

Advocating for Children

An Interview with Irwin Redlener, MD and Karen Redlener, Co-Founders, Ukraine Children's Action Project



Karen and Irwin Redlener

EDITORS' NOTE Irwin Redlener has dedicated his life to helping vulnerable at-risk children survive and thrive. Whether as a highly accomplished pediatrician caring for children with life-threatening illnesses, founder of the Children's Health Fund (CHF), creator of a state-of-the-art New York City Children's Hospital, discussing current public health issues and policies, or advocating on behalf of the growing numbers of children in crisis, his creative strategies have made him a sought after thought leader and speaker for media, educational organizations, and political forums. He is one of America's leading child advocates. He also devotes his energies to educating the nation about the need to be prepared for the increasing number of natural and man-made disasters that threaten cities and citizens and promoting the best methods to affect a full and speedy recovery post-disaster, particularly for children.

Karen Redlener is Co-Founder and former Executive Director of the Children's Health Fund. She has expertise in child health and development, as well as significant experience in program management and financial administration. She has a history of program design and development, including work expanding Lee County Cooperative Clinic, designing South Bronx Children's Health Center, designing CHF's signature mobile medical clinic model, and developing CHF's Healthy and Ready to Learn Program.

PROJECT BRIEF Co-Founded by Dr. Irwin Redlener and Karen Redlener, the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP) is working directly with the cities of Lviv, Ukraine and Warsaw, Poland – along with a range of local and international organizations, as well as senior government officials in both countries – to address the critical and growing needs of hundreds of thousands of traumatized kids who fled the brutal battlegrounds of eastern and southern Ukraine. Many have sought safety, usually with a parent, in the western regions of Ukraine; others are living as refugees in Poland and other countries. These children need psychological support, access to health-care and, for virtually every school-age child, access to language compatible education. This defines the mission and work of the Ukraine Children's Action Project. UCAP is working with schools and special programs in Ukraine and Poland to support access to schools and remote learning hubs for all displaced children. Many corollary needs are addressed as well, including training teachers to deal with classrooms filled with psychologically traumatized students. UCAP has also been there to provide textbooks to elementary school students when educational funds were diverted to support the vital military needs of Ukraine's army. In Lviv and Warsaw, UCAP proposed a new Future Ready initiative that will help identify health barriers to learning and offer wide-ranging support for children who are suffering from psychological trauma. UCAP is working with the American Federation of Teachers, The Polish Teacher's Union, the Ukraine Teachers Union, National Psychological Association of Ukraine, UNICEF, and other organizations. UCAP is also in regular communication with senior medical leaders in Lviv to understand and support medical and rehabilitation needs for children who have been transported from eastern and southern Ukraine to Lviv for care and treatment. Finally, UCAP's leaders are committed to helping make sure that media and the American public don't lose sight of Ukraine's children who continue to suffer under a war over which they have no say and no ability to bring the violence to an end. UCAP is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.

What was your vision for creating the Ukraine Children's Action Project (UCAP) and how do you define its mission?

Irwin: We've spent our working lives advocating for children and creating programs to help children living with adversity get the healthcare and support they need. When the Russians invaded Ukraine on February 24, we knew that civilians in general, and children in particular, were going to feel a disproportionately high impact of this war. When our friend of 50 years, the singer/activist, Joan Baez, asked how to best spend money she had raised through the sale of her art, we decided to see what we could do to help.

Beginning in April, this idea involved several trips to Poland where so many Ukrainian refugees have found a generous population who welcomed them with open arms and a government committed to caring for the millions of families who came to escape the violent brutality that Russian troops inflicted on the cities and towns of eastern and southern Ukraine. Then, in May, I got into Ukraine and had a chance to see the resilience and bravery of everyday Ukrainians who also fled Russia's missiles and decided to try and make it in western Ukraine.

Karen: After our initial trip, we realized that our experience addressing the health, education and crisis response needs of children was very relevant to the urgent needs of displaced Ukrainian children impacted by war. By establishing the Ukraine Children's Action Project, we were able to focus attention on, and raise funds for, children's critical mental health, trauma and educational continuity needs.

By the end of our second trip, we had established working relationships with the



Irwin Redlener with Andrzej Duda, President of Poland



Karen Redlener with a Warsaw shelter director

mayors of Warsaw and Lviv, the governor of the Lviv region, leadership in the Polish teacher's union, and many agencies in both cities. Besides that, of course, we spoke with countless numbers of displaced kids and their families to get a clear understanding of what was needed.

Will you provide an overview of the work of UCAP?

Irwin: Needless to say, the first concern for traumatized people seeking safe refuge is to make sure humanitarian needs are met. This means food, shelter, security, and medical care. That's where many of the major brand name organizations excel, such as UNICEF, Save the Children, International Medical Corps, and many others.

Our concern is that there needs to be greater focus on the two big issues that almost all of the refugee and displaced kids face: first, prolonged disruption of their education; and second, untreated consequences of severe psychological trauma.

Karen: So that is where UCAP is concentrating its activities. We're working with political leaders, teachers, and other relevant organizations to emphasize the need to make sure there are systems to ensure that every refugee or displaced kid is in a classroom or attending "learning hubs" to access their lessons "on-line" in supervised, language appropriate environments.

In addition, we funded a summer camp experience for dozens of Ukraine refugee children in Warsaw. We bought books for school children in Ukraine, where book budgets for the schools have been diverted to support the military. And we have been developing online training programs to help both Polish and Ukrainian teachers cope with classrooms of traumatized children. We are working with school systems in both countries to support their ability to screen kids for vision problems, hunger, and psychological and behavioral issues.

Irwin: And, as a pediatrician, I am concerned about the needs of the hospitals having what they need to provide care to the many children

transferred from the east with horrendous wounds of war.

We have a very full agenda, and we'll continue to do what we can – as long as we continue to raise the necessary funds.

One of the things we're most proud of is how quickly people came together to help us support Ukraine's kids. Our old friend, legendary singer and social activist, Joan Baez, was first to come on board. Then, the iconic actor Michael Keaton and popular MSNBC anchor, Nicolle Wallace. Supporting us with great subject matter expertise and experience are Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Dr. Harold Koplewicz, founder of the Child Mind Institute. These are among the people that are actively involved, and it makes a difference.

What do you want people to know about the current needs of Ukrainian children?

Karen: The child population of Ukraine was about 7.5 million before the war. Some 5 million kids have been emergently evacuated either out of the country or to hopefully safe havens in the west of Ukraine. We're talking about 2/3 children under age 18 who have left their homes and communities. That would be like 55 million children in the U.S. displaced under a brutal attack by a neighboring country.

All of Ukraine's children need the war to stop immediately. But even when it does, recovery will take at least a decade. All refugees, including children, need stability, safety, school, and support. This is a very rough time.

What more can be done to support Ukrainian children and address the refugee crisis?

Irwin: Americans and the West must not forget about the plight of Ukrainians – especially the millions of kids who need support and professional attention. That said, the attacks on Ukrainian civilians must cease immediately. And that's why, oddly enough, this pediatrician says that support of the Ukrainian military efforts is essential. This is an existential struggle to stop Russia from destroying a country, its people,

its economy, and its culture. All the democratic nations of the world must be aligned to help Ukraine prevail in this war.

And, of course, we hope folks will contribute to UCAP and help us make sure that this "war generation" gets through a nightmare of persistent terror. They need a glide path to successful, productive, and fulfilled lives. And Ukraine needs these kids to be educated, resilient and ready to contribute to the future recovery of their country.

How do you define success for UCAP's work?

Karen: We certainly wouldn't be able to do what we do without the support of our concerned donors. We all need to be in the struggle, but Irwin and I want to see concrete accomplishments like children linked to accessible education as a priority, universal trauma management training for teachers, making sure every kid who needs glasses or psychological support gets their needs fulfilled. Also, we want to help keep the needs of Ukrainian kids and families on the radar screen in the U.S. Irwin speaks and writes about this urgent situation as often as he can.

Will you discuss your passion for humanitarian work and what has made this work so special for you?

Irwin: Karen and I met 50 years ago working in a health clinic in the sixth poorest county in America, where "colored only" signs in certain doctors' waiting rooms had not yet been fully removed. When I made evening house calls, way out in the county, I was followed by guys in pick-up trucks with filled gun racks. I was the medical director of this VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) supported clinic in Lee County, Arkansas. Karen was a VISTA volunteer who established social service programs and screened some 1,000 children in Lee County for vision, hearing deficits and developmental delays.

Passion, whatever that means – and mission commitment – were attitudes and life perspectives that both of us grew up with. That's why our work was always exciting – and our relationship deeply romantic.

Plus, for us, injustice, racism, and especially unnecessary suffering of children are intolerable realities that we won't stop trying to deal with for as long as we can.

With all of the challenges facing Ukrainian children, how do you stay optimistic about the future?

Karen: We are inspired by each other, by our children, and by our seven grandchildren. They make us laugh, they give us hope, and they are our antidotes to whatever ails us. We hang out with them as much as we can, and we care about what the future has in store for them and all children.

We are also inspired by the incredible Ukrainian and Polish people we've met who are working so hard to help families and children get the resources they need to survive this unbelievable 21st century catastrophe.

Irwin: Strange as it may seem, we are thrilled to be able to have the energy and drive to do what we do. Actually, if we didn't think that the future will be better than the present, it would be impossible to keep moving forward with our work. ●