



Bohdan Biekietov, Ukrainian war refugee, finds a home at Montgomery

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There's something special taking place at Montgomery High School, and it all revolves around a brave senior named Bohdan Biekietov.

A few years ago, he was unassuming youngster living thousands of miles away in Odesa, Ukraine, with his parents and younger sister.

That all changed in February of 2022, when Ukraine was invaded by Russia, starting a war that still rages today.

Bohdan, his mother, Olga, and sister, Sofia, moved to America, and wound up settling in the Somerset County community. His father, Demitry, remains in Ukraine, where he serves in the military, but has been able to visit New Jersey a few times.



Bohdan is also a standout basketball player. Standing 6-9, the senior debuted last year by averaging over 12 points and 10 rebounds for a team that won the Central Jersey, Group 4 championship. He's putting up similar numbers this year, and is set to attend and play basketball at Franklin & Marshall in Pennsylvania next winter.

Bohdan, meanwhile, has found a love for all things America, especially the freedoms granted its citizens. He's immersed himself into the culture, visiting as many places as he can, and meeting as many people as possible along the way. He's traveled to different cities, gone on a camping trip and has even gotten a job working at a local smoothie shop.



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"For me, it's amazing," he said. "Everything is different than I experienced in Europe. The basketball is different, the school is huge - I've never studied at a school this big. Everyone is very friendly to me and everyone shows support. That's the main plus of America. You see the country in the movies and you never think you'll come to America and experience it."

It's something that has amazed Kris Grundy, who is Montgomery's boys basketball coach and athletic director.

"It's been great," Grundy said. "To see him when he got here and immediately assimilate to his surroundings, just to know where he came from and what his dad is still doing there, and to know that he's thriving here is awesome. He loves everything America."



Photo credit: Scott Faytok, NJ.com

“As one of our coaches said, he’s the happiest guy in the world,” Grundy said. “To know that he’s thriving here and is going to be taken care of in college is great. When the colleges were after him, he was all about asking if he could visit this school, this school and this school. I told him that there was no chance you’d be going there, but he said he didn’t care, he just wanted to experience it. He’s soaking it all in.”

“I was amazed when I got here,” Bohdan said. “For me, it was the start of my new life and a breath of fresh air.”

The move to America obviously required great adjustment, not just socially, but in playing basketball.

“The physicality and style of play here is more individual,” he said. “You’ve got to take opportunities yourself and attack the rim. In Europe, we have a trillion sets for every guy, and everything is set up, and if you got out of that mentality, you would be kind of punished.”

Coming to America and Montgomery has been great for Bohdan, but it has also been fantastic for his classmates. That’s because one of the best things about Bohdan’s presence at the school is the educational effect it has had on his classmates.

It’s quite possible that many of them, immersed in their own lives, would otherwise have no idea about the war being waged in Ukraine. And if they have, it’s almost impossible for them to relate.

But instead, they have a fellow student who only a couple of years ago experienced things like being awakened by explosions caused by the fighting, saw constant reminders of the damage in the streets, and also has a father who is still there as a commander in missile protection for the Ukrainian Army. It’s something that’s much more impactful than anything he does on the basketball court.

“I think the lesson is to value everything you have,” Bohdan said. “Even though in my country there is war, I am safe here. There are people that have way less and worse situations than I do. They’re in different countries where there may be a dictatorship or other issues and have no freedom. Everyone should value the core values of America. The freedoms of speech, religion and being able to gather together. In other countries, you can get beat up for that. People also get to vote and decide their future, where in other places that might not be possible.

“It’s good to bring people’s attention to certain problems around the world,” he added. “It’s our planet, it’s not just one country. Everything is too connected to get isolated. It’s good to make people aware of what’s happening to my family and my city and my country. I’m so thankful to be given the opportunity.”



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