

Rapid Response Transcript – Victoria Yampolsky

“A global benefit concert for Ukraine”

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VICTORIA YAMPOLSKY: If you were in the war zone right now, wouldn't you want somebody to help you? I got to a very depressing state when I was reading all the news, and I got an idea for this concert. How about we bring international top artists and athletes and celebrities to unite everybody around the world to come together in support of Ukraine?

We cold-called most artists. And with Pink Floyd, I cold called their office. I took several phone calls. I don't take no for an answer, so I find a way to negotiate.

I would give entrepreneurs this advice: not to be afraid. Try for an idea that seems so crazy and undoable when you first start because you never know what you can do before you try it.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Victoria Yampolsky, CEO of a new organization called World Unite for Ukraine.

A New York-based, Russia-born entrepreneur, Yampolsky had an idea for a big concert to raise funds and support for Ukrainians. And even though she had no experience in entertainment or international aid, on June 16th that idea is set to become a reality.

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 with Victoria because her start-from-nothing effort is a classic entrepreneurial gambit that, in some ways, just shouldn't exist. Fueled by what some would call gumption and others chutzpah, Victoria has convinced, cajoled, and inspired volunteers and partners around the globe to buy into her dream.

She's convinced performers from Pink Floyd to Crash Test Dummies to contribute, as well as a slew of top Ukrainian artists.

She's orchestrated logistics and brought in the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation as a partner to make sure the funds raised are distributed effectively and to the right places.

Many details are still coming together about the program, and with just a few weeks until the concert itself, a more cautious person might be anxious. But Victoria's belief and enthusiasm continues to add momentum and ambition.

It may not end up being LiveAid, but as she explains, wherever things land will be a success. It's a story about the positive spirit of entrepreneurship, in service of human kindness, and how putting together big dreams with, what Victoria calls, massive action can generate impact out of nothing.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Victoria Yampolsky, the CEO of World Unite for Ukraine, as well as the founder of The Startup Station. Victoria's coming to us from her home in Manhattan as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn. Victoria, thanks for joining us.

YAMPOLSKY: Thank you so much, Bob. It's a pleasure to be here.

SAFIAN: So you are a native of Russia. You immigrated to the United States about 25 years ago. You told me that you've always had a fondness for your home country. You wanted your son to know how to speak Russian, but now this year you find yourself headlong involved in resisting Russia and helping support those in Ukraine. And, in particular, you're putting together a fundraising concert on June 16th featuring artists like Pink Floyd as well as Ukrainian performers to support grassroots organizations in and around Ukraine. This is not your core background, event production and humanitarian aid, but you've attacked the challenge with considerable entrepreneurial zeal. And I'm eager to hear the story about how this came to be, how World Unite for Ukraine came to be. Can you take us back to the beginning, to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where you were, and how this all started?

YAMPOLSKY: Absolutely. When the war started, I was skiing in the Alps with my son in Austria, and we were actually worried about staying in Europe because we didn't know what the war was going to do. After that I went back to Germany and got COVID. My son went back to the U.S., and I remained in Germany, being able to read all the news. And it was a very sad time for me as somebody who's from Russia, but also has Ukrainian roots. My son is half Ukrainian. My grandmother is from Ukraine, from Odessa. My stepfather is from Lviv. And my story is not unique. Many of our volunteers, many members of the Russian community have ties to both Russia and Ukraine, and that's why it's been so sad for us and so affecting for us what's been going on.

So I got to a very, I would say, a depressing state when I was reading all the news, and I was getting feelings of helplessness and powerlessness and anger and frustration that I wasn't really able to do anything. And donating \$100 or \$200 didn't seem like enough. When I came back, I got an idea for this concert. The way how I got it is I watched somebody on Facebook, a musician, who was doing a live stream with a musician from a bomb shelter.

And I thought, "Wow, how powerful. How about we do it bigger? How about we bring Ukrainian top artists and international top artists and athletes and celebrities, and how

about we create a movement that's going to unite everybody around the world to come together in support of Ukraine? And how about we empower different charities on the execution side to provide help with the funds that we raise? And that is how World United for Ukraine was born. And then I called my friend who I've known for 20 years, all the way back from St. Petersburg, Russia where we were both born, and we met in a Jewish camp, and I asked her, "Svetlana, I have this crazy idea. Do you want to help me?" And she said, "Well, I'm an epidemiologist. I don't really know how to put together global events, but if you tell me what to do, I will do it." And I told her, "I don't know either, but I'm an entrepreneur, and we're going to figure it out."

That was six weeks ago, and then fast forward to where we are now, we are a team of 100 volunteers in 10 plus countries. Our website is in eight languages. We have amazing artists who's committed to support us both from the Ukraine and U.S., Canada and Sweden. And we've partnered with an amazing foundation that's the oldest foundation that's been supporting Ukraine in the U.S. called the U.S.-Ukraine foundation. And they've recently created the program Blue Check that's going to empower local grassroots charities in Ukraine to deliver aid directly to Ukrainians who have been displaced or who are still in Ukraine. Yesterday I had an opportunity to write a personal letter to President Zelensky. For us to be able to write him a personal letter to tell him about the project, something that we're working on every day. Every hour that we can possibly spend in our lives, we're spending towards it. It was very meaningful for me and for Svetlana.

SAFIAN: In the beginning, it's just the two of you. How do you get from two of you to 100 people all around the world? Is there a network that you leverage somehow?

YAMPOLSKY: Yes. I've built a very extensive global network over my entrepreneurship years. So I knew in my mind what I needed to do. I'm used to launching businesses. I consult early stage start-ups, so I knew what we need to put in place, and I started giving calls to people. If I was looking just for somebody like a PR firm, I was asking for connections. And everybody just agreed. I mean, I just had to make one phone call, and people just got inspired by the idea, and they jumped on board. Even with a streaming company, we didn't really have connections to the streaming platform. I found somebody who was producing the John Lennon 40-year tribute.

He advised me of the streaming platform Mandolin. I cold-called them on LinkedIn, and the next day we had a call, and the day after our call they agreed to support us. And this is the speed with which this project has been unfolding.

SAFIAN: You mentioned that you're partnering with the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation. The proceeds of the fundraising go to the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation. How did you get connected with them? Was that an organization you knew before?

YAMPOLSKY: No, I went to Cornell, and I'm very involved with the Cornell Entrepreneurship. We needed volunteers to do research on the media, so I wrote to the entrepreneurship list, and I said, "This is what I'm doing. I'm appealing to you for help. I'm an alum. Can you volunteer 5 to 10 hours of your time to help us do this?"

And one of the people who replied was a board member of the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, who introduced us to the US-Ukraine Foundation and also became a volunteer for the media project. Again, the response was also something just short of magical because we got connected to them on, let's say, Wednesday. On Thursday, we already had a call. And on Friday we had a dedicated person on their staff who was helping us with all the music introductions and everything where we still had a gap on our team. They have been an incredible, incredible supporter.

SAFIAN: Now, you noted that the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation recently created this new program it calls Blue Check, that identifies and vets aid organizations in Ukraine. And this is something they're putting together in partnership with the actor Liev Schreiber. Did you know about Blue Check beforehand?

YAMPOLSKY: I did not know about Blue Check beforehand. It's a wonderful platform for us because as we're bringing the world together on the funding side and on the awareness side through the concert, Blue Check is bringing charities together on the execution side, so it seems such a perfect fit for what we're trying to do.

SAFIAN: And I guess it made it simpler for you. You don't have to worry about your organization being set up to identify those things. All the proceeds will go directly to them, is that right?

YAMPOLSKY: All the proceeds go directly to them. Then they will go through the allocation process for all the charities that go through the Blue Check and get verified so that we know that the money will be allocated in a responsible and transparent way, and all the charities who receive the money have the infrastructure to deliver what they promise to deliver.

SAFIAN: The biggest headliner in your lineup, at least right now, is Pink Floyd. And you were explaining to me that you just cold-called them too.

YAMPOLSKY: We cold called most artists. And with Pink Floyd, I cold-called their office in the UK, and I made sure that they got the email. And I think it took me several phone calls. Eventually somebody responded and said that they're not going to help us, to which I responded, "How about just give us access to this video?" And that worked.

SAFIAN: You found a way to sort of convince them to be part of it.

YAMPOLSKY: Yeah, I would say through my entrepreneurial hustling activities. I don't take no for an answer, so I find a way to negotiate. If the first offer was a no, can we negotiate to something that will be yes, once I know who the decision-maker is?

SAFIAN: You've gathered a bunch of Ukrainian performers, and I'll confess that I'm not familiar with domestic Ukrainian stars other than reading that a Ukrainian group won the Eurovision contest this year. That's all I know about Ukrainian entertainers. How are you finding and casting Ukrainian talent?

YAMPOLSKY: First, we got Ukrainian talent before we went to get international talent. And my co-founder Svetlana listens to Ukrainian music. I also don't listen just like you. She started calling people that she personally liked first. And the way she found their information initially was that she just googled for the numbers of their management company, and she found it. We started talking to some people, but nobody was really coming on board.

The way we got the first artist, Nastya Kaminskya, was because she recorded a song "I Am Ukraine," which she performed at the United Nations concert and a few other charity events. And it had a refrain which was really moving. And I thought that it would be so cool if she recorded it in English. So I translated the Ukrainian lyrics into first Russian because I don't speak Ukrainian, and then into English.

And then I created a poem for the refrain, and so we needed rights to the song. And that's how we started talking to the person who could give us rights to the song. And eventually they agreed to participate, even though the song never got recorded. But that is how we got our first artist. And for the rest we got connected to somebody who was very active in the Ukrainian music scene. He provided us with a list of artists who are popular in Ukraine as well as their contact info.

SAFIAN: As you're describing so many of these steps here, you're saying, "Oh, well, we googled this, or we cold-called this person, or we tried one thing and it ended up being something else," it is very scrappy the way you have been working to pull this together.

YAMPOLSKY: I applied the entrepreneurial approach. So every time we had a problem, we took massive action, and we saw what came back, and then we reevaluated it, and moved forward.

SAFIAN: Are there lessons you've learned so far in doing this that might change the way you approach your entrepreneurial business going forward, things that you might share with other entrepreneurs who are listening to this that it opened your eyes to a little bit?

YAMPOLSKY: I would say: not to be afraid to try for an idea that seems so crazy and undoable when you first start because you never know what you can do before you try it. And I think once I stopped being afraid and just really just went for it, and I didn't think

about what's possible, it just, every day we determine what our priorities are, and every day we just do everything we can on the way towards those priorities, and that's how everything was happening. I would give entrepreneurs this advice not to be afraid, not to decide in advance what they can or cannot do. And also what's very important for us is that we have a purpose that is bigger than all of us, that we want to do something for the good of other people, and we're not really concerned with self-promotion or our egos or what our roles are. And I think it helps to have a very good morale on the team, and everybody working in unison, and so we don't spend a lot of energy on disagreements, et cetera. And so this helps to move projects fast.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: Before the break, we heard World Unite for Ukraine's Victoria Yampolsky talk about the inspiration behind the benefit concert she's organizing and how hustle has helped secure partners and build momentum.

Now she talks about the financial strategy around the event, the danger of brands continuing to service Russia, and why she feels her own personal sacrifices have been worthwhile.

Plus, she explains why flexibility will continue to define her group's efforts, and why she believes a positive outcome is guaranteed.

The initial information I saw about World Unite and the concert, it set a goal of raising \$3 million, and then a more recent release had the number at 10 million. So, you raised the target number. And I'm curious, was that because there's been a flood of money that came in, this was even before you started selling tickets, or was that a strategic decision of some kind?

YAMPOLSKY: This was a strategic decision so that we can attract big stars and big sponsors. And also it's a decision so that we can create more impact. And we're not saying that we're going to necessarily reach this goal by June 16th. We only started fundraising four days ago, but this is our goal overall. And we all believe that it's possible with everybody's help.

SAFIAN: And the idea was that by setting a bigger target, you have a better chance of reaching ... Whatever the end point is will be better because the target you set is higher?

YAMPOLSKY: Yes. It's the same idea when you're raising money for a start-up. When you're trying to raise only \$100,000, it's very hard. But when you're trying to raise \$5 million, suddenly there are more people who want to write checks. It's a similar idea here. So again, it comes from entrepreneurship. This project is very much rooted in entrepreneurship.

SAFIAN: And I guess if you're trying to raise \$5 million, but you only raise \$3 million, it's still better than just having raised 100,000 in your example.

YAMPOLSKY: Absolutely. Whatever we raise will go towards Ukraine, and we don't have to stop at any point. We can continue working on this and supporting Blue Check and potential other charity partners that may come on board.

SAFIAN: You're still hustling to make this even bigger. You mentioned that you're trying to convince talent agency CAA to be a partner. What do you need?

YAMPOLSKY: We would like to get a host who is an A-level talent to help us sell more tickets. We're looking for corporate sponsors. And I guess if there is any big band that would like to support us and submit a video for the concert, that will help us reach our goal as well.

And we're looking for interviews everywhere we can go.

SAFIAN: Now, you're not getting paid for this, right? And you have another business, a day job. So how do you juggle those needs? If you're spending all your time on this, what happens to your business, your own start-up?

YAMPOLSKY: Well, there are nights and weekends, and I am a highly organized person. And I think I'm benefiting from all of my time-management skills right now, but it is a challenge. However, for me, there's no better way for me to spend my time than to help people in need. And I'm very happy, and I feel very fortunate that I can do it.

SAFIAN: And if that means you have to deprioritize some things in your business for now, that's a sacrifice you're willing to make.

YAMPOLSKY: And to my personal life, yes, that's a sacrifice that I'm willing to make, because I believe that people who are in Ukraine now, they don't have an ability to take a break, they don't have an ability to go outside. A lot of them don't feel safe. Some of them already are under a lot of trauma. Some of them lost everything. Some of them lost their body parts, if they have been in the worst situation. So I'm incredibly more lucky. So if I can just donate my time to be able to help them and to unite others to help them as well, then this is my ... As a human being, I feel that it's my calling. And everybody on our team feels the same way. There are some people who don't even have a connection, direct connection to Ukraine that just feel very affected by the crisis because we're humans, and we respond to pain.

SAFIAN: You still have friends and family back in Russia. What is their view of the war? What are you hearing from them about what they think is happening in Ukraine?

YAMPOLSKY: I don't actually have any living members of my family in Russia. I do have some colleagues in Russia. They say that they're against the war, but that's a very small percentage of people. From what I hear through the grapevine of the Russian immigrant

community, unfortunately there is a big divide between people who are outside of Russia and the people who are still in Russia. And families often can't talk to each other because families that are still in Russia have been brainwashed and that they fully support the invasion. Whereas people who are outside and able to get a more objective news coverage of what's going on, they're obviously against the aggression.

SAFIAN: How do you feel about the move that some businesses are making to boycott their activities in Russia? Is it helpful? Is it punitive in the right ways? Is it hurting ordinary Russians in a way that isn't fair, or is it what's needed to puncture some of that propaganda that you're referring to?

YAMPOLSKY: My personal opinion is that everybody in Ukraine is affected by the war in a much bigger way than anybody in Russia, except those people who are physically fighting. So if the cost of realizing that the country is violating the land of another country, if the cost of this is losing your job or not having some products in a supermarket or in other stores, then, for me, that's a signal for their collective consciousness to be awakened, so that they realize: how is a country that got to the point where a dictator was able to stay in power for so long, and we ended up in a situation that we did?

SAFIAN: And if you're a business, you're a brand that's still doing business in Russia, would you give them advice of any kind?

YAMPOLSKY: I don't think that I should do that because they have their own reasons and priorities. I can only say that we all know about those companies that still supported the Nazis and did not exit doing business with Germany. And so we still remember who they are. However, some of them are still successful companies today. I believe that this is a personal decision for everybody, and there are obviously business considerations to be taken into account as well.

SAFIAN: You've put a lot of time into this, in this race to get to June 16th. What's at stake for this project, for World Unite for Ukraine?

YAMPOLSKY: I believe that what we've created is incredible, and whatever is meant to happen, that's what's been meant to happen by the universe. Whatever outcome we're going to get, that's what we were meant to get, and it can only be a positive outcome because there was nothing before. Whatever we create will go to help Ukrainians, and it will continue to live on, so there is no failure in our specific enterprise because there's only upside to doing good.

SAFIAN: Will World Unite for Ukraine exist after June 16th?

YAMPOLSKY: It's definitely going to continue, but how it's going to continue is to be determined after June 16th.

SAFIAN: Because I know right now, it's not a registered nonprofit.org or ... It's just an LLC, right? It's sort of almost like a shell to be able to make things faster and simpler to set up the concert and move the money through the foundation?

YAMPOLSKY: That is correct. But who is to say what can change the type of incorporation? We did what made sense, given how much time we had to achieve our objectives, and then as more problems arise, we evaluate and solve those problems. So, that has been our approach to this project from the beginning.

SAFIAN: If listeners here want to buy a ticket to the concert or to show their support, or if they have a business that might contribute in some way, what's the best way for them to reach out, to connect, to learn more about it?

YAMPOLSKY: Our website is worlduniteforukraine.com. There is a link to get tickets. It will take you to a Mandolin site where you can get tickets. We also set merchandise there, designed by Ukrainian and Moldova born artists. There are t-shirts and posters available. All of this can be bought on the Mandolin site, and if you are interested in becoming a corporate sponsor, then my email is Victoria@worlduniteforukraine.com, and I will be happy to send you more info about how you can participate.

SAFIAN: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that we should have? Anything that I didn't ask you about?

YAMPOLSKY: This project for me has been a testament to human kindness and how much can be achieved when you come at something from love and from your heart.

I would ask everybody to go on the website, learn about the project, spread awareness, and support us in any way you can because anything you do will help Ukrainians who are in trouble right now. Just think about this. If you were in the war zone right now, wouldn't you want somebody to help you?

SAFIAN: Well, Victoria, thank you. Thank you for talking with us. Thanks for devoting so much of yourself to helping people you don't even know, but are in need, and we wish you great luck with it.

YAMPOLSKY: Thank you so much. Thank you for inviting me.