

Kateryna Kononenko Ukraine



Kateryna: My name is Kate. I'm from Ukraine. I am not going to school, but I'm working.

Interviewer: When did you come to the United States?

Kateryna: I came to the United States in November last year [2022], so it's been 11 months.

Interviewer: How was your experience in Ukraine?

Kateryna: Before the war started Ukraine was gorgeous. I loved my country, and I still love it. And I had a lot of friends. I'd been working, I'd been studying. So I just did everything as a normal person does and I was just happy to be in society and live my life with them. When the war started, of course, everything changed. And everything became the total opposite. I didn't have friends next to me, I didn't have a stable job, things like that. So I would say my experience was pretty amazing until the war started.

Interviewer: Do you have any family back there right now?

Kateryna: Yes, I do. Only me and my mom escaped the country. My grandparents, my uncle and his family, and all my grandma's family is still there, so she'll stay.

Interviewer: Who helped you come to America?

Kateryna: War made me [come to the United States] but my friend helped me a lot. She's American and we met while she was serving her LDS mission back in Ukraine five years ago. We were still good friends and kept in touch. Once the war started she invited me here just to escape for two years, or the time while the war was going, just to get me in a safe place. So my friend.

Interviewer: What was your job back in Ukraine?

Kateryna: I was an English teacher, or more like a tutor, for three years. I just did this for fun the first time. And then I started working more officially.

Interviewer: Are you still doing that here?

Kateryna: I did that a little bit and then I realized teaching English in America is kind of fun and strange, but it doesn't really make sense for me to be honest. So I decided to change my profession to follow a different side in a different field. So now I'm working as a medical assistant. So I went into the medical sphere.

Interviewer: What is your 'American Dream'?

Kateryna: To become a really cool doctor and have my own clinic- that would be fun. Like how it is on American movies and TV shows.

Interviewer: If a war did not happen in your country, what do you think you would be doing right now?

Kateryna: I would think that I would open my own business in the English sphere. I was planning to do that already, but I didn't do that, unfortunately. To be honest that is a really hard question. I will say that I would just continue to studying, like working and maybe have some more friends. Maybe I would start a family. I don't know. I'm 20 years old, so I don't know what would've happened.

Interviewer: What were the first few months like after moving here?

Kateryna: It was a disaster. It was hard. I was struggling a lot. First of all, for me, every single thing is so different and at the same time kind of similar to Ukraine. The reason is, I spent the first 6 months of the war in Germany and then I moved to America. After Germany, America looked kind of like a paradise for me. I love Germany, but it's not a country for me, it wasn't comfortable- the food, society, and language I was struggling with. When I came to America, I was like, 'Wow, you speak English!' so life is easy. So, I think I was struggling a lot. First of all, because of food. Second of all, because of society. Everybody was so friendly and I was like, 'Why are you talking to me?' Yeah, I was really struggling, but it became better.

Interviewer: Do you like your home food or American food?

Kateryna: My stomach is dying still. I am trying to get used to it. I say that I would prefer Ukrainian food more. Because for me, it sounds more healthy. And I think if it's better for your health, it's usually yummy. In Ukraine, food is really good, even if it's not really healthy sometimes. But in America, everything is so fatty and has a lot of oil. And for me, it tastes good, but not as good as my food as I prefer.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your hobbies?

Kateryna: I love volleyball. I love organizing events. So I loved to organize a lot of events for young adults. Back in Ukraine, I had a group of people and we were organizing different events, going from one part of the country to another one for like, one week as a holiday and everything like that. And for me, I would say that was my passion in my life.

Interviewer: What are your hopes for your community?

Kateryna: To be more open. Because everybody is telling us that we are grumpy. We are not. You just need to talk to people more to open our hearts. And I would say that I would really hope that Ukrainian people could be more open to everybody. And to not hide some emotions inside. It's kind of like America, but not that much- something in the middle.

Interviewer: What are you grateful about America?

Kateryna: Oh, for a lot of help. Since the war started America helped us a lot and I am really grateful for that. I would say that just people, how they react to you, is amazing. How they support you all the time. I would say that I'm really grateful for all the support for all the words people here are saying to my country. And just being friendly and kind and being nice. I think this is the most important for me. This is what I'm grateful for.

Interviewer: In the United States they covered news about the Ukraine War. I was wondering if the U.S. media fully covered the whole war?

Kateryna: Never. I would say it's really hard to cover that because you have your own news as well, you cannot speak only about Ukraine and to only cover everything that is happening in Ukraine. If that were to happen you really need to talk only about Ukraine all the time. So it's not going to be American news anymore. It's going to be Ukrainian news here- and it doesn't make sense. So I would say that it's never covered. It's not too bad. It's sad for us because we want the world to know what's going on. We want help, we need help, we need support. I would say that it's not covered all the time, but it's not too bad- you cover a lot. Sometimes you cover the most important events that happened.

Interviewer: What are some differences and similarities between Ukraine and the U.S.?

Kateryna: That's a really good question. So, it is really interesting because, from one side, Ukrainians are grumpy while Americans are really happy all the time. But at the same time, once Ukrainians open their hearts and get used to you, we are kind of similar to each other. We are so goofy, we are so funny as well and just like regular people. I would say hard workers is about Ukrainians and Americans. The difference is more about how you react to different situations, like, your emotions are so different. For example, Americans would be sad for something that happened and Ukrainians would be angry. Americans would be happy if something happened, Ukrainians would be like, 'Oh, nice, that's good to hear.' So I would say reaction to the situation. Similarities- The way you gather for all the celebrations and things like that. These kinds of family traditions are so similar to what we do, at least in my region and my country. Family is really important for us. Family being together and coming together for a birthday, for example, or for the New Year, or something like that. Family traditions is a little bit similar.

Interviewer: What traditions have been passed down in your family?

Kateryna: We're trying to keep all the traditions with my family here. So as I remember, we were trying to do them every year the same way, and we were trying to keep that even when the war started. I'm here, my family's back in Ukraine, but we have the most important stuff is Zoom. Zoom really works to make my family together again. So that's really nice to even just be together.

Interviewer: What possessions does your family treasure?

Kateryna: That's a hard question. I would say that for my family the most important thing is the family. Every person in this group of people is my family- This is the biggest treasure for us, and especially the children. So we are not really concentrating on something like a tradition to meet every year, or like have huge photo albums just because we want them. No, it's more about people and it's more about how you connect to each other, and how you're talking to each other, and how you like to live together and support each other. So I would say each family member.

Interviewer: What does 'being welcoming' mean to you?

Kateryna: Hugs. When you hug somebody and you're saying, 'Welcome, welcome, welcome,' that's the meaning of welcoming for me. And just being nice. When a person is really happy to see you and really enjoys you being here. It's really important for me, and I would say that this emotion that a person shows you all the time and they see you is the most important for me as a 'being welcome.'

Interviewer: You used to work as an English tutor. Was it hard to switch to a new job?

Kateryna: It was hard. I think I started relearning English from the very beginning when I went into the medical field because all the words were different and I was struggling a lot. But in general, I would say that I started loving it, and I started having a passion for it. I would say that it made it much easier for me to go into this atmosphere. It was hard from the English part, but the learning and the community that was pretty easy. because I liked it.

Interviewer: Do you prefer your old job as an English tutor, or do you like your new job in the medical field?

Kateryna: I'm currently working in Bountiful with Family Medicine Clinic, and I'm working for a Ukrainian-speaking doctor. So it's a kind of double opportunity to work with somebody from your country and to help at the same time a lot of refugees. Because a lot of refugees come into our clinic, just because they don't speak English enough and they just want to have this medical support and mental support when they're coming to the medical assistant or doctor. I will say that I love medicine more because there's much more to learn, and it's much more fun. In English, you can only say what is the present continuous. And in the medical field, you can break somebody's bone just to make it look normal. I feel that's much more fun for me at least. In English, when you're becoming a teacher, it's like three years and you're done. You don't have any more ways to learn to grow. In the medical sphere, it's always something new, you're always learning, always, always, always.

Interviewer: What is something that people living outside America don't understand about Americans? Something that you have to live here to know.

Kateryna: The people and cars here. I really thought that cars in America were fake. For example, the huge trucks I thought were only used on TV as a joke, but I realized it is true and I love that. The people in general: Everybody really thinks that it is a joke that Americans are really fun and kind and all the time smiling. I thought that it was a joke as well because obviously it sounds strange for me like, 'How can you be happy all the time?' But I have learned that you can. Yeah, you definitely can.

Interviewer: What's your favorite holiday?

Kateryna: *Ivan Kupula*. This Ukrainian holiday is really really fun. 'Ivan' is his name and 'kapula' means, 'he is taking a bath.' This sounds really strange, so I will explain. So this is a holiday when everybody starts making a huge, huge fire. And while it's burning, you jump over it. You make this cool stuff, like a wreath hat of flowers to wear, you put some with candles on it,

and you put it to float on a river. Girls are usually making them to put on the river and it floats somewhere. Then if a guy catches it, you definitely get to get married- It's like a tradition. There is a lot of fun stuff for Ivan Kupula. You're usually dressed in Ukrainian traditional dresses. They look really beautiful. And you're trying to guess your future by doing fun rituals. I think this is the funniest part of the traditions.

Interviewer: How do the guys know who the wreaths are from?

Kateryna: When a guy catches a wreath, usually the girl can see the guy. So if you don't want to meet this guy you can just run away. We call these wreaths, *vinok* and all of the wreaths are so special so you can see which one is yours. You decorated the way you wanted to. You will know that it's yours because it looks special. Once somebody catches it, you see somebody with it and maybe you like that he looks good, so you meet up, but if you don't like him, you can just run away as fast as you can.

Interviewer: Did you notice any differences between what you can have in the U.S. and your country?

Kateryna: I would say economically now it's easier here. It's much easier to be in America. It's much easier to buy a car, to buy a house, and to find work, at least in Utah. In Utah, it's much easier to find work, but it depends on the field. But I would say to live here, in general, as a human, it's a little bit easier because everything is good. You can have everything if you have money. And the government supports you a lot. But in general, I would say economically, this is the biggest difference that I see that I would love to have Ukraine grow up a little bit- maybe a lot.

Interviewer: In the months leading up to the official declaration of the war, did everyone see it coming, or was it a big surprise?

Kateryna: We saw news that Russia built an army on our borders. We knew that it could happen, but we didn't believe that it would, because we really thought that this was our brother-nation. We never thought that they were really going to come into our country and to kill our people. I will say that it was kind of expected but we didn't believe that. We didn't believe that at all.

Interviewer: What do you remember about the start of this conflict in 2014?

Kateryna: I was a child at that time, but I remember how scared I was. I remember the situation where I was sitting on the couch, watching the news with my family, and they started talking, 'Oh my goodness, the war has started, and probably your uncle is going to go to the war.' I remember how scared I was just. They explained to me what is war, what is going on, and what's going to be next. I remember I was in my village and my parents didn't even go to the big cities, because that was dangerous. Literally in every garbage can you could find a bomb that could explode at any time. So literally, you're just walking on the street, and it could go, 'boom' and you're dead. So for me, that was pretty scary and terrifying. And I remember that as a child. After

that, the news stopped showing that a lot and they tried showing more the good parts of Ukraine, not only the part with a war, so I started forgetting about the war a little bit. I remember that we had a lot of friends in my school who were refugees from these part of Ukraine. That was heartbreaking for me because then they explained to us what was going on. I remember that they said, 'I would say you will never understand what happens during war, until you see it with your own eyes.' I understood that there was a war, but not fully.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your religious or spiritual beliefs?

Kateryna: I've been an LDS member for five years, and I became a member of the Church, kind of accidentally. My mom made me go to the church because of the English. She wanted me to study English as much as possible because she wanted me to move abroad. And I didn't want that. And I was struggling. I was like, 'No – no English in my life. I'm fine. I am Ukranian, I'm fine.' And she made me go. She didn't know that it was a church. But then the missionary asked, 'Hey, do you believe in God?' And I was like, 'Nope.' Then they started talking to us and teaching us all the lessons and telling me a lot about the church. I was 15 and it was pretty easy to tell me that something is true. I think I started believing pretty fast. I'm still an active church member. It was fun and pretty fast.

Interviewer: What is something that happened when you came here that has impacted you the most?

Kateryna: That's a hard question. When you are moving abroad, you kind of remember everything, and you have this kind of PTSD. But once you've moved here, you're trying to become normal again. And for me, I started doing that, and I was fine. Then I started working for a Ukrainian doctor and we started seeing a lot of refugees. Once we started having ten Ukrainian refugees in one day, it was like, boom, woah, I'm confused, because all the memories started coming back. I think this was a moment when my life changed again, and I felt that I came back to the war again on the very first day again. That was the moment.

Interviewer: How are you and your parents alike and different?

Kateryna: We are so different. Me and my mom, we are totally opposite people. So if you're gonna look at us, I have curly hair that is blonde, and she has dark, black hair, and her skin tone is a little bit darker than mine. Nobody believes that she's my mom because we are so different. And she's kind of introverted, she is always like, 'Don't talk to me, or what do you want from me?' and likes to be left alone all the time. And I'm like, 'Hey, let's do something.' Or 'What do you want to do this weekend?' We are totally opposite people. It's like water and fire. So that's fun. It is fun to live as fire.

Interviewer: When in life have you felt most connected?

Kateryna: Back in Ukraine. I realized that just now because I thought that I was lonely. I thought that I was really alone, I didn't have anybody to support me, I didn't have anything. But then when I moved to America, I realized 'Oh, so now I'm alone.' And I realized that I have only

my mom. But when it's only one person, it's not like a really big society and you need more communication in your life. That was interesting because in Ukraine, I had a lot of friends and a lot of people, and they always needed something. I never had a free day. And when I came here, I realized that it was a time when I was more connected.

Interviewer: What's the story behind your name?

Kateryna: My mom always told me that my name is only for cats because it's not a human name, in her opinion. Then when she met my dad, he liked the name 'Kateryna.' And she said 'No.' And he said, 'Yes.' So I am named after a cat that does not exist.

Interviewer: How old are you?

Kateryna: I am 20.

Interviewer: What objects tell the story of your life?

Kateryna: Photo albums. My family was obsessed with taking photos. So I feel like all my life is on pictures. We have huge albums from all my childhood- from school to graduation and everything in between. Photo albums literally show the film of my life.