When Oksana Sayko, MD, MPH, associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) at the Medical College of Wisconsin, first immigrated to the United States in the mid 1990s from Ukraine, she did not know a single person, had difficulty speaking English and was caring for a young child.

“People in my new community saw our family struggling and reached out to us to lend a helping hand,” recalls Dr. Sayko. “When I asked why they were willing to help a stranger, they told me that the opportunity to truly help doesn’t come along very often in life. “This has stuck with me ever since, and made me want to do the same for others.”

Dr. Sayko recently was presented with that opportunity. In November 2014, some 5,000 miles away from her Wisconsin home, the Russian military crossed the border into Ukraine, setting off years of fighting between the two sovereign nations. Additionally, the subsequent annexation of the Crimea region, along with demonstrations by pro-Russian groups within Ukraine, escalated into an armed conflict between the Ukrainian government and separatist forces. To date, Ukraine has experienced thousands of fatalities and more than 9,000 wounded.

“The casualties were astounding. I couldn’t just sit and watch. I knew I needed to use my skills as a physician to help,” says Dr. Sayko. Her first call was to her PM&R colleague, professor David Del Toro, MD, GME ’92, to enlist his help for a medical mission. Although Dr. Del Toro had no connection to Ukraine, he did not hesitate to join. “She came to me and I immediately signed up to help,” Dr. Del Toro remarks. “I didn’t see this as a responsibility for those connected to the conflict. Rather, I saw it as my duty as a health professional to help where I am needed the most.”

Dr. Sayko and Del Toro quickly assembled a team to travel to Ukraine’s capital city, Kiev (“Kyiv” in Ukrainian), in summer 2015. This initial mission was purely clinical – aimed at helping as many of the wounded as possible. Although the team provided a vital and much needed service for many injured patients, Dr. Sayko knew that they were not doing enough. “I recognized that there was a better way that we could be serving the Ukrainian people, more than just treating on an individual level. To enact change in a bigger picture capacity, we needed to alter our approach,” Dr. Sayko shares.

To that end, after returning to Milwaukee, Drs. Sayko and Del Toro solicited help from MCW’s Office of Global Health to devise a more productive plan for a return mission in 2016. “This was our overall intent, and we are well on our way toward that end.”

The medical community in Ukraine embraced the opportunity to learn from Dr. Sayko’s team. Altogether, more than 100 “students” – comprising professors at local medical education institutions and physical therapists – graduated from the course with certificates in rehabilitation medicine. They have been using the skills gained during this trip at local teaching hospitals.

“We created a situation where we could help more of the wounded by teaching host practices in rehabilitation medicine,” says Dr. Del Toro. “This was our overall intent, and we are well on our way toward that end.”

On the trip home, planning began for yet another return trip for Dr. Sayko and her team, which they hope will be funded through the NATO Trust Fund. Regardless of the grant outcome, Dr. Sayko and the team will be back in Ukraine soon to lend a helping hand.

— ALEX KROUSE