

Young Ukrainian girl finds her new home in robotics



When the **Russian invasion** began, **Kira Borysozna Tkachenko** became part of the **Ukrainian diaspora** that left home to emigrate to other parts of the world.

The **15-year-old** is currently staying in **Mexico** at her sister's house and is studying at **PrepaTec Irapuato**, where she joined the **TecGear** robotics team.

"Life changes all the time. One morning you wake up and, without expecting it to happen, everything around you has completely changed. Today, what I want is to explore the world," she says.

"When I came to PrepaTec, I was talking to a girl, and she said, 'If you like science, you can try out for the robotics team. You might like it.' Once I walked into the lab, I immediately felt like it was my new home," she adds.

However, the driver for the **TecGear** team mentions how **difficult** it was to **leave her country** due to the war, **and not speaking Spanish** when she arrived in Mexico.



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War initiates a pilgrimage to Mexico

Kira used to live in the southern Ukrainian city of **Odessa**, one of the largest cities in her country.

*“That territory **isn’t occupied** right now. There are no soldiers fighting each other, but the city is **affected by the war**,” she says.*

When the war broke out, she had to leave the country, leaving her father, friends, and home behind. For her, **it was like starting over from scratch**.

Together with her mother, she **crossed the border** to **Moldova**, eventually getting to **Romania** to fly to Mexico and join her sister, who has been living in the country for three years because she is **married to a Mexican**.

The journey was not easy. They had to stay in Romania for several days, they didn’t have much money, they didn’t know how long it would take, and staying in a hotel was not an option.

No one wanted to help them, she says, until **a couple of volunteers** with a toddler and a baby decided to aid them.

“They were the best family I’ve ever met in my life. It was hard for them to help us, but they did it anyway. Without their support, I probably wouldn’t be here today.

*“They gave me a **tree of life bracelet** before I went to the airport. It shows you that when you feel like it’s all over, it’s the end of the world, and you have nothing left, there are **good people who***

will help you.”

The challenge of rebuilding her life in Mexico

Her first days in Mexico were complicated because she was missing some school documents and because she didn't speak **Spanish**.

*“I didn't have my documents so I could carry on studying, but **my family worked very hard** so that I could continue my education.”*

Her family's work resulted in her **getting a scholarship** to **PrepaTec**, which she was able to do by joining the **theater group**.

She admits that it has been a challenge taking all the **Spanish classes**, which is a language she **hasn't yet mastered**, but she **is able to understand it more and more**, using English to make herself understood.

“You wake up one morning and, without expecting it to happen, everything around you has completely changed. Today, what I want is to explore the world.”

Interested in science and technology from an early age

The young woman is clear that she is definitely **a math and science person**. She knows it's something that's in her blood and that she undoubtedly **inherited from her family**.

*“Almost my entire **family has been connected to science**. All my grandparents were engineers. My grandmother was an engineering physicist, and my father is an IT engineer. I was excited about it from an early age, and I liked to watch movies about science and other interesting things,” she said.*

She said that she even sometimes helped her father on some projects and had a few hobbies such as **number games** which she used to **improve her memory**.

It's at **PrepaTec** where she found the opportunity to compete in the **FIRST Robotics Competition**, says Kira.

She adds that this is a type of experience she never had before, and she sees important lessons in it for her education, such as **values and skills**.

*“FIRST helps give you **mental stability** and improves your **communication** and **problem-solving skills** because you learn how to deal better with challenges and how to work as a team and collaborate with other teams in your alliance,” she says.*

However, Kira admits that she didn't have an opportunity in her native Ukraine to join a project like **FIRST Robotics Competition**, where today she is **in charge of operating the mechanisms** of the **TecGear** team robot.

“I’m very grateful to have the opportunity to be here and try all this. In fact, the FIRST competitions help me a lot with everything that’s going on and what’s happened in my life,” the student says.

*“For me, it’s a mixture of feelings because I’m anxious and nervous, but **everyone on the team is supportive**. It’s weird, but nice, knowing that you control a huge 46-kilogram machine with your hands. It’s a **unique experience**.”*



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Finding a new home in Mexico

Among others, one challenge for her as a foreigner in Mexico is the food, she laughs.

*“Food is another big challenge because **I’m a vegetarian** and Mexican food has a lot to do with **meat and spicy flavors** that I don’t really like. There have been other cultural shocks because I grew up in a completely different world in another part of the planet.”*

However, Kira admits that something she really likes about Mexico is the **warmth of the people** and the mentality of always having a **positive attitude** in the face of challenges.

“For example, (Mauricio) Chávez, our team mechanic, is an incredible person who knows what the team needs. I’m a very stressed person, and when there are problems, he says, ‘Don’t worry, everything will be fine, we’re going to fix it no matter what,’” said Kira.

“I’m very grateful to have the opportunity to be here and try all this. In fact, the FIRST competitions help me a lot with everything that’s going on and what’s happened in my life.”

However, the young woman says she is **excited** to have the opportunity to continue studying and to have a space where she can continue to have **experiences in technology**.

*“There are times when I feel anxious and tired, for example, when I have a theater event or I have exams, but I need to **prepare for a competition** at the same time.*

*“But, **I’m grateful to be here** because I know there are a lot of people in the same position as me who will never have these kinds of opportunities,” she added.*

Keeping in touch with her loved ones

The student says that although it has been complicated because of power outages and Internet instability, she has been able to **keep in touch with her family and friends** back home.

*“Even my best friend watched my competition on Twitch, and she was **texting** me to congratulate me on winning a match and stuff like that.*

“I still keep in touch with a lot of people back in Ukraine, although it’s complicated,” Kira added.

Today, the young woman does not know what the future holds for her. In view of the changes she has recently experienced in her life, she prefers not to make many plans for the future.

*“I hope it’s possible to go somewhere up north, because I love winter. I like snow and things like that. I’d like to go somewhere quiet and **study something related to science, engineering, robotics**, and maybe related to medicine,” she added.*

Finally, Kira shared a reflection she heard at FIRST that she relates a lot to herself, her life experience, the war, and other experiences: **“No matter how many times you fail, what matters is that you keep getting back up and keep going.”**



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FIRST: the world's robotics classroom

FIRST (an acronym for *For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology*) is a robotics tournament conceived as an **aspirational event** to get **children and young people interested in science**.

It was created in 1989 by **Dean Kamen**, a **prominent inventor and entrepreneur**, who created **Segway**, the vertical two-wheeled vehicle.

FIRST Robotics Competition is a robotics competition aimed at young people between 14 and 18 years old.

The Tec Monterrey campus hosted the first of three regional tournaments in Mexico from March 1 to 4, the second at the **Puebla campus from March 15 to 18**, and the third at the **Laguna campus from March 22 to 25**.

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