Often seeds planted during our youth lie dormant until we, the gardener, find the time and resources to allow growth. When she was a young adult, Rosemary (Hasson) McCarty ’90 planted a seed which eventually led her to a refugee camp on the border between Thailand and Burma.

Back in 1960, Rosemary McCarty spent a year doing mission work with Jesuit priests in Chile. She described her experience as “very transformative.” Upon returning to the United States, McCarty continued on with her life: marrying, having two children and starting a career. However, what she experienced in Chile would never leave her mind, and her desire to help the less fortunate would never leave her heart.

Two years ago when a friend was traveling to the Nu Poe Refugee Camp along the Thai-Burma border, McCarty asked if she could accompany her. The camp is a remote Thai-controlled jungle encampment that has been home for many Burmese refugees since 1997. It houses more than 18,000 people.

While at the camp, McCarty worked primarily with the Karen people, an ethnic group from Burma. The Karen have been the repeated targets of violence and persecution from the Burmese government.

“They are systematically being driven out of their country. Their villages are destroyed, landmines are planted around them so they cannot return. Many are killed, raped and made to be porters, and the children are made to join the army,” McCarty explained.

In the past two years, McCarty has been back to the camp three times, teaching English to the teenage students. She was the only female foreigner permitted to live in the camp. Last April, she returned from a three-month stay and is already looking forward to going back.

“Every time I go back I stay longer. I’m ready to go longer, for six months the next time. I would go back this summer but I have a husband,” she laughed.

McCarty’s children and grandchildren support her work with the refugees. “They know me, and I could see them doing the same things in their lives eventually,” she said.
McCarty practices centering prayer regularly. Centering prayer is a method of silent prayer where one experiences God’s presence within. McCarty believes that during her time doing this type of praying is where she got the call to work with the Karen refugees.

“It’s amazing when you open to where the Holy Spirit leads you. It’s where God wants me to be and it’s where the Spirit is leading me,” she explained.

The Nu Poe Camp lacks clean drinking water, has little electricity and only a few generators to charge the remaining batteries in the camp. There is no indoor plumbing. McCarty lived in a dormitory with her female students where she would eat only two meals a day that consisted primarily of rice and vegetables.

Families live in bamboo shacks with dirt floors. There is a film of dust which covers everything in the camp. There is little disease in the camp which does have a primitive hospital. Most of the Karen people are Christians, although there are a few sections of Buddhists.

McCarty explained that she never felt unsafe during her stays at the Nu Poe Camp. There were times when she felt homesick, but she said she was embraced and loved by the teenagers she was teaching.

In the refugee camp McCarty is known as teacher or “tharamu” in Karen. She taught in three different schools in the camp, holding classes all week long.

“The word got out that there was an English teacher in the camp and you would have thought that I was an ambassador. I was like gold because I was an English speaker. For many in the camp, I was their first English speaking teacher. They learn English from the time they’re in grade school,” McCarty said.

One particular Karen student captured McCarty’s heart and she has taken him under her wing. His name is Htoodai and he is 19 years old. He resided in a Karen state inside of Burma until the SPDC (State Peace Development Council) came to his village and killed his father.

Htoodai was sent to an orphanage when he was four years old and grew up living in three different orphanages.

McCarty is impressed with this young man’s drive to get a university education and go back to Burma to be a leader of the Karen people.

According to McCarty, the refugee camp receives funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other non-government organizations (NGOs).

McCarty has a deep love for the inhabitants of the Nu Poe Refugee Camp. These people have captured her heart, and she speaks passionately about her time with them.

“This was the worst, coming back to the states this past time. We are so spoiled. For me, being there was a privilege. I watched the way they (the Karen people) lived, and they’re happy, content, and faith-filled. They still hold out. They want to go home to their village, but it’s not going to happen — not in my lifetime.”

Saying goodbye after her last visit was particularly difficult for McCarty. The residents hosted a party for her.

“It was really hard leaving. The night before I was to leave, one by one they (the students) would come to my door, and they brought little gifts. They didn’t want me to leave,” she said.

To learn more about the people living in the Nu Poe Refugee Camp and to find out how you can help, contact McCarty at rosemary_2003@yahoo.com.