

THE TABLET

DIOCESAN NEWS

St. Francis College Valedictorian Worries About Family in Ukraine

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By Paula Katinas

‘I just had to pull myself together,’ says Horzov



A photo of the Horzovs was taken a few years ago at a holiday celebration, long before the war with Russia upended the lives of Ukrainians. Pictured from left are Antonina, grandmother Mahdalyna, Anastasiia, Arseniy, Petro Horzov, and Larysa Horzov.

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS — While many people have apps on their phones like WhatsApp, DoorDash, or Uber, Antonina Horzov has one called Alarm — which alerts her whenever air raid sirens sound in Irshava, her native city in Ukraine.

The alerts are important to Horzov, the Class of 2022 valedictorian at St. Francis College in Brooklyn Heights, because her whole family is still in war-torn Ukraine and the app gives her a way to know exactly what’s going on in her homeland in real-time.

“When the air siren goes off, I’m texting everybody: ‘Are you guys okay? Where is everybody? Are you in the basement?’” she explained. “I want to make sure that I’m staying in touch with them.”

Living more than 4,000 miles away from her family during the war has been hard for Horzov, 27, who resides in Coney Island and works as an office manager in a dental clinic when not in class at St. Francis.

But she still managed to graduate last month with both bachelor's and master's degrees in accounting, while maintaining a 4.0 grade point average.

In her valedictory speech at St. Francis College's commencement at the Ford Amphitheater in Coney Island on May 19, she spoke about how sad life is for many of her peers back home.

"We are lucky to be able to celebrate our graduation day under a peaceful sky. Right now, not all students in the world have this privilege," she said, adding that many college-age Ukrainians, "live in fear of hearing air sirens, signaling that danger is coming, and facing rocket attacks, mass destruction, and genocide."



Antonina Horzov says she's proud of her brother Arseniy, who plans to become a dentist like their father. "I never wanted to go into dentistry, so it's ironic that I work in a dental clinic," she said.

Horzov is one of approximately 1,700 Ukrainian students who attended U.S. colleges and universities during the 2021-2022 school year, according to the Institute for International Education.

She thinks about her family all the time. Her mother, Larysa, father, Petro, sister Anastasiia, brother, Arseniy, and her grandmother, Mahdalyna Ohar, live in Irshava, a town of 10,000 residents in eastern Ukraine approximately 190 miles from the city of Lviv. The family chose to stay together since the father and brother are of fighting age.

"When this all started, the air sirens were going off every day, a couple of times. They had to go down to the basement for safety's sake. Because you never know. You never know where the Russians are going to hit," she explained.

Horzov, who has lived in the U.S. for seven years, said she feels a sense of guilt. "I'm here. I'm in safety. I don't have to worry about bombs dropping on my head. And I think, 'Oh, my God, my whole family is back there and I can't do anything,'" she said.

Horzov decided that if she couldn't be there to help her family, she could do her part to assist the war effort.

"We started helping soldiers ... We started collecting donations financially or just, like, buying tactical equipment.

"We found out from our friends on the front lines what they need. I thought at least I'm doing something that's going to make a small difference," she said.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on Feb. 24, Horzov was gripped with fear and anger.

"But it was already almost the end of the semester and midterms were coming up. I just had to pull myself together," she recalled.

She spoke to her parents, Petro, a dentist, and Larysa, a music teacher, who encouraged her to remain in the U.S.

Officials at St. Francis College quickly reached out to her and offered her tuition assistance and emotional support.

"They just checked with me all the time to make sure that I was OK or if I needed anything," she said. "The college was crucial in helping me to finish and accomplish my degree."

Horzov plans to stay in the U.S. for the foreseeable future and work as a certified public accountant.