

### Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

*Interview by Kate Graham*

Meredith Sommers is a woman who approaches Dana with courage.

She has lived and worked abroad in both Europe and Nicaragua, sought greater political rights for immigrants, welcomed asylum seekers into her home, taught English to new immigrants, and visited people on the brink of deportation in jail.

For Meredith, acts of generosity come naturally: “It’s about being available and saying, ‘yes!’”

#### Connections to Latin America

Meredith grew up with a sense of compassion for others, especially people who found themselves in situations that they could not handle on their own.

When she was a child, her grandparents took a trip to Guatemala and brought back for her a traditional Guatemalan dress.

This experience sparked her curiosity and led her to believe she had a sister in Latin America. Beginning in the 1980s, she experienced life in Central America through work at the Center for Global Education, and spent additional time in Nicaragua.



#### Work After Retirement Brings Joy

In 2000, Meredith retired from working at the Resource Center of the Americas, where her job focused on education on poverty, politics, and socio-economic issues in Mexico and Central America.

Never considering taking up golf, Meredith began volunteering to teach English as a Second Language classes at Holy Rosary Church in the Philips neighborhood of Minneapolis.

She teaches mostly Spanish-speaking adults from Mexico, El Salvador, and Ecuador, but also Somali immigrants. Her sense of “burn out” from prior work quickly dissolved as she discovered that “teaching language is sharing language” and that making personal connections brought her joy.

In 2010, after hearing from her students about their fear of deportation, Meredith began to visit people in the deportation center at the Ramsey County Jail.

She is currently working to obtain the release of a Mexican man who has lived and worked in Minnesota for 22 years. If deported, he would leave his wife and three children to fend for themselves. She said that this is “challenging, but the people are inspiring.”

She finds that her Buddhist practice helps her to recognize and release feelings of anger and to find equanimity when dealing with some policies and decisions in the immigration system.

“I am learning about resiliency and impermanence as we become involved with one another. We are learning from each other, nurturing each other.”

### Learning to Set Boundaries

Meredith has had to learn how to set appropriate boundaries in her volunteer work. In the past, she has helped immigrants seeking "family" by allowing them to live in her home with her husband and three sons.

She developed a wonderful relationship with one individual, but with another person the outcome was not what she had hoped.

“Fearlessness is not only possible, it is the ultimate joy. When you touch nonfear, you are free.”

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

Looking back on the experience, she has learned that the focus on survival for some people can cause them to behave in self-interested and dishonest ways.

### Compassion for Oneself

For Meredith, the key to setting appropriate boundaries is to give “while it feels good, and learning to trust that feeling.” It is hard to say “no,” because it feels uncompassionate. But, in her practice, she has learned to have compassion for herself.

She has also had to let go of expectations. “Buddhist practice helps me focus on what is happening now, in the present moment. It guides me to let go of the outcome in teaching or visiting the detention center, and to trust that students and detainees will be able to figure out their own path.”

Although setting boundaries is crucial, it is also important to take risks. “I don’t think of it as volunteerism, necessarily,” said Meredith. “It has led to an incredible life. I have taken some risks, and I don’t regret it. And I have found that I have many sisters, and brothers, in Latin America.”