

Researcher from Ukraine thrives in move to Lakehead

FROM THE THUNDER BAY CEDC

SASHA Bubon, associate scientist at the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute and chief technology officer of Radialis Medical, has accomplished a lot since immigrating from Ukraine 12 years ago.

His story and eventual path to Canada began with an online search when he was an undergraduate student with a degree in computer science and engineering. He was looking to apply to a masters program in physics and was researching international opportunities when his search led him to Alla Reznik, currently the Canada Research Chair in physics radiation and medical imaging and a professor at Lakehead University.

Sasha had never heard of Lakehead University, or Thunder Bay, but he was interested in Reznik's work and the connection with Reznik (who, coincidentally, is also from the Ukraine) sparked the journey that would eventually lead him to the shores of Lake Superior.

But it would take a while and, as Sasha tells it, there was a lot of paperwork and back-and-forth communications before his arrival in Canada in 2010. He began the process in 2009 and recalls that it took some time to determine what the university would accept and verification of his degree from the Ukraine.

The program at Lakehead University is thesis based and the research is for detectors in medical imaging. Sasha feels that his education in engineering from the Ukraine was especially helpful in applying for the applied physics program. This was exactly what Reznik was working on, and his background was a perfect fit. Sasha was accepted into the program and after a few more delays, finally found himself on his way to Canada.

It was the middle of winter when Sasha arrived in Thunder Bay in January 2010 and although he had researched the city, he found it to be a quite a change from home and what he was used to. Born and raised in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, — a large city which he describes as “vibrant and dynamic” — he readily admits that it was quite a transition to what he describes as “rural Canada.” He had never heard of Thunder Bay before and other than Reznik, who had just recently

ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

moved from Toronto to Thunder Bay herself, he had no other connections to the city.

The Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute was just starting up at that time and Sasha was one of the first masters students to work there. It was a tremendous opportunity and in addition owning and managing his own business, Radialis Medical, he has remained there and a contributing member of the Thunder Bay community ever since.

Sasha recalls his initial impressions of the area when he arrived and how it compared to the research he did to prepare for the move. The weather required some adjusting initially.

Because Thunder Bay is on the same latitude as Kyiv, he expected similar conditions but hadn't factored in the cooling effect of Lake Superior, which he describes with a hint of humour as a “giant thermos.” Sasha's geography research gave him a better sense of where he was located in Ontario and he noted the city's closeness to the American border, which saw as being a plus. But he didn't know much about the city of Thunder Bay itself.

Most of what he knew was through his association with Reznik who he describes as a “superstar” in the science field and he readily admits that he came here specifically for the opportunity to work with her. But Sasha is not short on enthusiasm for his adopted city.

“I'm a very big believer that, for a newcomer, there is no better place to start their journey to Canada, than to come to Thunder Bay.”

He goes on to point out that there are plenty of job opportunities in the city and everyone he knows who has immigrated here has found a job. In addition, there are the obvious advantages of the lower cost of living and housing in particular. Although the market has cooled recently, Sasha has ob-

served that it is possible to live in Thunder Bay and buy a house with an income of \$40,000 a year, which would be impossible living in larger centre.

Sasha has found Thunder Bay to be a welcoming community and many of the supports that were given to him, such as finding a place to live so he knew exactly where he was going when he got off the plane, were provided by his colleagues and connections at Lakehead University. But much of the work related to immigration he had to handle on his own. He found the bureaucracy to be frustrating but he can now take his frustrations directly to the ballot box as he became a proud Canadian citizen (and a voter) in 2017.

Sasha also has become somewhat of an ambassador for Thunder Bay. His colleagues at Lakehead University initially felt that they did not need an International student. But after working with him, they were asking him if they were more students interested in coming here. Because Sasha travels around the world in his job, he is able to educate people about Thunder Bay.

“Everywhere I go, I promote Thunder Bay as much as I can,” he says. He often meets Ukrainian friends who have moved to various locations elsewhere in the world for job opportunities and he always manages to bring up Thunder Bay. He chuckles as he quotes their usual response: “Yes, we know Thunder Bay is the best place in the world — as you keep telling us.”

Sasha's work as a scientist and researcher has been widely recognized. In 2020, he received an award for his work in developing a “virtual biopsy” that uses new a PET (positron emission tomography) scan technique to detect breast cancer. He has used his skills and training to develop medical imaging that will save lives. This is his priority now but his enthusiasm and commitment to his adopted city are hard to miss.

Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission (CEDC) has worked closely with Sasha for more than 10 years in providing business advice and support for his research and the development of Radialis. For more information on CEDC programs, visit gotothunderbay.ca. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.