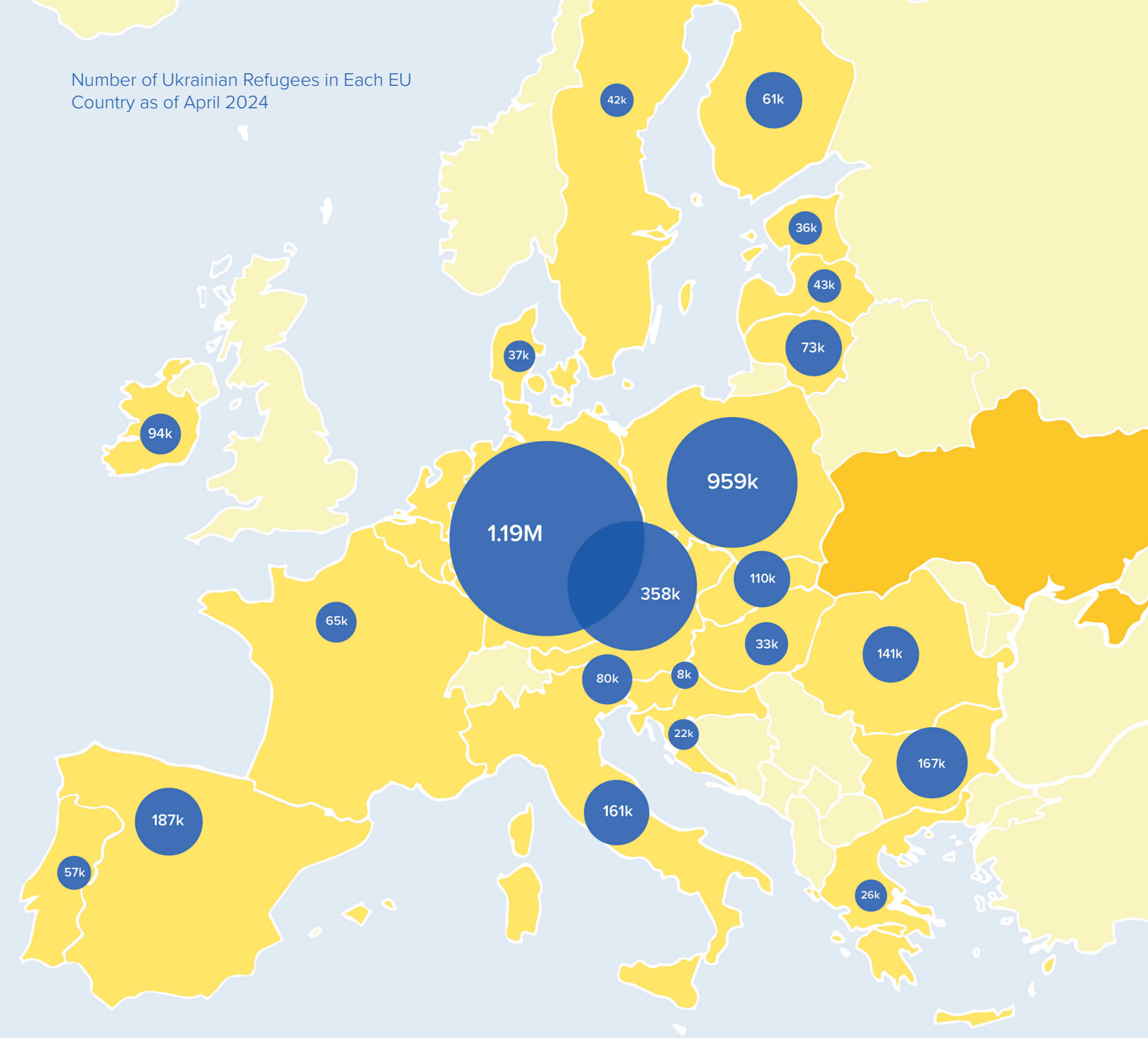
Despite the intimidating circumstances, she enthusiastically jumped into her role as language instructor to 20 Ukrainian women. She quickly discerned the difference between Spaniards, who tend to be more open and social, and her new students. During a get-to-know-you activity at the beginning of the course, many of the women described themselves by saying, "*Soy muy cerrada*" (I am very closed). But when Sandholtz considered their vastly different culture, along with the difficult situations that they came from, their closed nature was no surprise. Each student brought personal stories of suffering from their war-torn country to their new home.

Two of the women had grown up together as orphans in Ukraine, one of whom had traveled ahead of her own child to create a more secure life in Spain. Unable to bear the distance, she eventually returned to face the wartime dangers and reunite with her child. Another woman had worked as an engineer in Ukraine, but the war left her homeless, so she moved to Spain to start over completely. These stories deeply touched Sandholtz, who adds, "Every single one of my students had a son or brother or husband that was fighting."

Most of the women desired to return to their home country at a safer point in the future. In the meantime, they worked hard to establish themselves in Spain. They expressed incredible determination to learn and improve their language proficiency so that they could obtain jobs. Sandholtz says that she had never seen such a high level of motivation in all of her experience as a teacher. The class started out just one day a week for one hour each, but after a few months, the students were so eager to learn more that the class increased to three days a week for two hours each.

The motivation was high, but the means were fairly limited. Since she did not have access to textbooks, Sandholtz developed her own teaching materials using slides from the Spanish 101 class she taught as a grad student at BYU. She created additional exercises and

*Illustration by Caroline Bills Quispe (Graphic Design '25), Data courtesy of the Council of the European Union bit.ly/ukrainerefugeedata*




homework for her students to practice outside of the classroom, and her in-class teaching style included plenty of interactive games and recurring activities like Jeopardy and *Matamoscas* (Flyswatter). In *Matamoscas*, two students stood at the front of the room with flyswatters, and Sandholtz displayed an image on screen (usually an image of a particular setting containing objects from a vocabulary list that they had learned). She then called out the name of an object in Spanish, and whichever student first swatted the object in the image won a point. Teaching techniques like this turned out to be very effective.

**Nearly 6.5 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded globally.[1]**

Impressively, most of the students reached intermediate-low to intermediate-high proficiency by the end of the course. Sandholtz attributes her students' success to the determination and sense of community they built in the classroom, as well as her own BYU Spanish pedagogy education. The teaching methods that she carried with her from BYU to Spain prepared her to speak in the target language at all times and use interactive learning activities to engage with students.

The students had such success that *Fundación Madrina* invited the press to attend their course graduation ceremony. Various news outlets interviewed both Sandholtz and her students that day. Describing the students' interviews, Sandholtz says, "They were able to talk about their experiences in Ukraine and their sorrows and their families. And they were speaking in Spanish! It was really cool." As for Sandholtz, members of her ward watched her on the news that night, gleefully telling her afterward, "*Te vi en la tele!*" (I saw you on TV!)

**Less than 60% of Ukranian schools are deemed safe and eligible to reopen.[2]**

## ESTABLISHING LIFELONG CONNECTIONS

The women established a network of support amongst themselves to share information and opportunities, including a group message that Sandholtz also joined. She recounts how fun it was to see streams of messages in Ukrainian sprinkled with occasional messages in Spanish. Of all the course benefits for her students, Sandholtz emphasizes the importance of that network created in the classroom, which provides crucial support for those seeking further opportunities. For instance, one of the students discovered that their newly acquired language proficiency qualified them to take another Spanish course at a local college, and several of the women now take that course together.

Besides providing career and networking opportunities, the social aspect of learning Spanish encouraged the students to open themselves up and transform from the stoic women who had once described themselves as "very closed." Sandholtz became especially close to a young mother named Olena who came to Madrid with her autistic son. Sandholtz has a son with Down syndrome, so the two women formed a connection as they learned about each other's families and experiences raising children with disabilities.

Since she normally only teaches students who are high school or college age, Sandholtz found it gratifying to work with students closer to her age. Her ability to relate to the women on a personal level, such as when she formed the connection with a fellow mother of a disabled child, enhanced the learning experience for both students and instructor. Sandholtz says, "To me, it was just so fun to watch them warm up. It surprised me that we got to be such good friends. And they appreciated the work that I put in." The culmination of her growing friendship with Olena came when their sons had the chance to meet during a celebratory picnic at the end of the course.

During her six months in Madrid, Sandholtz embodied the BYU motto of "Enter to learn; go forth to serve." The pedagogical skills that she acquired through her education and work at BYU opened the door for her unique teaching experience abroad, where she truly made an impact in the lives of her students. Now back teaching at BYU, Sandholtz still keeps in touch with those Ukrainian students—her good friends—and she hopes to return to Spain someday soon to witness their continuing progress. H

### ENDNOTES


1. The UN Refugee Agency. "Operational Data Portal." bit.ly/odpukraine. Accessed April 24, 2024.
2. UNICEF. "Start of an uncertain school year for four million schoolchildren in Ukraine." https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/start-uncertain-school-year-four-million-schoolchildren-ukraine.

Photo courtesy of Carrie Sandholtz

Carrie Sandholtz (left) with her student Iryna, a Ukrainian refugee who crochets and sells bears to raise funds for the Ukrainian war effort