

International Newsletter

April 2024

Ukraine Australia Canada United Kingdom



Volume 1 Issue 9

A Month in Postcards



This month our postcard warriors from Australia sent 607 cards, from Canada sent 432 cards, and from the UK sent 42 cards. Australia's total sent is now 11,071 cards, Canada's total sent is now 1,700, and UK's total sent is 384.

Please keep the cards coming; the Defenders will treasure them!

In this Issue

About	2
When Zelenskyy called, Brandon answered	3
By Helen	
This is my reality	9
Australia Branch News and Updates	16
Canada Branch News and Updates	18

About

Postcards to the Front International Newsletter is a monthly publication of the project Postcards to the Front. Founded by three Ukrainian women shortly after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the idea of sending messages of support and encouragement to the frontline Defenders of Ukraine spread out on Postcrossing.com — an international postcard exchange platform. Branches of Postcards to the Front have been established in Australia, Canada and United Kingdom.

Defender personnel, including medics, mechanics, drivers, cooks, etc., receive postcards in their care packages. While each bit of happy mail makes a huge difference in the psychological well-being of the front line Defenders, messages and pictures from children are especially heartwarming. Your support makes a difference. Thank you!

The views and opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the author, and not the opinion of this newsletter nor affiliated websites. Authors take responsibility for correct citations of sources and references, both oral and text.

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When Zelenskyy called, Brandon answered

By Helen

In February, we reported on the amazing turnout at the Oshawa *Global Day of Action* to support Ukraine. Postcards were written. A Canada/Ukraine flag was signed by demonstrators, and we anticipate it to soon land at the front lines in Ukraine to cheer on the Defenders.

One of the people we met in Oshawa was Brandon, known to his Ukrainian colleagues as Brandon "Фродо" Lee. In case you're wondering: Frodo!



Figure 1: Brandon singing flag in Oshawa.

Brandon worked in private security, then planned to return to school to study aerospace engineering.

His plans suddenly changed on February 24, 2022.

Although he doesn't have Ukrainian roots, Brandon has been interested and concerned about Ukraine since 2014, when he "considered going during the original invasion in 2014 post-Maidan; however, I never committed to going. Since the first day of the full-scale invasion [in 2022], I began helping the community at large with collecting, filtering and ordering open-source intelligence."

Within days of the February 22 invasion, Brandon heard President Zelenskyy make a plea for foreign volunteers.

No question for Brandon. "That was the day that I made my decision to go and my family also knew once they heard that request."

A simple decision based on Brandon's belief "in individual liberty and the right to self-determination for all people. As a result," he added, "I am a strong believer in Ukraine's right to choose the future it wants."

Initially, Brandon helped piece together open source intelligence (OSINT) reports and materials. This allowed him to get in touch with a large community of foreign volunteers. From there, he connected with a group of Americans interested in doing on-the-ground work. "I met up with them," he said, "and the rest is history."

The organization was not formally a part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, so Brandon was in Ukraine "nominally as a civilian".

The purpose of the organization," he explained, "was to train, advise, embed, and provide combat support to units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the National Guard of Ukraine."



Figure 2: Setting up defensive positions in the Vuhledar direction.

As a result, Brandon and other team members spent time at the front lines with the units they embedded with.

When young, Brandon participated in Canada's Army Cadet program. He has studied infantry tactics extensively between leaving that program and going to Ukraine. Although he was required to do some military training prior to arriving in Ukraine, his primary role was as an assistant infantry tactics instructor with a US-based Non-Government Organization (NGO), operated and staffed by American veterans.

"I was under the mentorship of two former United States Marines," he told us, "who were both career infantrymen. A lot of it was learning on the job rather than formal training; however, we would coordinate closely going over course material and developing lesson plans. In the evenings, we would train each other. Eventually, over the course of my year in-country, I became experienced enough to become the organization's Lead Infantry Tactics Instructor."

Brandon added that the "lack of military experience itself isn't a problem. You just need to be quiet and listen to those that have it, like anything else in life."

Entering into his role in Ukraine, he was already a skilled instructor. Once in Ukraine, Brandon "was immersed in infantry skills and the infantry lifestyle the entire time. As a result, I was fairly proficient by the time I went East to the front."

As well as having useful skills to offer Ukraine, Brandon says it was also important to be physically fit, and to maintain his health while in the frontline areas. "The last thing you want to become is a liability because you failed to keep yourself in shape."



Figure 3: Brandon at a training facility in Kyiv.

There are many reasons, Brandon shared, and "considerable overlap in motivations" for foreign volunteers to travel to Ukraine.

"The overarching theme," he noted, "was that we supported Ukraine's freedom and right to choose. Many foreigners [that] I served with were Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans and," he notably observed, "they saw a marked difference between Ukraine's desire to be free and Afghanistan's relative indifference."

Naturally, prior military experience is most useful. But, he offered, "it's important to temper expectations for what service in Ukraine will be like. Ukraine is not a NATO military and does not have the same kind of expectations that comes with that. Expect a culture that is far less risk averse than what you might be used to. Also understand that you are the underdog. You do not have air support on demand and the enemy largely has a significant advantage when it comes to artillery. If you are not mentally prepared to be shelled and to fight without the kind of advantages inherent with being in NATO military, it is not the place for you."

To be more succinct, he added, "If that's acceptable to you, keep an open mind and listen to those with experience in Ukraine. Very few Western veterans have experience fighting toe-to-toe in a conventional war with a peer enemy."

Brandon served alongside Ukrainians and Americans. "Although I know they are in Ukraine, I did not meet any other Canadians or other nationalities."

He told us that there are many volunteering opportunities in Ukraine, no matter what kind of aid you might wish to offer, recommending that one first "do research to ensure any group you intend on working with is professional and has a good reputation. For enlisting, the International Legion of Ukraine is going to have the most English speakers available if you don't have fluency in Ukrainian, which can be a real barrier otherwise."

Information about joining the International Legion of Ukraine can be found at the <u>International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine</u>.

Once Brandon decided he was going to Ukraine, family and friends and family were very supportive and "knew it was what I wanted to do. Family helped with equipment and other expenses."

And so, off he went, spending about a year in Ukraine, with a month break in between to bring equipment over from the United States.

His first role was in Western Ukraine where he provided initial training and support to the 47th Separate Motor Rifle Battalion (now the 47th Separate Assault Brigade). He also spent time in Donetsk, at the front, with the 68th Jaeger Infantry Brigade. Here, he also served in a training/advisory capacity.



Figure 4: In a MaxxPro Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle at the front in Donetsk with the 68th Jager Infantry Brigade.

Brandon remains committed to Ukraine. Soon, he will return to train with the team he has put together as they prepare for the next deployment. This new organization "will primarily be focused on reconnaissance and other frontline combat support tasks."

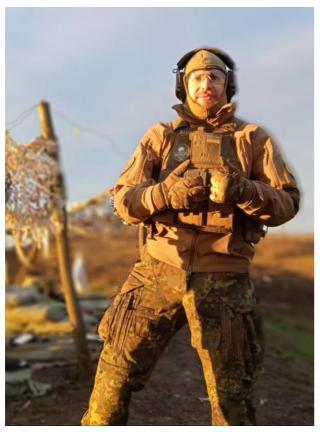


Figure 5: Brandon at the front near Vuhledar.

Anticipating a month-long deployment, Brandon and his team will work alongside other groups that specialize in similar roles, such as demining, as well as other value combat support work. For example, one partner organization, <u>Invictus Global Response</u>, with which Brandon has worked on other projects.

"The intention will be to spend the majority of our time in the East and we have a couple of units interested in what our team offers."

When asked what our readers should know about the situation in Ukraine, Brandon said that "Morale is very high in the Ukrainian Army. This will be a long war, so pauses in progress are to be expected and we should not become demoralized as a result of them."

And, he added, "as long as Ukraine continues to choose to fight, we should support Ukraine. Our support is cheap in comparison to the effort and resolve of the Ukrainian people."

There are many ways to support Ukraine, he offered. For instance, "projects like *Postcards* to the Front help keep everyone's spirits up."

Also, "donate to reputable groups working in Ukraine. Continue to keep Ukraine in the forefront everyone's minds. When things settle into stalemate and there's no large advances being made by either side, the war becomes "normal" and news falls progressively from the front page."

And so, he urges, "the best way to help Ukraine is to not become indifferent."

Overall, Brandon is rather quiet about his involvement with Ukraine. While he has received some recognition in Ukraine for his service to the National Guard of Ukraine for predeployment training, he doesn't view his involvement as anything particularly special. Just something he must do, for reasons that align with his personal values.

We met Brandon at the February 24th *Global Day of Action* rally in Oshawa. He joined us to sign postcard messages of support for Ukraine's Defenders, as well as to sign the Canada/Ukraine flag which will soon to arrive at a brigade at the front lines.

He speaks, from experience, of the value of postcard messages of support to Ukraine's Defenders.

Simply, "messages of support are very uplifting and show that people on this side of the world do think what we're doing [in Ukraine] is special [important]. It lets everyone know that Ukraine doesn't exist in a vacuum, and isn't alone."

Let's write some Ukrainian!

To make a special connection with the Defenders who receive your cards, try some of these Ukrainian phrases.

What you do is incredible те, що ви робите, неймовірно

Please, be careful будь ласка, будьте обережні

Be strong and stay safe Будьте сильними та бережіть себе

Stay till the end! (to the end of the war) Стійте до кінця

Don't give up Не здавайтеся!

And, to close your message, try one of these:

I wish you a victory Бажаю вам перемоги

Bless Ukraine Благослови Україну

With love

3 любов'ю

(at the end of the letter)

With care

3 турботою

(at the end of the letter)

3 повагою

With respect / respectfully (at the end of the letter)

This is my reality

By Helen



While writing this article, I received an email from Polly. It was around 5am her time in Odesa, Ukraine.

She wrote, "I recently received your gorgeous card with Polina and it was so amazing to receive it! I wanted to take a photo in our realities and photograph it in the parking garage. Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to have a girl in Canada named after me, I can't express my gratitude. I'm sending you a few photos, you never know if you need them:) More love for you."

This is her reality.

Sheltering underground, away from the bombing, with her mother and her beloved cat, Mura, and dog, Basya.

Often, all night long.

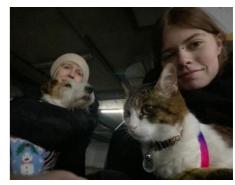




Figure 6: Postcard Polina.

Last September we held postcard-writing workshops in Merrickville, a quaint historic town in south-eastern Ontario. Our friend, and supporter, Jan, created Postcard Polina as a beacon of hope for Ukraine, and to invite Village Bean coffee shop patrons and passersby to write messages of support to Defenders.

"I need a name for my creation," Jan told me a week before our Merrickville visit. She wouldn't tell me what the creation was, but said that I had to give her a name that works with 'postcard'. I told Jan about Polly, in Odesa; short for Polina.

What a delightful surprise to meet Postcard Polina on our arrival in town!



It had been more than a year since I began sending Polly and her mother, Nadya, monthly postcards with messages of hope, good cheer, and support. There are 38 other Ukrainians to whom I send similar monthly postcards. Most found through <u>Postcrossing</u> in the days and weeks after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. But one way that I could immediately support Ukrainians, under fire.



This was before I learned about *Postcards to the Front*. That would come later.



Through the early months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Nadya and Polly and their family managed to carry on.

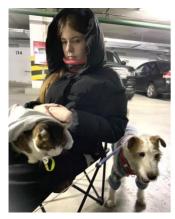
It's become more difficult to 'manage'.

While her "days [are] pretty monotonous," Nadya told me, doing what she can for her family, as a housewife, nothing is as it was pre-invasion.

Things were already hard due to impacts from the pandemic. The full-scale invasion just made things worse.

Everything about life in Odesa, the Black Sea port city where they live, has been dramatically altered. Harder. Scarier. In recent months, they suffer more frequent and stronger assaults from the skies. Buildings around them burn and collapse. People and pets are homeless. Or killed.

"My husband lost his job. We had to sell the house, as it became too difficult to maintain it during blackouts ... impossible to heat, and no light for 6-12 hours each day."



War wears people down. Polly began to struggle with her postsecondary studies, finding it stressful to learn, to study, to do her work, often in a bomb shelter. Food and household goods became scarce. The freedom to get around outside was taken away from them. For example, Nadya loved to ride her bike, but is not much able to now.

Already, Nadya is counting the years since the invasion.

"It was very scary in the first year. After all, there wasn't even a siren warning about an air attack. Complete confusion, because we had never encountered this before. During the explosions, we were hiding in a small corridor. Our house was not far from the sea and all the attacks mostly came from there. The rockets were flying right over our roof. We moved all the beds away from the windows. It was scary to fall asleep. I often fell into a panic. My daughter [Polly] calmed me down, although I saw that she was very afraid. In the first days, I and all the people were focused on stocking up on food, but there wasn't enough of it. I remember how we ran from one store to another in search of pasta, canned food and food for our animals."

And then, a harsher reality settled in. "What I was not yet prepared for was the fact that ... I was left without friends in our city. Most went abroad to save their children and grandchildren. Even though my family was here, I felt a huge emptiness."

Nadya found comfort and grew friendships, through Postcrossing.

"Almost immediately [following the invasion]," she told me, "I started receiving postcards with words of support from different countries: Austria, Germany, Poland, Great Britain, Finland, Japan, USA and, of course, Canada."

Before the invasion, Nadya was more interested in the image on the postcard; whether it fit into her collection. "Now," she says, "words are very important to me; those words that you write to me. After all, the whole world knows what is happening now in Ukraine. Your words, such as 'Take care of yourself', 'We wish



Ukraine Victory', are very important to me. And even if in your letter you and other people do not talk about the war, but talk about your ordinary day, about your family ... all this really distracts me from sad thoughts. And, of course, I show every postcard to my daughter. And she shows me her postcards!"

When Nadya told me about the arrival of her first grandchild, I sent a series of cards to Nadya and Polly and to welcome the newborn little girl into the family. It was then that I started to write more about my grandchildren, as both Nadya and I had something new in common: grandmotherhood.



"I smile reading your cards," she says of my description of life with my grandchildren.

Both Nadya and Polly love their seaside city, Odesa, with its picturesque architecture, such as the Odesa Opera and Ballet Theatre and the historic Transfiguration Cathedral – severely damaged by a Russian missile last summer – all making the city centre a UNESCO heritage site. There's also the famous Potomkin Stairs that lead to the Black Sea where the spectacular Vorontsov Lighthouse stands. A beacon of light, for sea farers and for the people of Odesa, living through dark times.

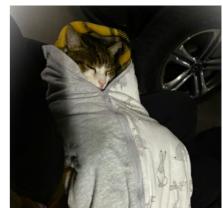


Nadya laments the destruction of her beautiful historic city. "Architectural monuments are being destroyed, our marine terminal was completely destroyed. Considerable funds will be required to restore the port, the marine station, and all of the architectural structures."

Their beautiful city has had no respite from the bombing. "This year," Nadya recalled, "half-an-hour before New Year's Eve, the strongest bombing of Odessa began. We were all sitting in the corridor with a cat and a dog and looked at the festively laid table through the doorway."

This is their reality.

Nadya is angry about the casualties amongst the civilian population. "As a result of [recent] shelling on a nearby street, a teenager was killed by shrapnel. I want the whole world to know about this! I want to scream in despair and anger! Russians, wake up! You are criminals! You kill unarmed people!!!"



This is Ukraine's reality.



Polly has reduced her psychology study load, to work part time, as well as to spend more time with her mother. She also needs more quiet time at home as the stress of constant attack has been hard on her.

She recalls that on the date that the full-scale invasion began in February, 2022, her best friend went to shelter in Switzerland. Although they have only been able to meet again a few times since, "our meetings are filled with fun, laughter and productive walks. But, when she leaves, my soul becomes sad."

Like her mother, Polly has made new Postcrossing friends since the full-scale invasion. For example, Maarit, in Finland, who has sent Polly postcards, envelopes with tea, a parcel with a cup and towels, Finnish sweets, and more. Polly feels comforted that people from other countries support Ukraine with such care. "Words of support warm my soul."



Polly has also been proactive in reaching out to the Postcrossing community, posting requests for birthday cards for her loved ones. "Strangers happily offered their help in this matter, making me and my family very happy."

Of course, I sent birthday wishes, too.



Neither Polly nor Nadya were aware of *Postcards to the Front*. Both agree that knowing that a stranger from another country empathizes and thinks about them is worth a lot!

"I consider this good moral support," said Nadya. "The main thing is that the words are written from the heart!"

Polly shared that she has read "how much the military rejoices at the drawings of Ukrainian children that are included in parcels that they receive. I think, then, that when you receive a postcard with support from another country, while protecting your people, it's even more pleasant."

Nadya recalled one time when she "saw on TV how one military man said that they were given letters from Ukrainian schoolchildren. One wrote about their fears. One wrote that they were proud of our military. And everyone sent wishes to return home safe and sound."

All helpful to boost morale.

Polly imagines that the way she feels on receiving a postcard would be similar to how a Defender might feel: "the words 'we are on your side', 'victory is for Ukraine', 'our country supports you', and 'may there be peace in your country', can only be pleasant. And sad. Postcards like this move me to tears, as [the writer] is so far away. But, they are for us, on our side."



When she sees reports in the media about the conditions that their military are living through to defend their people, their land, she confided, "my heart breaks! Just imagine what it means to spend the night in the open air for at least a week when there is cold rain and snow. Because of the shelling, it is not always possible to get food. But you still need to carry out combat missions! The people who are now defending Ukraine are real heroes! And after all, most of them are not professional soldiers."



Polly imagines that if she sat down with you, dear reader, she would say, "be kinder to each other. Continue to support Ukraine. We don't give up. And we need more weapons and ammunition. As much support as possible." Including postcards.





Despite the ongoing war, the constant bombing and hiding in the dark for long cold hours, Nadya says that she has become much stronger than she was two years ago. Not physically, but "strong in spirit." And this, she says, is "thanks to the support of people. The example of our Defenders, the family and friends, and friends abroad whom I met at Postcrossing ... friends who find the time to write to me."

Polly adds that "the war has shown me that Ukrainians know how to unite and, for this, I cannot but rejoice. Recently, there was a fundraiser for the purchase of 35 ships. Many businesses helped collect this money; not a small amount. It was collected in two days. I am proud of our people."

And what do they see in the future?

Polly hopes that she will have earned her degree in psychology, and will have established a shelter for animals. All through the war, she has been doing what she can to feed homeless cats, dogs and wild birds. She views this care for animals, also suffering through the war, to be one way of being useful.

Nadya imagines that tourism and other funding support will help rebuild her beautiful city. She also imagines that she will, one day, "plant a tree, take care of it and look at it with joy from the window, and ... maybe with sadness."







Australia Branch News and Updates

By Peter

> Increasing Our Support base

Last month I mentioned that I was trying to increase our support base by distributing flyers around my neighbourhood. So far, I have leafleted around 400 homes. I figure I have about 100 more to do.

This has resulted with an extra 13 cards this month that otherwise we wouldn't have had. I'm not ready to give up on this yet. All we need is for a couple of people to get passionate about it and we could end up getting another 20 or 30 cards a month.

We will see next month if I have found a couple of passionate people.

I am also expecting a bunch of the very Australian cards that Garth W. produces for us. I was going to put one here but the last one were snapped up on ANZAC Day.

Meanwhile, another 400 cards has arrived. If you need any to write, let me know.

Finally, as we strive to increase our support base, I'm thinking that if you Postcard Warriors are able to recruit just one person to our cause from amongst your family and friends, I could stop being a street walker!

> Ukrainian Association Sunshine

This is the second time that *Postcards to the Front* has been invited to an ANZAC Day barbecue in Sunshine. We were represented by Postcard warrior Dr. Gab and myself.

It was so good to see familiar faces at this event. As you can see from the flyer, we got billing so people would know we were there.

We were mentioned in the welcoming speech along with the ANZAC ode. It was really like being with family.





Notes for our readers –

ANZAC Day is observed each year on April 25th to remember the service of Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. Similar to Remembrance Day (Canada), or Veterans Day (United States), both observed each year on November 11th.

Figure 7: The ANZAC Ode.

We were also rewarded with over 50 cards on the day, which included some really cute cards by some of the kids.

In Ukraine, there is Defender's Day, which is a public holiday on October 1st when Ukrainians honour veterans and fallen members of the armed forces.



Figure 8: Some of the Happy crowd.

Canada Branch News and Updates

By Helen

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY to all of us at Canada Branch, and to all of our supporters!

This month, we celebrate one year of sending postcard messages of support and encouragement to Ukraine's Defenders. Nearly 2,000 cards have made their way from Canada Branch to Ukraine's Defenders, with many thanks to all of *you* postcard warriors!

We've received cards from hundreds of Canadians from across the country, as well as cards from Australia, Costa Rica, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States.

To celebrate this milestone, we asked our granddaughters to draw names from amongst all those who wrote cards to. The lucky winners receive the following tokens of our appreciation, sent from home base in Ukraine.



- Borscht from Ukraine:
 Joyce of New Hamburg, Ontario and Robin in Baltimore, Maryland.
- Socks from Ukraine:Ron, in Bowmanville, Ontario.
- 3. A miscellaneous batch of postcards: Aloy and Edu from Costa Rica.

In the following section are some memories from our first year.



A Brief History of Conada



First meeting in **April 2023** to discuss the launch of *Postcards to the Front Canada*: Helen & Jean-Michel, Peter (Australia) and Tamara (Ukraine).

First cards arrive in Millbrook.









First cards arrive in Ukraine, in under a month of postal travel.

A group of Postcrossers gather in Windsor for a meet-up and to write messages of support to Ukraine.









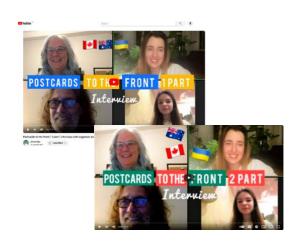


A group of card-markers in New Hamburg, Ontario, gather to create and write postcards to Defenders.

Two postcard workshops in Merrickville, Ontario: one at the Royal Canadian Legion, and the other at the Eastern Ontario Postcard Show. Plus Cards created and written by Gr. 3 students at Merrickville Public School.









Ukrainian YouTuber, Anna Byo, posted a two-part interview about the project on her channel, receiving many views and, of course, generating a lot of interest. And, of course, postcards. To see the interviews, click Part 1 and Part 2.

Grade 5/6 students at our local public school write messages of support to Defenders for Remembrance Day.











Postcard workshop with Polish students visiting Canada for leadership training through the Polish Academy of Canada.





Lotteries / prizes organized on Postcrossing forum to encourage Postcrossers writing postcards to the Defenders.

Postcard workshops at St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Church, and at St. Matthews Anglican Church in Oshawa, Ontario.





February 24th Global Day of Action rally in Oshawa, Ontario + postcard writing and flag signing. Hats knit by our friend, Lynda.

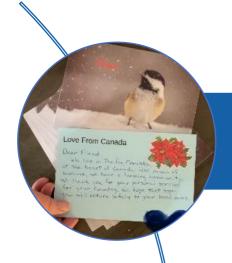








A number of individuals and groups have designed cards for this project. Here are a few samples:



Chickadee, designed by Manitoba photographer **Doug Lauvstad**, and postcards written by members of the La Pas, Manitoba community.



Easter greetings designed by Saskatchewan artist **Connie Borsa** at Prairie Reflections Cards.



Handcrafted by New Hamburg, Ontario resident Joyce.

Finally, we've held several contests and lotteries over the course of this year, including one run by our layout editor, Linda, whose offerings generated quite a bit of interest; more importantly, hundreds of cards for Defenders.

Of course, it's all been about sending messages of support to Ukraine's Defenders.





Need cards? We have **lots**! Check out our new ones, proudly printed at Coba Studios in Merrickville, Ontario!



Drop us a line by email, and we'll be happy to send you a batch – FREE! – that you can write to Defenders. Card designs by Jean-Michel Komarnicki. *Postcard Polina* [on the right] is a creation of Jan Schryburt (Merrickville, Ontario), who placed Polina outside the The Village Bean Coffee House in autumn 2023 to promote Postcards to the Front.



Please ... share our website as widely as you can — <u>postcardstothefrontcanada.com</u>. The best way for you to stay up-to-date with us is by clicking to subscribe. Also, invite family and friends to write cards. Maybe you want to organize a postcard-writing bee? Check our website for tips, <u>How to Organize a Postcard-Writing Workshop</u>. Need cards? We'll send you some. We're happy to offer our support for your efforts.



Your cards <u>do</u> make a difference ... as Brandon tells us in this month's newsletter in the article, "When Zelenskyy called, Brandon answered" –

... messages of support are very uplifting and show that people on this side of the world do think that what we're doing [in Ukraine] is special [important]. It lets everyone know that Ukraine doesn't exist in a vacuum, and isn't alone.

Brandon

Thank you for your continued support of Defenders of Ukraine!

Help Wanted!

Do you want to be part of a global creative effort?

Do you have used stamps? Can you share them with us?

Antonella, a supporter of *Postcards to the Front* who lives in Croatia, has offered to create a unique postcard for us, using postage stamps.

Please ... if you have used stamps lying about, send them along for Antonella's postcard project. Any stamps are welcome. However, she has a shortage of **yellow and blue stamps**, essential to her project. If you can, please prioritize these. But all stamps are welcome.

Thank you!

You can send your gently used stamps to -

Bencani 1 P. O. Box 184 Or, to –

51216 Viskovo Millbrook, ON LOA 1G0

CROATIA Canada