A half a world away from home, in a poor village where goats and chickens roam freely, Creighton graduate Kerri McCallister, BA’99, has felt the presence of God.
He comes quietly. But she knows He’s there, gently guiding her work for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

McCallister is a teacher at St. Xavier School in Godavri, Nepal, a rural village of rolling foothills and rice fields a few miles north of Nepal’s capital city of Kathmandu.

She arrived in Nepal — a mountainous country about the size of Illinois nestled between India and China — in November 1999. But her journey began years before, when, as a student at Creighton, she regularly pulled from the library shelves a book on volunteer organizations.

“I would read through the book, and every time I came to JVI (Jesuit Volunteers International), I started smiling,” McCallister said. “Something about it felt incredibly right.”

Though a Catholic with deep faith, McCallister felt strongly against pushing religious conversion. Instead, she wanted to “serve people on their level.”

She quickly identified with the four components of JVI: living simply, social justice, spirituality and living in community.

After graduating from Creighton with a degree in English and secondary education, McCallister joined JVI and began two weeks of orientation in Scranton, Pa.

She never asked to go to Nepal, but secretly that’s where she wanted to be placed.

“I just let it go,” McCallister explained. “Wherever I’m supposed to go, that will happen. So I felt very strongly that God was leading me here.”

Even so, it was still difficult to get on the plane and leave behind family and friends in Longmont, Colo.

“To get on the plane, to come here to a completely new country where I didn’t know what to expect and exactly what I was doing, I think that took a leap of faith,” McCallister said.

Adjusting to the new culture, she admits, was sometimes difficult.

“I didn’t know how to speak the language, I didn’t know how to cook new food, and, as for teaching, I was trained for secondary education,” McCallister said. “I had no background in English as a second language, and now I had to teach 45 kids in the class.”

During these difficult times, she turned to God.

“I would have little times where I would say, ‘God, this is a down day, and I need a sign.’ And it would always come,” McCallister said.

“I think that helped me develop more faith and trust in God.”

McCallister has fallen in love with the village’s simple pleasures — buying fresh vegetables at the local market, trekking across the rolling hills and soaking up the sights, sounds and smells of the beautiful countryside.

“I’ve felt so alive here,” she said.

“There are so many sensory things here that I love.”

McCallister was supposed to return home last year, but after much prayer and reflection, she decided to extend her visit for another year, and will return this November. Again, she felt God’s guiding hand in making her decision.

On the advice of a fellow JVI volunteer, McCallister approached a nun who runs a retreat house in the village to see if she could stay with her for the extra year.

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Experiencing God in Nepal

McCallister and JVI colleague Mary Monners of Isabel, S.D., review their teaching schedules prior to the start of the school year at St. Xavier.

Getting ready: McCallister applies tika paste to her forehead. In Nepal, the mark signifies the center of intelligence and spirituality. The decorative inscription hanging on the wall, written in Nepali, is a translation from the Gospel of John. It reads: “You are my beloved.”

McCallister, second from left, participates in a faculty meeting.
McCallister distributes textbooks to students at St. Xavier. The school currently enrolls 630 students in grades one through seven.

Students wait in line outside St. Xavier to pick up their textbooks. The Jesuit-run school is located at the foothills of the Himalayan mountain range.
McCallister, along with her friend and JVI colleague Mary Monnens, tours the sights of Nepal’s capital city of Kathmandu.
Monnens, McCallister and the Rev. Casper Miller, S.J., principal of St. Xavier High School in Kathmandu and a spiritual counselor for Jesuit Volunteers International, rest underneath a tree during a tour of the city.
McCallister currently teaches at St. Xavier in the morning and a village school in the afternoon. In addition to English, she also teaches social studies and a course on population and environment.

The Jesuit-run St. Xavier instructs some 630 students in grades one through seven. (The school is in the process of adding a grade level every year, with the hopes of eventually expanding through 10th grade.) Inside the one-story, brick and concrete school buildings, the classrooms are simple: benches and desks, with a blackboard at the front as the only teaching aid.

All subjects, except Nepali, are taught in English. And most children begin learning English around age 4, so they are familiar with the language.

School is not mandatory in Nepal. But McCallister sees education as critically important, not only as a vehicle for learning, but as a forum to get students to believe in themselves.

“If you can teach students to think for themselves, or just teach them that they have power, that what they say matters, that their ideas are important, I think that’s a huge way to empower the students later in life,” McCallister said.

After all, she said, it’s not the volunteer’s role to push for political or structural changes within the host country, but to empower the nation’s citizens so that they can make the necessary changes. McCallister’s students, however, aren’t the only ones learning and growing. The Creighton alumna said she has discovered a lot about herself, too, and her evolving worldview, becoming more of an advocate for the poor and downtrodden.

“I think we have a responsibility for the poor. And I think so often, especially in the U.S. or wealthy countries, we kind of gloss over that,” she said.

McCallister recalled walking in the village and coming across a beautiful, Western-style house. In the midst of all the small village homes, she was struck by the fact that only this expensive home had its property enclosed by a wall.

“It made me think that we do that in the U.S. We push all the poor people into a place where we don’t even have to see them, so that the housing they can afford is away from us,” McCallister said.

The experience opened her eyes. “You stop seeing poverty as something negative, but as a place where God is present,” she said.

It also presents a challenge for those of affluence in countries such as the United States.

“In the U.S., we have so much economically, so much in terms of opportunity and education, that I think we have a definite responsibility and moral obligation to share that wealth,” McCallister said.

Her experiences in Nepal have led
her to reflect on theology courses taken at Creighton and the idea of building the kingdom of God on earth.

“It just seems very unfair that there is such a great disparity of wealth,” she said. “I see so many things that we could do, that we have the power to do, to make that thought a reality — that the kingdom of God can be here (on earth).”

“I think so many times I have experienced the kingdom of God here (in Nepal) in little ways. Just small amounts of time.”

McCallister tells the story about visiting one of her student’s families during Dasain, a major Hindu holiday held in October. The family greeted her with a traditional blessing, spreading red tika paste on her forehead.

“Her father called me bahini, which means younger sister. But my student wanted her father to call me chori, or daughter, so that we could be sisters,” she said.

“I just felt so graced and so much a part of their family. And I just felt God’s presence so much there that it was like a little moment of what it really must be like to be in the kingdom of heaven. To be so open and have things shared so freely, with so much love.”

McCallister said it will be hard to leave Nepal, both because of the people and memories she will leave behind and because of the challenges awaiting her once she returns home.

“I think for me, in some ways, the hardest thing will be to get on the plane to go back knowing that I want to live differently now.

“That because of this experience, I do not want to be a mainstream part of Western culture. I want to live in a way that honors the people here and honors what I’ve learned.”

She is still wrestling with how to best do that. But her message is simple.

“One of the things I’ve learned and one of the things I would like to share the most is that we all have so many gifts. And we just have to share them.”