Sometimes people tell Megan Berthold ’84 that her chosen career sounds depressing. Berthold—director of research and a therapist for the Program for Torture Victims (PTV) in Los Angeles—disagrees. She says she gains “vicarious resilience” from her work with survivors of state-sponsored torture: “Our clients by and large have enormous strength. They’re creative and resourceful at surviving.”

PTV provides free medical, psychological, and case-management services to its clients, most of them asylum-seekers with limited or no access to government benefits or the authorizations that would let them work legally. Berthold herself appears as an expert witness in immigration court and trains health and mental-health providers, lawyers, and social-service agencies. She brings more than 20 years of experience to her job, beginning with her first year after Harvard, when an older brother who was working in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal offered to set her up with a volunteer teaching post.

“I was fresh out of college, and I think living and working in a very different culture gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own,” says Berthold, who was raised to value service and stand up to injustice. She found her life’s work in Nepal: “I knew I loved working cross-culturally and with refugees.”

She earned a master’s in social work from the University of Utah in 1988, then worked in refugee camps in the Philippines and on the Thai-Cambodian border, where, she recalls, “You could buy hand grenades in the little market where you might buy rice, for less than a dollar.” Eventually she moved to Los Angeles and earned a doctorate in social welfare from UCLA, completing her degree and joining PTV in 1998.

The very concept of therapy can be foreign to survivors, she notes: “The majority of the clients I’ve worked with have never encountered someone in my profession before.” Many come to PTV only for help with their asylum claims at first, but if they start working with staff members, Berthold says, they often experience some easing of stress and begin to open up.

Therapy for survivors often involves helping them “reclaim their sense of agency [and] regain control over their own life,” Berthold explains. PTV’s clients frequently deal with depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Those who were tortured because they were working for political change or human rights often fare better if they can maintain a connection to their activism, she says. To help those who were tortured for no particular reason, she tries “to look individually at their different world views [and] what helps sustain them” as they try to adapt to life in a new country.

And life in the United States can be difficult for these survivors: in the wake of 9/11, it can take years for their asylum cases to be resolved. In the meantime, they cannot sponsor the immigration of their spouses or minor children, even though their families are often endangered by the very governments that tortured PTV’s clients in the first place. American actions overseas can also prove upsetting for PTV’s clients. “When the photos of Abu Ghraib came out, it was very horrible and frightening” for some of them, Berthold says. “Our clients escaped here looking for safety and refuge.”

Yet the men and women who choose to live and remain hopeful despite their suffering keep Berthold committed to her work of helping them heal. “I feel fortunate and privileged,” she says, “to have this opportunity to interact so closely with such amazing people.”

Brittney Moraski