



Sharing the Bounty

Refugee advocate Maria Figueroa partners with farmer Carol Waterman to give Karen refugees a taste of their native land



It's a chilly February morning when an unlikely group of people gather on the more than 140 acres of land that make up Waterman's Farm on the city's southeast side.

Vibrant and colorful handwoven clothing worn by about a dozen of the guests to the farm distinguishes the Karen people from Carol Waterman, co-owner of Waterman's Farm, and Maria Figueroa, founder of Refugee Resource and Research Institute.

Since they can't speak one other's language, Carol and Maria search the faces of the Karen refugees for signs of communication — making sure they understand they will be free to take over one to two acres of the land, farming it and treating it as their own.

As Maria looks around, she is amazed at what she sees on the face of one of the men, Htoo Wah.

"A *smile*," Figueroa says incredulously, recalling the farm visit. "I had known him for three or four years, and in all that time I had never seen him smile."

It was Htoo Wah who spurred on Maria to make a connection between the refugees and a local farmer. While visiting the refugees as part of her mission with Refugee Resources, she noticed a deep-seated melancholy among the group of people who had fled the military dictatorial rule of their native land in Burma.

Unlike many other refugees, the Karen people took much longer to adapt to their surroundings, Maria noted. "They're very, very welcoming and warm, but it was a very sad sight.

"I tried to find out what it is that makes it so difficult for them to adjust. What is it that is missing? Where did they come from? What did they do? What is their

history?” she recalls.

Through her research, which included talking to directors of national and international organizations, she discovered they came from a background with deep agrarian roots.

Her intuitions were confirmed when Htoo Wah said through an interpreter: “If only we can farm. Is it possible for you to find us a farm?” Maria recalls.

“Even if you’re not a refugee, and you’re taken from something familiar and you’re thrown into a very foreign environment, it can be very alienating,” Maria says. “I thought maybe it would help if they can be reconnected to what defines them as Karen — as individuals coming from this background.”

When Maria later told Carol about the rarity of that smile, Carol was deeply touched.

“I almost cried,” says Carol, who along with her husband, Bruce, agreed to Maria’s proposal to allow the Karen people to farm part of their land. “It makes me feel humble. It’s so simple, but wow. It’s great.”

The story of how a family farm that had been a part of the Waterman legacy for 132 years came to touch the spirits of people from across the world stems from the work Maria has undertaken for nearly all her life.

A love for human rights

As a youth growing up in the Philippines during a time of military dictatorship, Maria knew little of the hardships of the people outside her circle of family and friends.

Born a single child to college-educated professionals, Maria was insulated from the lifestyles that many working-class families endured. It wasn’t until she was a pre-teen attending a boarding school that she learned more about the human rights violations taking place in her country.

Though they couldn’t be blatant about it, the nuns and priests who taught at the school were very involved in human rights activism and passed on their convictions to their students.

“You get involved without really knowing

it,” Maria recalls. “Catholic schools were immersing students in what was happening throughout the country. It started as part of the curriculum.”

Through her teachers, Maria learned about the casualties of speaking out against human rights violations, including “mysterious disappearances,” harassment and imprisonments — stories that never appeared in the government-controlled media.

As part of one class, students were introduced to other lifestyles through an immersion program. For a short period, students were sent to live with a family in the slums, a family of farmers or of another class.

Maria’s immersion sent her to the country where she stayed with a family who farmed land that wasn’t theirs — giving the majority of the crops to the landowner and living off the remainder.

She recalls the shock of realizing there was no running water in the home. “You had to walk a mile to get to the nearest water pump,” she says. “Being young, it was very uncomfortable.”



Taking root

That early exposure fed Maria's passion for human rights advocacy.

She earned her bachelor's degree in English literature and psychology from the University of the Philippines but quickly shifted her focus to human rights work. She did a brief stint as an assistant editor and a managing editor of a tourist magazine then later signed up for the opportunity to join a human rights organization that was run by nuns and priests.

She furthered her studies by earning a master's degree in Peace Studies and Conflict Transformation at the European University Center for Peace in Austria and taking courses in fundraising in philanthropy.

Though they were supportive of Maria's work in human rights activism, her parents often were afraid for her safety.

"I come from a progressive thinking family, but while they were supportive they wanted to know, 'Why can't I be involved in something else that's not so dangerous?'" Maria says with a laugh.

At the time, Maria didn't consider her activism dangerous. "I was not one of those big personalities. I was just one of the many working in the human rights movement, and you never think anything would happen to you."

Since those early years, Maria has continued



Maria Figueroa

to do work with nonprofit organizations — particularly those focused on the promotion of human rights, she says.

Making a difference

In the years that followed, Maria continued to seek out opportunities to work for nonprofits in areas as varied as Singapore, California, Hong Kong and Europe — all places she lived as a result of her husband's career moves with Delphi.

When Patrick's work brought the family, including daughter Alexandra, 15, to the Indianapolis area in 2005, Maria worked as a resettlement coordinator, helping refugees get their basic needs met. (Their older daughter Dominique, 22, stayed in Austria where she was going to boarding school at the time.)

Later, Maria founded Refuge Resource and Research Institute to supplement the services settlement agencies offer.

"I wanted to take a human rights approach to resolving their dilemmas," Maria says of refugees. "I've experienced how it is to live in a foreign country; it's not very easy. I can relate to being an alien, being in a very strange environment."

For the Karen refugees, Maria knew connecting them to a farm would have a major impact on their healing.

"I wanted to help them regain their dignity and the rights that were taken away from them," she says.

Through a series of calls, including one to the mayor's office, Maria met Carol Waterman and approached her about the proposal.

Carol, having grown up on a farm in northern Indiana, was immediately intrigued. "It was very interesting," she recalled of the proposal. "They talked about what they wanted — reconnecting them to what is familiar."



"I thought, *Why couldn't we do that?*"

Her husband, Bruce, readily agreed.

"Being farmers ourselves, we understood the desire they must have for farming," says Carol,



who also runs Waterman's Farm Market with her husband. "It tugged at our heartstrings. We can't speak the language but we understood their need to connect to the earth."

The adjustment wasn't that simple. Some of the vegetables the Karen refugees grow in their native country don't grow well in Indiana's soil and climate. There are differences in farming methods. While the Watermans use farm equipment, the refugees use their hands and hoes to pull weeds.

After a series of meetings, the group decided they would plant zucchini, okra, squash, bitter melon and yard long beans.

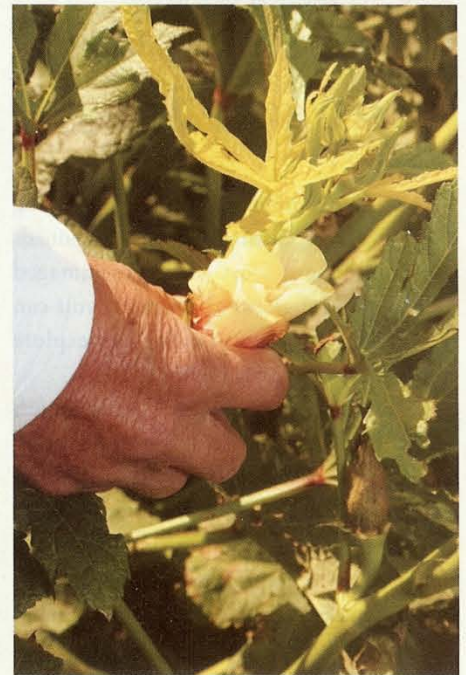
Though they don't speak one other's language nor necessarily share a taste in

crops, there is a deep connection, Carol says.

"There are fewer and fewer people involved in agriculture, but there's something about being connected to the earth — the soil, the smell of the soil when you first till the ground and then seeing a sprout breaking through the soil ... there's something very rewarding for all of us to be able to produce food that people will eat," Carol says.

Though Maria doesn't share that passion for farming, she knows plenty about connecting to what's important. And the smile on Htoo Wah's face made her realize that she had found that missing link to help the Karen refugees take another step in their healing.

"You have to be able to reconnect to your past and what is familiar to help you move forward," she says. W



Maria Figueroa shares a laugh with Carol Waterman (above left), who agreed to give Karen refugees an opportunity to raise crops on Waterman's Farms.