



A War's Personal Reckoning: Laura Vanderberg Kept a Trauma Buried in Her Psyche for Decades

by Chitra Ragavan • 20 Jan 2023 • 15 min read

Then, the former Peace Corps worker who once taught English as a foreign language to Ukrainian students was pulled into Ukrainian aid efforts after Russia waged war.

A Viral Insights Column On Super-Survivors

Last February, [Laura Vanderberg](#) quit her dream job as a tenured professor and chair of an academic department at a small Massachusetts college. She had struggled with institutional financial challenges she felt represented a lack of support for the first-of-its-kind, world-renowned program for higher education students with learning

disabilities—students like her older brother who is gifted in math and science and has dyslexia, which makes it very difficult for him to read. Vanderberg left the school abruptly, with no idea of what she wanted to do next. But she knew she was being drawn by some higher calling.

Three weeks later, Russia invaded Ukraine.

“Then my everything just blew itself out of the water,” says Vanderberg.



Laura Vanderberg, founder and president of Global Community Corps, in her garden in Arlington, Massachusetts. Photo Credit: Andrew Fiordalis

In an instant, Vanderberg’s world was reconnected to Ukraine, where she had worked for two years as a volunteer in the [Peace Corps](#), teaching English as a foreign language

to Ukrainian students, in Oleksandria, Ukraine, School Number Nine, almost twenty-five years ago. Those students were now adults caught up in the brutal war waged by Russia, trapped once again in an endless, historic cycle of invasion and oppression.



Laura Vanderberg [left] in Ukraine in 2001 and her American democracy studies students, holding a photo of then-President, George W. Bush and a letter they had written to him. He wrote them back.

Photo Credit: Laura Vanderberg

Vanderberg began reconnecting with her former students, asking the simple question: “What do you need?” The answer was unanimous: custom body armor.

“Then my everything just blew itself out of the water.” – Laura Vanderberg

It was the earliest days of the war, and at the time, little military aid, either offensive or defensive, was getting to Ukrainian soldiers. Vanderberg's Ukrainian friends, still trying to wrap their heads and hearts around the rapidly evolving crisis, gave her their wish list of defensive tactical gear.



Kyiv, Ukraine – March 2, 2022: A Kyiv subway station offers safety and shelter to thousands of Ukrainians during a Russian rocket and bomb attack. Photo Credit: Oles_Navrotskyi

At first, the college teacher and special education expert was amused at the cognitive dissonance of it all.

“I know very little about war, except to say that I've studied trauma and I work with people who have experienced trauma,” Vanderberg told me. “The idea of [them] giving me a list of war equipment is . . . it's hilarious.”

She was stumped as to what to do next and nervous because she had hit the proverbial fork in the road.



Kyiv, Ukraine – Feb 28, 2022: A large number of civilians enrolled in the Territorial Defense Forces.

Photo Credit: palinchak

“I started to talk with my friends and they basically said, ‘You have to do this work,’ Vanderberg told me. ‘I don't care if you don't feel comfortable with it. I don't care if you don't know about it. The fact that you have this list means that they trust you. They've told no one else this information and you have to act on it.’”



Students in School Number Nine, Oleksandria, Ukraine, celebrate Thanksgiving in 2001 with recipes from Vanderberg's family. Photo Courtesy: Laura Vanderberg

Vanderberg knew they were right. She soon set up her own nonprofit organization called [Global Community Corps](#) to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainians and other communities in crisis.



Vanderberg in transit while delivering the fifth Ukraine aid package, holding a sign that says, "Slava Ukraini" or "Glory to Ukraine." Calligraphy by Ukrainian artist, Olena Kovtash. Photo Credit: Laura Vanderberg

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Her first order of business was figuring out how to get the wish list items manufactured and sent to Ukrainian soldiers. Her husband’s friend, a former Marine Corps officer, connected her to a manufacturer of defensive tactical gear like chest plate carriers (body

armor), combat medical kits, etc. near Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Soon, Vanderberg and her team were sending samples back and forth to Ukraine for field tests and revisions.



Custom chest plate carriers (body armor), third generation, designed especially for Ukrainian soldiers with feedback from the front lines. Photo Credit: Chris Quick

Now, as the grinding Russian full-scale invasion nears its first anniversary, Global Community Corps, which Vanderberg says is funded by hundreds of small donors, has completed its fifth military aid shipment, totaling 3,000 pounds, of defensive gear to

Ukrainian troops on the frontlines, as well as critical humanitarian aid to families and educators. Vanderberg—who is fluent in Russian and speaks Ukrainian and the mixed dialect Surzhyk—has traveled to the Poland-Ukrainian border three times to facilitate convoys with aid.



January 2023 – Third-generation chest plates (body armor), winter jackets and defensive tactical gear headed to Ukraine from Poland. Photo Credit:

Laura Vanderberg

When she first posed her question—“What do you need?”—to her Ukrainian connections, Vanderberg had no idea she would forever be leaving behind her dreams of blazing a trail in education like her parents and grandparents and using her cognitive and special education expertise to fight for the success of college students with disabilities.

Nor did she realize spending time with battle-hardened soldiers in the US and Ukraine would upend her life in the most deeply personal way and force her to confront a traumatic secret she had suppressed from herself and those closest to her for nearly three decades.

In July, nearly five months into her new life as an unlikely conduit of body armor and humanitarian aid to Ukrainian troops, Vanderberg says she was watching a video shot by one of her colleagues, a former US soldier who was documenting horrific Russian violence against Ukrainian women and children.

“So I'm watching this and realizing, this is so incredibly real. These are not the clips that we see on the news every day. It's not a grainy explosion from a CCTV of a building. These are real lives,” Vanderberg recalls. “And the things that this man encountered, I understood, because deep in my history, I had been assaulted violently. And I never touched it. For 30 years, I never touched it.”

But now her trauma, which Vanderberg says she had “stuffed” inside her psyche for nearly three decades, could no longer be secreted away. She tells me the story, which she says she only recently disclosed to her husband of nearly two decades..

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When Vanderberg was 17 and entering her final year of high school (five or six years before she entered the Peace Corps), she went to a party and agreed to walk on the beach with someone she knew well and had previously trusted. It was dark. There, on the beach, he sexually assaulted her.

“The assault was pathological and it was punishment. And it was everything that a man who feels threatened does to someone to make them submissive,” Vanderberg says. “And it was horrific. And I never told anyone.”

She says that what happened next was even worse, if that was possible. “He held my hand and walked me back to the group and acted as if we were together as if he hadn't just suffocated me until I thought I was going to die,” she recalls. “And it was so disturbing, but I was so young, I had no words for it.”

**“And it was so disturbing, but I was so young, I had no words for it.” —
Laura Vanderberg**

Vanderberg says she never spoke with her attacker again. Finally coming to grips with what had really happened to her has changed her to her core. She says she's stronger, more assertive, more independent, and less likely to get pushed around, have decisions made for her, or tolerate chauvinism. It's also changed how she interacts with her alpha-male military colleagues, some of whom know her story.

“I've had to grow comfortable with saying, ‘This is what it's like as a person who has experienced trauma, who now has to work in trauma every day,’” says Vanderberg. “I'm not going to be afraid of it. I will not live in fear. I'm living with fear. And I'm learning how to work with my fear.”

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It’s also changed her dynamic with her husband, who quickly recognized he was navigating an entirely new dynamic in his marriage.

“I’d have to ask him what he saw, but he saw me change, right? He sees me change every single day,” Vanderberg says. “And the change has been so rapid because I have to figure it out so I can get people the help they need. At some point, I just said to him, ‘I had a violent assault and I’m having to deal with it.’”

Vanderberg says she doesn’t intend to have a “hard conversation” with her 7-year-old daughter about the incident because they talk about her body and her choices daily. But she is teaching her daughter jiu jitsu to encourage physicality and so that she can defend herself. “This world is not easy; it is not fair,” says Vanderberg, “and I must prepare her to be an empathic, sensitive, and strong human.”



Vanderberg at inauguration for Peace Corps volunteers, Kyiv, Ukraine, 1999. Photo Courtesy: Laura Vanderberg

I asked Vanderberg why that particular video shot by the US soldier triggered her traumatic memory when the non-stop media coverage over the past few years of [Harvey Weinstein's](#) sexual assault criminal trials and [Jeffrey Epstein's](#) terrible sexual abuse of young girls didn't.

She says that her response to those scandals in American culture was, "Of course that happened." It doesn't bother her to read those stories, she says, ". . . because I know well that these actions happen in our culture. It is not a surprise."

The “current” sexual violence in Ukraine, Vanderberg says, is that “it is happening right now, to people that I love, in a place where I lived, on a massive scale, as an overt act of warfare using sexual violence as a weapon.”

She draws a parallel between her own silence after her sexual assault and the historic stoicism of Ukrainians, who learned how to speak up and forced the world to listen after the assault on their democracy by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“Someone had the gall to say to me, ‘People like you don't usually survive.’ And this might get me a little teary, but it's teary because of anger, not because of sadness,” Vanderberg says. “But the assumption that people who are fundamentally harmed don't survive is because we only know about the ones who don't survive. The ones who do survive, we don't talk about it. We continue living our lives and doing good work.”

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This week, Vanderberg is hosting two members of [Eleos-Ukraine](#), the largest nonprofit group in Ukraine: the founder, Reverend Serhiy Dmytriyev, who is a military chaplain and enlisted in the Territorial Defense Forces' 30th Mechanized Brigade, and the group's executive project manager, Tetiana Ivanova.



Vanderberg with Eleos-Ukraine founder, Rev. Serhiy Dmytriiev and executive project manager, Tetiana Ivanova. Photo Credit: Laura Vanderberg

Ukraine has an integrated church-state model, so chaplains such as Rev. Dmytriiev can become fully enlisted and assigned to military units. Global Community Corps is hosting the delegation, which was sent by the Territorial Defense Forces and is facilitating meetings between Dmytriiev, Ivanova, and US trauma, mental health, and spiritual experts to come up with a proactive program model for supporting the psychological and spiritual resilience of the Ukrainian people as they live through war and trauma. The goal is to find a way to do it in real time, rather than wait for the war to end, by training 1500 military chaplains who are enlisted through the Territorial Defense Forces to do this groundbreaking work.



Kyiv, Ukraine, Feb. 27, 2022. Members of Kyiv's Territorial Defense Forces making Molotov cocktails.

Photo Credit: palinchak

The team will also be looking at how US cities use public spaces to commemorate their fallen heroes. “That’s very much connected to the social structure of grieving,” Vanderberg says. “How do you consolidate the memory and pain of lost life due to war?”

In helping Ukrainians process their grief, Vanderberg may find an unlikely path to coming full circle with her own.