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A Humanitarian's Quiet Path to Change

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Diplomatic Dispatches
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As a 16-year-old exchange student in India, she recalls, she hopped on a third-class train car from Calcutta to Varanasi and stared at parched lands and hollow-eyed drought victims pushing their babies at arriving passengers before going off to die.

"I had never seen dead people before, I had never seen people about to die," said Kathleen Newland, though she had grown up in the Deep South and had seen real poverty. "It was an intense experience, the bread lines in Calcutta, the people fleeing the countryside, and that really changed my life."

Newland is now co-director of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington group that analyzes movements of people worldwide. As she sat this week in her sun-flooded office, the afternoon light softening a peaches-and-cream complexion, she reflected on the path that has led her to her professional mission in life. The daughter of a naval officer, she grew up in shipyards, going to nine schools around the country before graduating from high school. In college, she organized anti-war marchers in Washington as the Harvard University treasurer of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee and chaired the Radcliffe Moratorium Committee.

She remembers her father's friends, also naval officers, bringing pots of soup and trays of brownies to feed the protesters she sometimes brought home to sleep on the floor.

"That taught me a lesson about what is right and wrong and that patriotism does not mean blind loyalty and that loving your country is wanting it to be the best," she said. "Despite my humanitarianism and anti-war activities, I have a very strong sense of country and I am very patriotic."

Known for quiet diplomacy, Newland is one of a group of well-spoken women in Washington who have pushed the issues of women, children and refugees to the forefront of the federal government's policy concerns. Along the way, she has traveled widely, witnessing scenes of desperation in the world's far-flung refugee camps, in Somalia, along the Thai-Burmese border, in northern Kenya and in Afghanistan.

Newland does her work "with great style, in her presentation, in her person, in her diction," said Robert P. DeVecchi, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "She knows her stuff, she is well versed in the issues and she is never confrontational or coarse. This is almost a secret weapon.

"At the same time, she is not a pushover. She stands by her guns, but you don't feel you are being challenged," he added.

Lately, she has been active as volunteer chair of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. The group is particularly concerned about women in detention, undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers who have fled persecution in their own countries and have been locked up in the United States.

At any given time, Newland says, there are several thousand such people in Immigration and Naturalization Service facilities and county jails. Often their children are picked up with them and held in juvenile detention facilities with young people who have committed violent crimes.

The commission is working on a bill, the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act, which would require the government to appoint attorneys and guardians for refugee children.

Newland said she has concerns about the U.S. refugee resettlement program, which came to a complete halt after Sept. 11 and was restarted only with added layers of scrutiny that slow the process. Of 7,000 people who were travel-ready before September, only about 4,000 to 5,000 have moved, she said.

It's a tough time to be working on immigration issues, given the new fears that terrorists may gain entry to the United States as asylum-seekers. But caring for refugees in war zones can be easier than before.

"The constituency for humanitarian and refugee work is much broader and complex now than 20 years ago," said Paula Newberg, a former colleague of Newland's and a special adviser to the U.N. Foundation. There is broad agreement in government today that war cannot be waged without concern for civilians displaced by it.

The author or editor of five books and 11 articles, Newland has also served as adviser to a task force set up by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to help reform the United Nations, to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and to the International Labor Organization.

Despite the depth of the problems, "things can be done," Newland said with emphasis. "The international community has become much more organized. The hard part is political, prevention. The humanitarian part is always going to be the palliative."

Smooth black pebbles and stones collected during her travels adorn cabinet tops in her office at the institute. "I have an obsession with rocks, the calmness they bring," said Newland, who loves to cook and relies on the opera and the artwork on her walls to maintain balance in her life.

She stays away from the theater, she said, because there is "enough drama and turbulence" in her profession.

