Anthropologist Roberta Baer’s work with Burmese refugees is one example of USF’s institution-wide commitment to university-community engagement, the central focus of the Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships.
ucked away in a quiet area southeast of Ybor City and Port Tampa Bay lies Tampa Bay Gardens. Spreading across six acres behind St. Mary’s Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the garden has become a sanctuary for Tampa-area refugees, primarily those from Burma.

Approximately three years ago, a fortuitous encounter brought together two local religious leaders: Pastor Joseph Berhanu of the Global Refuge Community Church and Father Berhanu Bekale of St. Mary’s. Because Father Berhanu could empathize with the struggles of the Burmese refugees in Pastor Joseph’s church, he agreed to let them use the land behind St. Mary’s so that they could grow organic fruits and vegetables to help them replicate the diets they were used to in their home country of Burma.

“When we started,” remembers Father Berhanu, “my intention was just to help the people. We wanted to give them the opportunity to cultivate their own food to feed their family. And if there was a surplus, they could sell it and become more self-sufficient.”

The partnership for the Tampa Bay Gardens gradually solidified, eventually receiving a $250,000 grant through the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement’s Refugee Agricultural Services. The field of applied anthropology comprises scientists, scholars and practitioners who apply anthropological knowledge and skills to contemporary human problems. The key to their work is the collaboration with community partners who are interested in working with institutions of higher education to enhance the services they provide to those in need. Although her previous research primarily focused on Northwest Native Americans and fell in love with the concept of studying other cultures. After volunteering with Baer at the age of 9, when she saw an exhibit about Northwest Native Americans and fell in love with the concept of studying other cultures.

“Tampa Bay Gardens has now become an exemplary model of university-community partnerships. Through a series of grants from the Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships (OCEP), including one of four Research That Matters grants awarded for 2015 (see box, pg. 39), Baer has conducted field research at the garden and in the homes of Burmese refugees with the assistance of successive classes of USF students. The grants are especially helpful to pay for translators who are needed during field research and interviewing. The courses Baer has developed with grant support from OCEP enable her students to learn how to conduct applied research that will have a lasting impact on the Burmese refugee community as they transition to life in the United States.

OECP’s mission is to expand and strengthen university-community engagement locally and globally in support of USF’s strategic priorities: student success, research and innovation, partnerships, and sound financial management. OCEP’s work includes providing grant assistance to faculty and students working on service-learning projects and community engaged research; facilitating workshops, trainings, and one-on-one consultations in best practices for community engagement; hosting university-community match-ups and conferences; and providing educational materials with the goal of supporting the development of mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships across the campus and throughout the community.

“I’ve been doing these kinds of classes for years, even before it was called service-learning,” says Baer, who seamlessly weaves service-learning pedagogy and community-based research into her ongoing work with Burmese refugees. Baer serves on the Advisory Board of the Tampa Bay Burmese Council, and she has even been able to connect the Burmese gardeners with a local restaurant, the Refinery, which has an interest in the food choices of the Burmese refugees. Baer serves on the Burmese Council, and she has even been able to connect the Burmese gardeners with a local restaurant, the Refinery, which has an interest in the food choices of the Burmese refugees.

Chloe Sweetman, an Honors College senior majoring in anthropology with a minor in creative writing, is one of Baer’s students who has been so inspired by her work in the garden that she continues to volunteer there. She will be starting a master’s in applied anthropology in the fall. She says Baer’s Anthropology of Food course was a unique opportunity to work on a “holistic and beautiful project.”

Sweetman, a Bradenton native, has been determined to become an anthropologist since a trip to Tampa’s Museum of Science and Industry with her godmother at the age of 9, when she saw an exhibit about Northwest Native Americans and fell in love with the concept of studying other cultures. After volunteering with Baer as a summer research assistant, she enrolled in Anthropology of Food, and learned how to collect qualitative and quantitative data about the food choices of the Burmese refugees at the Tampa Bay Gardens.

“Tampa Bay Gardens is a ‘holistic and beautiful project.’”

Sweetman feels that the work in the garden is important, particularly for Burmese refugees who work with their families in the garden.

A Burmese woman works in the garden.

By BONNIE SILVESTRI | Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships
the youngest Burmese refugees, many of whom were born in refugee camps outside of their native country. It is so easy to "lose cultural cuisine and an agricultural connection and lose the traditions built around food," she says. She hopes that the children whose families are involved with the garden will regain a "cultural touchstone to reach back to understand their cultural heritage, a deep-rooted culture from Burma and have a balance of both cultures." Sweetman adds that Americans can also learn a great deal about herbal remedies from Burma for treating chronic ailments.

Together with Baer and Jennifer Briggs, another student from Baer’s Anthropology of Food class, Sweetman presented the results of the study at the OCEP-sponsored Research that Matters: Sustainable Food Conference in January 2015. A panel discussion during the conference also included the research of a graduate civil engineering course in Sustainable Development taught by Associate Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering Maya Trotz. Students in the course constructed a greenhouse and a system to harvest rainwater at the garden. Additionally, during the panel discussion, Father Berhanu, Pastor Joseph, Pastor Lah Kh (a Burmese Master Gardener), and Janet Blair, community liaison for the Suncoast Region Refugee Services program, shared their remarks about the significance of the USF collaboration to the success of the project.

The garden-centered collaborative is an exemplary project that demonstrates the mutual benefits of university-community partnerships. Students and faculty from multiple disciplines, including anthropology, engineering, public health and nursing, have been able to work on the garden project and produce actionable community-engaged scholarship, as well as provide a variety of services to the local Burmese refugee community. It is just this kind of work that ensures that USF maintains its national designation as a Carnegie Engaged University, recognized for Outreach and Partnerships as well as Curricular Engagement, which was recently renewed for the third time 2015. OCEP has a crucial role to play in supporting the development and maintenance of partnerships as well as curricular engagement.

"I am really thankful to OCEP," Baer says. "I wouldn’t have been able to do this research without the office’s support." In turn, Baer shares her expertise with other faculty looking to find ways to develop collaborative projects during annual service-learning days.

Perhaps most importantly, the community members are delighted with USF’s contribution. "It is a place the refugees can come," says Father Berhanu. "They can breathe; they can connect their eyes to the sky, and be in nature." This is precisely the kind of "third place" apart from work and home, that, with the help of USF faculty and students, contributes to the flourishing of the local community.

The greenhouse built by students in Maya Trotz’s Sustainable Development course.

Research that Matters

Four USF anthropologists received this year’s Research that Matters grants, each with approximately $8,000 in funding for the following four faculty-community partnerships:

- Roberta Baer, with community partner Tampa Bay Gardens, “Dietary Issues for Burmese Refugee Adults.”
- David Himmelgreen, with community partner Feeding America Tampa Bay, “An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the School Backpack Program.”
- Elizabeth Miller, with community partners Hillsborough County Breastfeeding Task Force and Tampa General Hospital-Genesis Women’s Center, “Breastfeeding and Breastfeeding Education Among African American Women in Hillsborough County.”
- Christian Wells, with community partner Seine Bight Reservoir to Museum Foundation, “Garifuna Community-Based Heritage Research in Seine Bight, Belize.”