

# “Compassion”

The year was 1977. I was a lonely seventeen-year-old high school student. A social misfit. I was a square peg in a sea of round holes. Passionate about social justice, animal rights, and the state of the planet, I was misunderstood by my teachers and bullied by "friends" and classmates. I withdrew, taking solace in writing and protesting.

One day, I saw a news report that would change my life. The newscaster was standing by a boat in Thailand, reporting on the "Boat People" and the refugee crisis that was unfolding after the Vietnam War. Thousands of refugees from war-torn Vietnam were escaping in droves, looking for solace, for safety. For home. I stood in front of the television, riveted, filled with emotion. I knew I must do something. But what could a 17-year-old girl do? I called the television station that aired the broadcast, was directed to the United Nations, who ultimately directed me to the International Rescue Committee. I made a phone call that would change the entire course of my life.

I spoke to a refugee resettlement counselor who offered me the position of "friend" to five families of Vietnamese "Boat People" in the Bronx. I arrived on a Saturday in November 1977, armed only with a Vietnamese/English dictionary, two bags of donations and a smile. I stayed for seven years, visiting every Saturday. After college, I became a Resettlement Counselor with the IRC working with clients from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos until 1986, when President Reagan cut the non-profit budgets and I lost my job.

Devastated, I moved to the Berkshires, MA and became an ESL teacher, and eventually a writer, chronicling this story in my novel. I could be the poster-child for teen volunteerism, as I can attest that doing this work turned my life around.

— *Jana, South Egremont, MA*