

## Rapid Response Transcript – Joe Gebbia

### “How Airbnb.org is housing Ukrainian refugees”

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**JOE GEBBIA:** It all started with a host in Salt Lake City named Sarah Brown. She booked that stay in Kyiv, and she put it up on her Facebook group with other Airbnb hosts. Bookings have totaled approximately \$15 million. All of us are just in awe of people's generous spirit.

We made a commitment: Airbnb.org would offer free temporary housing to a hundred thousand refugees fleeing from Ukraine.

We've been building what's become the largest accommodations platform on the planet. It just so happens, we've also been building this incredible humanitarian housing platform that's utilized in times of need.

Look, any company, whether you're tech or not, can look at what goes on in the world around them, and they can answer that very simple question: how can we help?

Finding the Venn diagram of what it is that you're really good at as a company with what's needed most in the world is the answer to that question.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Joe Gebbia, co-founder of Airbnb.

In response to the Ukraine crisis, Airbnb's platform has become a source of housing for refugees as well as a surprising tool to funnel money directly to individual Ukrainians.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Joe because, as chair of Airbnb's non-profit affiliate, Airbnb.org, he's on the leading edge of deploying business tools for humanitarian benefit.

Joe and his co-founders, Brian Chesky and Nate Blecharczyk have personally donated \$10 million to Airbnb.org to support housing Ukrainians.

Meanwhile, the Airbnb community has generated \$15 million in direct giving to Ukrainians.

Joe's commitment to refugee support is directly connected to his vision of Airbnb itself. But he also admits to being surprised by the way the platform has been used for good.

With co-founders Brian and Nate, Joe is setting an example for how companies can show up,

to as he puts it, “participate in the world around us.”

Activating the community around a company — and asking for help, as he does here — are key lessons in meeting that task.

### [THEME MUSIC]

**SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Joe Gebbia, co-founder of Airbnb and chairman of Airbnb.org. Joe is coming to us from his home in California as I ask my questions from my home in New York. Joe, thanks for joining us.

**GEBBIA:** Bob. It's so great to be here.

**SAFIAN:** Airbnb was one of the first big brands to jump in in support of Ukrainians, announcing that Airbnb.org would offer free short-term housing to up to a hundred thousand refugees. And soon after that, there was also a more organic effort, I guess, that sprang up to send funds directly to people in Ukraine using the Airbnb platform. I'm eager to hear more about both of these stories, as well as Airbnb.org's other activities and impacts and partnerships. Let's start with that first weekend and the decision to house a hundred thousand refugees. How did that come about?

**GEBBIA:** Bob, thanks again for having me on the show. It's great to be here and super excited to talk about these incredible acts of generosity taking place in the world right now. So going back to that weekend, it wasn't that long ago, February 24th: Russia invades Ukraine. We were watching the news reports in horror. We could see that it was likely a lot of people were going to be displaced from their homes. I was on a hike that weekend, and I remember being in touch with Brian, we're talking multiple times throughout the day, Saturday and Sunday, asking the question, how can we help?

On Airbnb.org, it's our platform where we house people in times of crisis. Housing people displaced by natural disasters, housing refugees and asylum seekers as they enter new countries. And so we made a commitment on February 28th, we announced that Airbnb.org would offer free temporary housing to a hundred thousand refugees fleeing from Ukraine via our hosts.

**SAFIAN:** You've done this before or things like this in other situations. Done this, first through the Open Homes Program that you launched before Airbnb was public. I think I first saw it after Hurricane Sandy. I'm not sure. Is that right?

**GEBBIA:** Yeah. You got it right.

**SAFIAN:** And then during Covid, you tapped this again to help healthcare and other frontline workers also. So this has been a process that you've done several times.

**GEBBIA:** Going back to Hurricane Sandy in 2012, in New York City, when tens of thousands of New Yorkers were displaced. We get this email from a host named Shell who says, "Dear Airbnb, I've got empty guest rooms in my Brooklyn loft. How do I volunteer those for free to those displaced by Hurricane Sandy?" And that simple suggestion from our host community triggered a whole bunch of changes to our platform where we enabled people to offer the rooms for free in times of crisis. And that one idea from a host has now spread to hosts all over the world.

We've housed more than 130,000 people in need of shelter due to natural disasters, medical needs, or displaced refugees. Last September, when you might remember the images coming out of Afghanistan of the evacuation taking place, the United States took in north of 80,000 Afghan refugees. Around that time, it was a similar weekend where Brian and I and the executive team were on the phone saying, "How can we help?" And our answer was to make a commitment to house 20,000 Afghan refugees in the United States.

It's so crazy to me that all this time we've been building what's become the largest accommodations platform on the planet. It just so happens, we've also been building this incredible humanitarian housing platform that's utilized in times of need.

If you go back deep into the history of Airbnb, there's an email that Brian sent to Nate and I on August 1st, 2008, before we'd launched the company on August 11th, 2008.

**SAFIAN:** These are early days.

**GEBBIA:** Super early days. This is the three of us sitting at Ralph Street all around our living room table, working on our laptops. And Brian sends an email to the tune of, "Hey guys, we should really think about what kind of role we want to play in the world, and what kind of ways we want to give back." And that sentiment and that spirit has always been within the three of us. And it's just been a joy to bring Airbnb.org to life, to formalize that spirit and to really unlock the generosity of so many people around the world.

It's so touching to hear from both the host and the guest of what it meant to them to participate in times like this. Of course, the guests are so grateful, but oftentimes the hosts find something in it that they didn't expect. A new feeling of purpose, in some cases, that they watch these images on TV, and they kind of feel helpless. Like what could I, as one person, possibly do to make a difference? And they found that way to make a difference through our platform.

**SAFIAN:** Now how does the matching work? I mean, you've got people in Ukraine, you've got houses. Are you guys actually matching the guests and those in need? Or, are there partners who are doing that? Because that's a whole different kind of logistical challenge that's not necessarily what Airbnb's forte is, right?

**GEBBIA:** We work with the local partners on the ground. In this case in Ukraine, partnering with resettlement agencies who have the deepest expertise in crisis response and they know how to provide the right support and care and safety that refugees need.

For example, the UN's International Organization for Migration. They do the vetting to make sure somebody is who they say they are. Are there children? Are there elderly? Do you need two bedrooms? And then, the field agents for those agencies then come on to Airbnb.org to search and then do the matching for the family in need with the host that has the right accommodations.

**SAFIAN:** Gotcha. And so you give vouchers, I guess, to these partners that they can then use to activate what's available on the platform.

**GEBBIA:** That's right. The stays are always free to the guest or, in this case, to the refugees. And it's either because the host has donated their home, or in a case where that's not possible, we will fund the stay on behalf of the guest.

**SAFIAN:** Do you also work with governments?

**GEBBIA:** So during Covid we leveraged our platform to, again, ask how could we help? If you remember, in the early days of Covid, doctors and nurses were actually sleeping in cars and parking decks between shifts.

This all started in Milan, in Italy, and our Italian hosts really stepped up and rose to the challenge and started housing first line responders. The government in France actually worked with us closely, and they put out an invitation and endorsed the idea that essentially anyone in France could open up their home to a frontline responder. And so the same is happening right now in most of Europe. We're working as closely as we can with the governments in the bordering countries to Ukraine and other Western European nations.

**SAFIAN:** And this is also then a way that you can sort of identify additional hosts who might be able to provide help for this flood of refugees in all these places.

**GEBBIA:** Yeah. Because one of the biggest misconceptions is that people think, "Oh, I have to be an existing host on Airbnb to participate." And the reality is you don't have to be an existing host.

Anybody can sign up. Anyone with an extra guest room down the hall or a guest house in the backyard — any kind of extra space can be utilized, and we can help match it with somebody who needs it.

**SAFIAN:** You and Brian and Nate, you collectively committed \$10 million to Airbnb.org's Ukraine initiative recently. So Airbnb doesn't itself fund all of the .org's efforts?

**GEBBIA:** No. It's a nonprofit. So we're able to raise money. The company steps up time and time again. It's inspired a lot of other people to donate as well. Every dollar that comes in gets put towards helping house somebody.

**SAFIAN:** So I have to ask you, how do you decide on \$10 million? Which one of you guys goes to the other ones and says, "Okay, fellas, we should all chip in."

**GEBBIA:** It's never been a hard conversation with Brian and Nate. They're insanely generous guys. They've never flinched when it comes to supporting Airbnb.org.

**SAFIAN:** Well, you also personally gave a million dollars to the UN's refugee efforts.

**GEBBIA:** Yeah. Housing's one of many things that the refugees need. The UNHCR does a good job at providing support across the myriad and the spectrum of needs for somebody who's been displaced.

I'm happy to support this from as many angles as possible.

**SAFIAN:** So you mentioned that open homes and Airbnb.org sort of grew organically from a host's activity after Hurricane Sandy. There's been a new spontaneous movement on the platform around Ukraine. It may have started with a woman in Salt Lake City.

I was trying to run this down an Airbnb host, who booked a stay in Ukraine that she never intended to use just as a way to support Ukrainians directly. And this has led to millions of dollars flowing directly person to person. It's kind of mind blowing.

**GEBBIA:** It really is, Bob. And it's one of those things that none of us would've predicted. But of course, all of us are just in awe at people's generous spirit and at the power of this platform used in such a creative way.

As you mentioned, it all started with a host in Salt Lake City named Sarah Brown. She booked that stay in Kyiv, and she put it up on her Facebook group with other Airbnb hosts.

And I think they all said, "Well, we can do that too. Why not support our host community in Ukraine?" Sarah said she was heartbroken for Ukraine, but she didn't know anybody there. And she said booking that stay helped her feel more invested in Ukraine beyond the news, by connecting with an actual person, in this case, an Airbnb host like herself.

And that host was named Katrina. And she's quoted as saying, "It's not just money. It's the support and encouragement."

I know this host has directed donors on Airbnb to contribute to a fund for the Ukrainian army as well. It's warmed a lot of hearts and it's made some material impact because the bookings have totaled approximately \$15 million.

**SAFIAN:** And this hadn't happened in other ways before, right? It wasn't something that you guys instigated, although you did support it by waiving fees and stuff like that, right?

**GEBBIA:** Oh, we definitely waived fees. The minute we saw this happening, we waved all our transaction fees, and people across 165 countries have joined in this community-led grassroots campaign to book Airbnb listings and experiences to support local hosts there. So as long as the activity continues, we'll continue to waive our fees.

**SAFIAN:** I'm curious what you think this says about the potential for new tech platforms, because there's been a lot of angst lately about sort of the negatives of mostly social media platforms. Although social media was an accelerant for this movement. What do you think this says about what tech platforms can be, can do?

**GEBBIA:** Look, any company, whether you're tech or not, can look at what goes on in the world around them, and they can answer that very simple question: how can we help? In my opinion, and coming from Airbnb, we have this notion that going forward, companies, besides being great businesses, will also need to be good for society.

That they'll need to benefit the communities that they operate in. I think this is a demand that comes from employees. It's growing demand from consumers. And, to a certain extent, from governments.

Again, I think with Ukraine, there are so many companies that have stepped up. We're just one of many. If you go to [tent.org](https://tent.org), you can find hundreds of companies of all scales, shapes, and sizes, tech and non-tech, that have raised their hand and said, "Hey, we want to help."

And [tent.org](https://tent.org), which we're a partner of, it's a phenomenal resource for anyone listening to this who has a company and wants to get involved.

## **[AD BREAK]**

**SAFIAN:** Before the break we heard Joe Gebbia talk about how [Airbnb.org](https://airbnb.org) and the Airbnb community are aligning to help Ukrainians in need, raising millions of dollars and housing thousands for free.

Now he talks about how doing good can advance and define a modern business, and the importance of asking: what would make us proud? He also shares his personal journey of discovery around refugees as well as some verbatim sentiments he's receiving from Ukrainians living in harm's way.

You mentioned that even before Airbnb started, Brian raised the idea of sort of the good that the organization your efforts might do. A decade ago, as I recall, you sent a note to Brian and to Nate kind of reminding them and suggesting the idea of having a nonprofit as part of the structure of the organization. Is Airbnb.org part of the conscience of Airbnb, like to remind the organization that this breadth of stakeholders exists?

**GEBBIA:** A hundred percent. When there's a hurricane in the Southeast of the United States, when there's a typhoon in Asia, wildfires in Canada, we have the capacity to be there, to respond sometimes faster than governments.

I think it's our way of saying, how do we go beyond just being a successful company? How can we find ways to participate in the world around us? And in this case, to improve the communities and serve the communities we operate in.

**SAFIAN:** Historically, sometimes business looked at doing good as, like, a cost, like a distraction from making money in some ways. And as I was thinking about what Airbnb.org is doing, providing these benefits for Ukrainians, there's also benefits for Airbnb's business.

There's brand awareness and improved relationships with governments in these countries. And you guys have had some tense times sometimes in new markets. And bringing additional hosts on board, introducing new people to the idea of the platform. Doing good work can be good for the business too. Was that always part of the idea?

**GEBBIA:** I don't know. Patagonia comes to mind as, like, a company where it's synonymous with doing right for, in their case, the environment, as well as doing right for their customers, as well as doing right for their shareholders.

I think more people are looking for more Patagonias in more product categories. I think more people are saying, "What's the Patagonia of blank? If that existed, I would love to buy from them or use their service."

My generation of Millennials and even more so with Gen Z, up and coming. These generations really care about who they're doing business with.

**SAFIAN:** If you're one of the listeners to this show do you have lessons or advice you would give to them about their role, their responsibility, and how to integrate that with the for-profit side of their business?

**GEBBIA:** My advice to other founders or people that I've spoken to over the years is to find a natural extension of their core business as a way to give back. Every company has a superpower of some kind. Facebook has theirs, or Apple has theirs. Everybody has their own core competency. And I think finding the Venn diagram of what it is that you're

really good at as a company with what's needed most in the world is the answer to that question.

So that weekend Brian and I were talking, we asked ourselves if we were alive in World War II, what would our company have done? How would we have gotten involved? Just imagine it's 10 years from now, and you're looking back on this moment of decision making. Would we be proud of the way that we showed up?

Usually, the best answers for us come when we ask that question: would we be proud?

**SAFIAN:** You are personally engaged and animated by the plight of refugees. And I heard that your commitment deepened after a research trip you took to Africa.

**GEBBIA:** This topic wasn't even on my mind for most of my life. And then, I remember in 2015, one of the software engineers that worked on my team came to me with a proposal for how our platform could help housing refugees. And if you remember the global topic of that summer was refugee displacement.

Anyway, this software engineer shares with me this proposal, and in it, there's a slide that I'll never forget. It was an estimate of the number of displaced people globally between 2015 to 2044. And the number grew from 70 million to upwards of 300 million people. I remember thinking, "Oh my God, that's like the population of the United States." In my lifetime, the population of the U.S. will be displaced either due to climate change, conflict, political strife, et cetera. And it just occurred to me like, "What can we do to put a dent in it? If this is going to be an issue that is around as long as our brand is, how can we do something?"

And so I became more invested in learning more. Over the years, I got to know Malala. And she invited me to a trip in Africa for Malala Day to focus on girls' education in refugee camps, specifically. So we went to Kenya and to Rwanda. And there was one moment, Bob, on that trip, that was one of those moments that forever changes your perspective.

I'm walking through a camp in Rwanda for Burundi refugees. There's these rows of mud huts, and there's no windows. There's a sheet for the door. I'm with a UNHCR translator to translate Burundi French for me. There's a woman standing at the door with a toddler in her arm and roughly a three-year-old holding her hand. And she tells me that a couple weeks earlier, she was trying to flee Burundi in the middle of the night. The troops were getting close to where she was, so she had to hide in bushes, and she's cradling her kids, terrified as they get closer.

Her journey, which lasted a couple weeks to get to the border, and then eventually to the camp and to the mud hut. And she says that in this hut, it was the first time that she

could fall asleep at night, feeling safe. And that hit me pretty hard. What a basic human right: to fall asleep at night and feel safe.

From that moment, it only further deepened my interest in the topic. Who are the right organizations? What are the needs? Where could the company play a role? Where could I play a role with my giving? I've tried as much as I can to just really wrap my head around this very, very global issue.

**SAFIAN:** The displacement that we're seeing in Ukraine and in some of the other examples you say are spurred by geopolitical issues. The huge numbers that are projected, a lot of that might be from climate change related impacts. How much do immediate crises like Covid, like Ukraine, threaten to distract us from the longer term challenges that climate change might bring?

**GEBBIA:** There's no reason people should be suffering if you can help them. And what you're calling out is that there are these bigger macro issues that need equal amounts of creativity and equal amounts of funding and equal amounts of political courage to do something about.

Here's a silver lining to what's going on in Ukraine. It's put a massive spotlight and magnifying glass on energy. People saying, "Wow, what does it look like to be dependent on dictator fuel? What if we were energy independent?" And it's finally opened up the conversation to one of the energy sources that I feel strongly about, which is nuclear power.

It's one of the safest forms of energy across the board. And anybody who has it pretty much has energy independence. But getting back to your bigger point around climate change, it's also carbon free energy.

**SAFIAN:** And the nuclear plants that could be built today are not like plants of the seventies. They are much safer and more efficient, less waste, all of those things.

**GEBBIA:** Did you know there's a company that has figured out how to extract energy out of nuclear waste? And they're working on a small modular reactor to actually process existing nuclear waste.

The company is called Oklo, by the way.

**SAFIAN:** There are amazing solutions out there. And I guess we've seen with Airbnb that sometimes there are surprisingly beneficial things that come out of platforms that maybe they weren't expressly designed for. I know you guys are designers. You designed it very well, but the uses end up being more broad than you imagined.

**GEBBIA:** I actually have a message from one of those hosts in Kiev to a guest that booked with no intention to stay. She says, "Dear Dana, thank you so much for your

support and contribution to the freedom of Ukraine. We are using the donation from Airbnb's community to help all those that need help in this difficult time: the elderly, women, children who stayed in Kiev and need food, medicine, warm clothes, et cetera. We've united a group of like-minded people and created a volunteer team that delivers everything people need. Thank you very much for your donation."

**SAFIAN:** Wow. And so are you getting these messages all the time?

**GEBBIA:** Yes.

**SAFIAN:** Every day, you're getting a new message, you're hearing new stuff about what's going on?

**GEBBIA:** Totally. We're getting these all the time. We've gotten back and forth messages. "I'm so inspired by the courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people. I wish for safety and health for all of you. The world stands with you and sees your bravery shine like a light in this darkness. You fight for freedom, and will never be forgotten."

**SAFIAN:** It's a nice antidote to some of the scarier things that you see on the news.

**GEBBIA:** I'll give you another one. Caroline has been a host in South Somerset, UK for seven years. She's a catalog designer, a mother of one, and hosts a few cottages across the English countryside. "Ever since I retired, I've been looking for something meaningful to do. I've been a host on Airbnb for seven years, and I've previously supported Airbnb.org through the Frontline Stays initiative. I'm offering the spare rooms in my house for free to Ukraine refugees. I have no idea what it feels like to run from war, but I do know what kindness feels like. I'm so grateful to have the opportunity to help those fleeing Ukraine through this initiative."

**SAFIAN:** Wow. It's great because it encapsulates that, as much as that host is giving, she feels like she's getting also. I'm curious, Joe, when you think about the present and the future, what's at stake for Airbnb.org right now?

**GEBBIA:** What's at stake is following through on our commitment. We committed to housing 100,000 people, and we're working really, really hard to ramp up our partners on the ground.

**SAFIAN:** Your biggest effort before this with Afghanistan was 20,000 people. Now, you're at five times as many. Do you think these efforts are going to continue to get larger, as you get more experienced with them?

**GEBBIA:** They'll get as large as our host community grows. The limitation is usually based on how many homes we have to offer, how many people raise their hand and say, "Hey, I want to help out this way." And so for anybody listening anywhere in the world,

and especially in Europe, this is a great time to go to Airbnb.org. It takes only a couple of minutes to sign up, to list your place. Again, you don't have to be an existing Airbnb host. And when you sign up on the platform to take in, in this case a refugee, you get 24/7 customer support, you get air cover, which is our top-to-bottom protection, which includes \$1 million in host damage protection, as well as \$1 million in host liability insurance.

Bob, it's so comprehensive, it includes things like carpet cleaning and pet damage, and it's free for all hosts. So for those who have the space, please consider signing up. And if you don't have the space, if you're not able to host, please consider donating to Airbnb.org to fund stays for refugees.

One thing I'll add, Bob, is the countries that are in the greatest need of homes and hosts are Poland, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. So for anybody listening in those countries, if you have any interest, please go to Airbnb.org where you can learn more.

**SAFIAN:** Well, Joe, thank you. Thanks so much for doing this.

**GEBBIA:** Bob, it's such a pleasure to be on the show. Thank you so much.