



BRIDGING BORDERS

U social workers lead the way in efforts to build and connect local and global refugee communities.



Elaine Jarvik | FALL 2016



Mae La, on the Thailand-Myanmar border, is sometimes called “the Club Med of refugee camps”—the sardonic point being that Mae La has reliable electricity and isn’t in the middle of a scorching desert. But like other refugees from Myanmar (aka Burma) who live in Thai camps, the residents of Mae La have essentially been stuck there. Some of them fled the country in the mid-1980s and have never been able to return; some were born in the camps and have never known any other home.

Rosemarie Hunter, an associate professor in the University of Utah’s College of Social Work, and six U colleagues, visited Mae La for the first time in 2008. Before they set foot in the camp, they were cautioned by aid workers that the refugees would be helpless and hopeless.

But the residents, the Utahns soon discovered, had built a flourishing high school out of bamboo, and had set up shops, with items they had bought after paying off guards to let them sneak outside. Hunter saw the experience as illustrative, because too often, she says, “There’s a tendency to only see need and weakness.”

Hunter’s approach—the goal of all social work, she says—is the opposite: to discover a person’s or a community’s strengths. To see, for example, the ingenuity and resilience of the refugees, and then to build on those. To not so much “serve” as build partnerships.

That initial 2008 trip led to Bridging Borders, which takes U social work students to the Thai camps each summer for fieldwork and trainings. Just as crucial, Hunter says, is the fact that they also take along former residents of the camps who now live in Utah, cultural liaisons who bridge past and present, local and global.



Rosemarie Hunter