

On Friday 24th February, our Ukrainian friends and their host teams gathered at the Ballinger memorial hall to mark the unhappiest of dates – the 1 year anniversary of the Russian invasion of their country. Here is an extract of the speech made by one of their community:

“We lived a normal life. We had jobs, our children went to school. We were building our homes. Sometimes we were happy, sometimes sad, we loved and hoped - we lived our lives. We lived the life we chose until the Russian onslaught came.

At around four o'clock Kyiv time on February 24, Putin, announced a "special military operation" with the purported purpose of "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine." In just a few minutes, missile strikes began all over the territory of Ukraine, including not far from Kyiv. Russian troops invaded Ukraine near Kharkiv, Kherson, Chernihiv, and Sumy, entering from Russia, Belarus, and Crimea, which is temporarily occupied by Russia.

The Russian army carried out insidious attacks on civilians, medical facilities and schools, destroying Ukrainian cities, firing at "green" evacuation corridors, regularly disregarding the norms of the Geneva Convention of 1949 on the protection of the civilian population in time of war, and they committed war crimes, cynically killing Ukrainians.

Counting on a quick victory, the invading troops ran into strong resistance from Ukrainians, who fiercely defended their land, will and independence, despite the fact that ordinary life was crumbling before their eyes.

February 24, 2022 forever divided the lives of Ukrainians into before and after. All the mothers present here woke up their children with the words: "Wake up, the war started." According to the UN, at the end of March, 60% of Ukrainian children were forced to leave their native homes due to the military actions of the Russian side.

Today, Ukrainians are more united than ever - they stop tanks and armoured personnel carriers with their bare hands, go to rallies in Russian occupied cities, because they don't know how to keep quiet. Every Ukrainian selflessly fights for his country on his front as a volunteer, journalist, cook, driver, artist, etc. The war has erased all shaky planted structures that brought disunity, the awareness of Ukrainian identity inevitably crystallizes in every citizen of Ukraine.

The war affected every Ukrainian. Everyone present here ended up in England by the will of fate. Many of us have gone through months of wandering, disorientation, lack of support, confusion, which led to various problems amid constant stress and uncertainty.

Once in Buckinghamshire, we received such care and support that we could not have hoped for. We have already thanked our hosts, and this evening we would like to give our thanks to some other key people.”

The team specifically thanked Sarah Green MP, Martin Tett, Gareth Williams and Deborah Stevens for their support throughout the last year to help them to settle into their new life in the area.

“Why are we here? Because we are unbreakable!

The struggle of Ukrainians changes the world and unites all reasonable people in the fight for the important values of independence, democracy, and freedom!

“As President Mr. Zelensky recently said “I think that this year is the most difficult year in the history of independent Ukraine. Yes, there will still be tests of the strength of our state ahead. Therefore, at this moment and on this day, it is important not to forget all those who today stand and defend our borders, people and homes, and those who are our friends who have been with us all this time. There is a feeling that February 24 will be the start of a new year for Ukraine.

We ARE unbreakable!

Slava Ukraini”.

And this support is still required...as hosting periods come to an end, we are looking for new hosts. With children now settled in schools, and the families plugged in to local support groups and jobs, we need more hosts locally to welcome these kind, generous and yet ultimately vulnerable people into their homes. If you are able to help, please reach out to the Hilltops Ukrainian Support Group.
