

Cambodian refugees' plight was overwhelming to nun

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By Fran Bauer of the Journal Staff
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Looking back, Sister Ann Catherine realizes there may have been no real way to prepare herself for the first view of the refugee village where she would spend five months offering medical care.

That first glimpse of Nong Samet, a village just beyond the Cambodian border in Thailand, was overwhelming, the Milwaukee nun recently recalled.

Until last March, medical teams had seldom stopped at the Village. But the Red Cross team she had joined planned to be there every day for at least five months.

They were outsiders, arriving in a war zone most Westerners were afraid to enter. Three were nuns, dressed in white garb that was unfamiliar to the area's residents. The doctor and technician with them must have looked equally strange.

Hundreds of gaunt faces circled the medical team's truck as it pulled up before the thatch-roofed enclosure that was to be their hospital.

"I trained myself always to look at faces," Sister Ann Catherine recalled. "I wanted to see the people as individuals."

If she saw only the numbers, or the intensity of their pain, she feared she would be overwhelmed by a sense of futility.

The team seemed to have so little to offer, she said, only the simplest of medicines and supplies.

But they did have skills to teach and love to give.

"And in the end," Sister Ann Catherine said, "that's what it all really comes down to. All we could really do was show them that the rest of the world knew they were suffering and cared."

The 36-year-old nun had seen poverty before.

Growing up in Milwaukee's Inner City had offered her an ample view of despair. During her high school days at St. Joan Antida and even during nurse's training at Alverno College, she specialized in working with the elderly.

Worked at St. Anthony's

Then two years ago, she became a nurse at St. Anthony's Hospital, where more problems of the poor awaited her.

Her patients there often are the transients, the drunks and the alienated who fill the free meal programs at the church next door, she said.

Yet all of this seemed somewhat diminished when she saw the plight of the Cambodians who had been forced to flee into Thailand to stay alive. For nearly five years, Cambodia has been locked in a war that may already have destroyed nearly half its population.

Those who survive are the strong ones, Sister Ann Catherine said.

Each day she watched starving children die. And it was common to see a child of perhaps 8 or 9 assume responsibility for a toddler.

Sad as that life might seem, memories of the experience still light the nun's eyes.

Never did she hear complaints or see frowns, she said. Instead, the people somehow had learned to cope. And each day, the children lined the road to smile and wave at the team members as they arrived and departed.

Fighting would resume at night, making the village unsafe, she said. The team members never knew what would await them the next morning when their truck journeyed from a nearby compound where all 200 Red Cross volunteers lived.

For Sister Ann Catherine, the days always began with silent prayer, then a breakfast that had to last until her return to the compound at nightfall.

At first language was a barrier, the nun recalled; the team had to rely on interpreters to convey words.

But a simpler system soon took over. When she would hold a sick child in her arms, Sister Ann Catherine recalled, she could see the mother's eyes fill with appreciation.

Nothing more needed to be said.

Journal Photo

Sister Ann Catherine displayed an album of photographs taken while she was a nurse in Cambodia.

