



Iryna Selytska, her mother Lyudmyla Stepanenko, and Jackie Lanigan from The Neighbourhood Centre. Picture by Rachel Chamberlain

PRAISE FOR AN 'ANGEL'

The Neighbourhood Centre in Bathurst has helped rescue a Ukrainian woman from the war and reunite her with her daughter in Australia. The centre's Jackie Lanigan helped to organise a visa to bring Lyudmyla Stepanenko safely to our shores. "This is a lady with a capital letter, I would say an angel in human form," Mrs Stepanenko's daughter, Iryna Selytska, said of Ms Lanigan.

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Ukrainian woman helped to reunite with her daughter

Rachel Chamberlain

AUSTRALIANS have watched the war in Ukraine from afar in horror, but for one Bathurst woman it was deeply personal and traumatic as she wondered if her mother was alive or dead.

Fortunately, Iryna Selytska can now hug her mother close and tight after she was rescued from the war zone and brought to Australia.

It was made possible through the assistance of Jackie Lanigan at The Neighbourhood Centre in Bathurst, who helped to organise a visa to bring Ms Selytska's mother, Lyudmyla Stepanenko, safely to Australian shores.

"This is a lady with a capital letter, I would say an angel in human form," Ms Selytska said of Ms Lanigan.

"She has a huge, kind, compassionate heart."

They can breathe a sigh of relief now, putting an end to months of uncertainty and fear.

It was in early 2022 that Ms Selytska lost contact with her mother for weeks, leaving her in a constant state of fear that she had been killed in the horrific attacks on Ukraine at

the hands of Russian forces.

She was in constant contact with people in internet chat groups, trying to find out if any of them knew where her mother was.

Finally, on March 16 she learned that her mother was safe.

"I jumped and cried and cried," she said of the mo-

ment she found out.

Her mother had survived the bombing of her apartment building in Mariupol, which completely decimated her home.

She and other residents, who had moved down to the first level of the five-storey building prior to the attack, had to crawl out through the

rubble and past the bodies of people who were killed.

"I was very lucky that my mother was alive, because too much people killed [in Mariupol]," Ms Selytska said.

After the bombing, Ms Stepanenko spent two weeks living underground with other survivors.

There were no blankets or

heating where they were hidden. Their only luxury was a single wooden chair.

She later travelled to other places where it was safe for her to stay, including the village of Bezimenoe, connecting with people along the way who helped to keep her alive.

In the meantime, Ms Se-

lytska contacted Ms Lanigan at The Neighbourhood Centre for help to get a visa that would allow her mother to come to Australia.

Ms Selytska, who became a citizen this year on Australia Day, already had a connection with Ms Lanigan from the citizenship process.

It took a month to secure a visitor visa after applying for it in July and, finally, on August 20 she was able to fly out to reunite with her mother, who by that point was in Rostov-on-Don, a city in southern Russia.

It was a scary journey for Ms Selytska, who didn't know what would happen when she arrived in Russia, but she said, "I had to do this for my mother; she very old and she need my help".

She described the reunion with her mother as emotional.

Her husband, who remained in Bathurst, then helped to arrange flights home. Several plane trips later, Ms Stepanenko took her first steps on Australian soil on September 3.

Ms Selytska said that day they arrived in Australia was "the best day in all my life".



Iryna Selytska, her mother Lyudmyla Stepanenko, and Jackie Lanigan from The Neighbourhood Centre. Picture by Rachel Chamberlain