

Nun tells of success in Cambodia

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By Kathy Lange
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Wauwatosa - Sister Ann Catherine Veierstahler, who spent last spring setting up feeding stations for Cambodian refugees along the Thailand border, came here Sunday with a success story and a message of hope.

Sister Veierstahler told the story of a farming people devastated by war and driven from their land, searching for a home and for survival, and of a world that mobilized to help them.

The story was told to about 40 people in two sessions of a seminar at Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church, 1529 Wauwatosa Ave. Sister Veierstahler shared experiences from last year, when she spent five months in Cambodia during a war between North Vietnamese and Cambodian Communists.

Served on Red Cross team

The Catholic nun, who now works at St. Anthony's Hospital, served as a nurse on a Red Cross team that included a physician, a technician and four other nurses. Their original task was to give medical aid and farming information to the refugees.

"When people are running from place to place in order to survive, you can't just tell them, 'Here, plant this for food,' " she said. "We saw that food was more important to them than clinics, so we bought them food."

Refugees need love and care

"Ninety percent of the people there were farmers before the war broke out, but almost all of the farmland was destroyed. There were 100 acres of land where we worked that had 100,000 Cambodians on it who fled the war to seek what we take for granted - food, medicine and security."

Sister Veierstahler emphasized that love and care, though not as tangible as rice and chicken, also were needed by the refugees.

"People were fed in many different ways," she said.

She showed a picture of a 9-year-old Cambodian girl with a shy smile, one of her success stories.

"Her mother carried her in because she was, starving to death and couldn't walk," Sister Veierstahler said. "Within a few short weeks, she was smiling, she was up, she was walking and visiting other children, primarily because she was able to eat and was given lots of attention and care."

The clinic set up by Sister Veierstahler and the Red Cross team was a thatched-bamboo hut where they fed children and adults, tended their wounds, taught school, trained doctors and nurses, played games and, most important of all, showed the refugees, that people cared about them.

Saw new life in orphans

"We saw many orphans who owned only a spoon, a bowl and a pair of shorts," she said. "Often they had been mistreated. As we fed them, as we held them in our arms, as we showed them we loved them, we saw new life in them."

"Because of money and food given from around the world, this nation and the lives of many children truly were saved."

"Under the Pol Pot regime, 4 million Cambodians, one-half of the population, died before the rest of the world knew about it," she said. "The people we were training to be doctors and nurses had been playing dumb for the previous five years. They didn't speak the English or French they had been taught for fear they would be killed."

Despite the suffering she witnessed, Sister Veierstahler expressed hope about Cambodia's future: "It seems from the reports we get that the country is re-establishing itself. I feel the nation will be saved because of our united effort."