

First Canada Day for Ukrainians who became Canadian Citizens

[Peace River Record Gazette \(Print Edition\)](#)

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Jul 12 • 01:15 AM

Edition Final

Section Local

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Mila Wagner has found safety and security in Alberta.

She left Ukraine after Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and moved to Alberta two years later.

She is a member of the Association of Science and Engineering Technology Professionals of Alberta (ASET). It's an organisation representing engineering technologists and technicians in Alberta.

They represent around 17,000 members, including full-time students and recent graduates, in more than 120 occupations across multiple industries.

They're currently providing two initiatives that support refugees with engineering technology backgrounds, of which Wagner has. When she arrived in Alberta, she discovered her multiple engineering technology-related degrees from Ukraine didn't ensure her a job in her profession.

No one would hire her based on her qualifications, so she had to take other jobs until she could return to school and repeat her education. At that time, she wasn't aware of ASET's program.

It would have fast-tracked her into her profession.

Fairview and Peace River residents are asked to reach out to ASET if they know anyone arriving from outside Canada that has a background in engineering technology.

Now married and raising her son, Nikita, in Lethbridge, Wagner is currently a technologist-in-training (TT) in civil engineering technology and employed by an engineering consulting firm.

Wagner and her son became Canadian citizens this past April. She also won the 2023 ASET CEO Award and brought her niece, a friend, and their son to Alberta from Ukraine.

"I was so proud to be a part of a province wide media campaign on behalf of the provincial professional association, and assist with building awareness about two ASET initiatives designed to support newcomers. It is my pleasure to serve my profession and community, and help give a leg up to people who just arrived in Canada," says Wagner.

This is the first time the award has been given out in the association's 60 year history.

Wagner still faces a major challenge: getting her parents here. They are currently residing in Kyiv, Ukraine as her father undergoes chemotherapy. She calls them almost daily to check in and see how they're doing.

It was very challenging to move to a new country, she says, due to the language barrier and no friends or family. She had to find a babysitter to help take care of her son while she studied English and worked jobs to cover living expenses.

She has secured VISAs for her parents, but they aren't well enough to travel yet. She hopes they'll get here by fall.

Canada Day was special for Wagner; her and her son's first as citizens. "I had tears in my eyes during the ceremony, and seeing my son become a Canadian citizen meant a lot to me."

Barry Cavanaugh, ASET CEO, outlines the two initiatives: the competency-based assessment program released in 2016 and an application fee waiver for engineering technology professionals with refugee status.

Applicants are assessed on a levelled playing field, and they can "be satisfied that we're getting as much information as possible" with the system that's been created.

After completing an English Language Proficiency test, refugees' education and work experience is evaluated. They are granted a certified engineering technologist (CET) title. This makes it easier for refugees to find work.

"One of the things we sought to achieve with Mila, and thank goodness she was so willing to be so available to help, is to make sure that people like her knew there was access to our programs. She didn't know until she was almost finished her education at Lethbridge College and that's a shame because she probably would have qualified, but she was very positive about it."

The second initiative supports refugees dealing with financial issues.

These fees of up to \$1,000 also go towards prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), practice exams, and certification exams.

Cavanaugh adds ASET's focus is on refugees coming from any area or circumstance.

"The fact that someone is displaced from home, country, perhaps family by war, famine and the like should stimulate compassion rather than 'discomfort'. These things can happen to anyone, and Canada is built on principles of openness and helping," says Cavanaugh.

"Communities should be looking to how best they can welcome newcomers generally--as we have throughout our history--but the real need by refugees is something we cannot ignore in human decency," says Cavanaugh.

ASET's program fast-tracks people facing credential issues in one-half to one-quarter of the time it would take to redo their education.

Further issues can arise if someone's academic institution is in a war zone and has been destroyed, as they wouldn't be able to access academic documents. PLAR grants these professionals necessary work portfolios.

"We've got the process and we've got the volunteers to help them, to mentor them through the process. We can get you qualified in as little as six months without any information about you from your old country. We want to know who you are, what you know. We don't care where you've been."

ASET LINKS: Email: asetceo@aset.ab.ca International applicant webpage: <https://www.aset.ab.ca/Home/Registration/Become-a-Member/International-Applicants> Non-graduate application information: <https://www.aset.ab.ca/Home/Registration/Resources/Non-Graduate>