Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER

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June 2026

Message from Fr. Shea

Kate has written up a long and very interesting newsletter.

The first part of the letter deals with the death of our dear little Titan. We have had children here at Sarnelli who died, mostly from AIDS. But it has been a while since our little horde of our 135 kids, experienced the death of one of their own.

After the funeral Mass for Titan, the coffin was opened to show the little guy with a baseball cap on, like a sleeping angel. Then some of the Buddhist housemothers came up with new shoes, warm pants and sweaters he could wear, just in case his travel would include cold places. Other children had candy and some of their toys to put in the coffin.

That kind of choked us all up.

May God Bless all our benefactors and friends
Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R

Last month was a sad time for everyone at Sarnelli House. A little boy named Titan, who was five years old, died at Udon Thani Hospital. Titan arrived at House of Hope in 2021 when he was nine months old. Both Titan's parents were illegal drug users, and his mother had had no prenatal care during her pregnancy. She had a fall when she was close to delivering Titan and she had to be urgently admitted to Nongkhai Hospital. Titan was induced quickly as there were complications, and at delivery he was resuscitated several times when his heart stopped, and he was finally sent by emergency ambulance to Udon Thani Hospital intensive care. After three months Titan was discharged home to the Nongkhai province into the care of his grandmother.. His mother had since disappeared, and his grandmother had to work – she drove a vehicle called a "samlor" to transport people in the local area and she was unable and didn't know how to care for Titan. He was sent back to Nongkhai Hospital and remained there until the Welfare Service referred him to Sarnelli House's care.

From his traumatic entry into the world, Titan proceeded to have complications with swallowing, seizures and lung infections for the rest of his life. He had severe limitations in head and neck control, communication, and he was unable to eat or drink safely. He was in and out of Nongkhai Hospital over the years and the housemothers gradually learnt the specialized nursing care that he needed - such as suctioning his lungs to remove the sputum that he couldn't cough up himself and preparing and feeding him puréed food through a tube into his nose that went to his stomach. They learned how to reinsert the tube when the involuntary movements of his hands would dislodge it. Reinserting the tube was not a pleasant procedure for Titan and with expert advice, Titan eventually had it surgically replaced with a gastrostomy feeding tube put directly into his stomach. This was less irritating for him and gave him some improvement in his quality of life. Moving Titan from House of Hope to live at the Sharon Houminer House for children with disabilities which opened in 2025, was another improvement for Titan, providing him with more individualized and appropriate care.

Incredibly, Titan survived Covid 19, influenza B and numerous chest infections, but his health remained precarious. Trying to balance his medications to manage spasms and seizures was a huge challenge for the paediatric team at Nongkhai Hospital. Although Titan grew taller, his weight gain was never equivalent to his age or height. He could not talk or sit or stand but he could respond by a smile to the voice of his housemothers,

which was worth all the hard work. On his last appointment to see the gastrointestinal surgeon at Udon Thani Hospital in May to check on his feeding tube, he developed a fever and his cough worsened rapidly. He was admitted to the hospital and the pediatric team quickly saw that he was fighting for his life despite the optimization of his medical treatment. In past admissions at Nongkhai hospital when his condition was critical, there had been discussions with the housemothers, doctors and nurses about Titan's end of life care plan. It had been agreed that extraordinary and invasive care was not appropriate for him. During this last hospital admission, a phone call was made to Fr. Shea to confirm this decision, and he fully supported Titan being treated palliatively. Titan's cough, spasms and seizures were managed by intravenous medications so that he was not distressed. Understanding that he had limited time left the housemothers contacted his parents and grandmother. Titan's parents had visited him periodically since he came to Sarnelli House. They also had had another baby, but because of being almost penniless they had reached out for assistance from the Outreach Program to purchase formula milk for their healthy child. Housemothers, volunteers and his family all visited Titan on the day before he

died, to say their goodbyes. As usual one of the housemothers stayed with him during his admission and Titan died peacefully the next morning with her by his side.

Titan's body was then transported from the hospital to Sarnelli House and he stayed in the hall for four nights where everyone could visit and pay their respects until his funeral and burial. He was placed in a beautifully decorated refrigerated coffin and every evening prayers were said with all the children, volunteers and staff present. His funeral mass was celebrated by Fr. Shea and the pastor from the Nongkhai parish and was well attended by government officials from the Welfare service, his family, staff, volunteers and all the children at Sarnelli House who were given the day off school. Titan was buried in the little cemetery adjacent to the larger village cemetery in Donwai.

Titan was very much loved by the housemothers and volunteers who cared for him. Despite his inability to respond in a normal way, he received loving, compassionate care. He was the most damaged and physically compromised of all the children living at Sarnelli House, yet as was his due he was treated with dignity, love and respect, Titan will be missed but not forgotten.

Giving back

It is great to see the teenagers give back in various ways and at various places during their school holidays. Recently a small storage room was renovated thanks to the generosity of a charity called Mercy Center USA. It has been converted into a reading room and simply furnished with mats on the floor, bean bags a rocking chair and display shelves for books. The

reading room will be available to the 51 children all under the age of nine years old living at the House of Hope, the Jan and Oscar House and St Patrick's House in the village of Pai Si Tong. Thanks to the recommendations from a Thai foundation that promotes reading to children, there is a store of 100 picture and story books in the reading room. The Good Shepherd Sisters have been working with this foundation implementing a project in the villages where they work. Their aim is to strengthen the relationships between children from fractured families with their grandmothers, older siblings or single mothers who care for them. The project promotes reading to children and teaches carers how to sit with a child, how to hold a book for the child to see, how to follow the story by describing the pictures or if

they can by reading, using the story's rhyming language and voicing the characters. Reading to children is traditionally not a common pastime in Thailand, particularly in the northeast. Literacy is poor among adults and poverty precludes buying anything but the necessities. In partnership with the Good Shepherd Sisters, their project staff presented a seminar to the housemothers who care for the small children at Pai Si Tong. It was quite a revelation for the Sarnelli House staff as they too had a poor understanding of how books can not only inform young minds and stimulate imaginations but also reinforce bonds between small children and their carers.

Two young graduates from senior high school who are back at Sarnelli House while waiting for college to start had the responsibility of reading to the children in the school holidays. They were taught the same reading techniques by the housemothers who had attended the reading seminar. Children were gathered in groups of four and a schedule was developed so that all the children were involved. For 15 minutes the teenager reads a chosen book to the children. There is total silence as the children become engrossed in the stories and the pictures. Even the most active and attention limited kids can make it through the 15 minutes. Afterwards the reader asks some gentle comprehension questions to see how well the children followed the story. The young adults have literally found their voice when reading to the children and they are surprised at how much they enjoy seeing the children respond to the stories and to them.

Other teenagers work in the different children's houses to help the housemothers manage the children during the day. The 16 boys at St Patrick's House are the biggest challenge, so two teenage boys 17 and 18 years old, worked there from 8am – 4.30pm, six days a week. They helped supervise swimming activities with the volunteers, organized outdoor sports like ball games and badminton as well as corralling their charges for mealtimes and shower times. The little boys loved having the big boys around and climbed them, wrestled them and all shouted at once at them as they vied for their attention. They eventually broke even the biggest and burliest of the teenagers who pleaded for a break from them after three weeks. Hats off to the housemothers who work there every day !

Double Scholarship

The Outreach Scholarship program continues and as of May 2026 there were 52 students studying in kindergarten all the way to college level, who came to collect their scholarship money at the offices in Donwai. In the Beung Gan province there are another 12 students supported by the Outreach Program. Many of the students are living with a grandmother or family relative, having been given into their care because of parental death or abandonment. Some are severely disabled or living with HIV themselves or have parents living with HIV who are unwell. Others are faced with poverty that prevents their parents from affording to buy school uniforms or school shoes or afford the cost of school transport. A set of identical twin girls by the names of Pin and Pay are to start college life this year. They first joined the Outreach Program as babies. Not long after they were born, their parents couldn't afford formula milk as their mother didn't have enough of her own milk to nurse them. She couldn't work as she looked after the twins and the father worked day labouring jobs when he could find them. The Outreach Program helped them with formula milk until the cut-off age of 18 months. The twins were then put on the school scholarship program when they started

school as their father was still struggling with finding work. Both parents had finished school in grade 6 and their work prospects were limited. They could not pay for the initial costs of the school year like new uniforms, school bags and shoes. Twice a year the twins arrived at the office in Donwai in their school uniforms to receive their scholarship money. They were always talkative and enthusiastic about their subjects and how school was going. Their grades were also very good and they were diligent and hard working. This year the twins graduated from senior high school and have both been accepted to study for a four-year degree in Logistics at Khon Kaen university. They are delighted with themselves and finish each other's sentences to tell everyone how excited they are. The two girls will go on to the Sarnelli House University Education program that pays for term fees, accommodation and food money. The students in this program are required to maintain

their grades above 2.5 out of 4 which shouldn't be a problem for the twins. Their parents are relieved and a little nervous as they face life without their girls, but they are also so proud of them.

Renovations

A major building site has opened in the village of Donwai, home to four children's houses that include Sarnelli House, the Sharon Houminer House, Our Lady of Refuge House and Nazareth House. Sarnelli House is the set of buildings that is getting the much-deserved makeover. It was opened in 2000 and was built for children living with HIV. In those first few years it housed up to 70 children, both boys and girls. It was a chaotic noisy place filled with life and laughter despite the severity of the children's illness. After these children began their life saving AntiRetroViral medications (ARV) in 2003, and knowledge grew about them being no danger to others, they were gradually incorporated into some of the children's houses which were based on gender and age, not HIV status. Sarnelli House then became the home for older boys 10 years and up. It now houses up to 35 boys when they are all back from their different schools and colleges in the holidays. It also includes the boys living on the farm who moved back to Sarnelli House in 2025.

Within the buildings of Sarnelli House there is the office of Ms. Kung the Director of Sarnelli House and the office of the health team where the medicines are stored and dispensed. There are storage rooms for the kitchen, laundry and for out-of-season clothing and bedding, there are bedrooms for housemothers to stay and a room for a volunteer. There is a large homework room and two distinct upstairs spaces for dormitories for the younger and older boys. All these have been completely emptied and demolition has begun. A new sewage system will be built, floors will be retiled, new windows installed, the electricity will be rewired, buildings reroofed, new storage, laundry and drying rooms made.

The boys have moved to Nazareth House which has been empty for several years and is just a short walk behind Sarnelli House. They are treating it like a big camping trip and are enjoying the change in their surrounds.

This has all been made possible thanks to the amazing generosity of donors from the USA. Thank you to all our donors, benefactors, sponsors and friends, big and small who help us give abandoned and vulnerable children a better life and provide educational and life skills to our young adults.

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To protect the privacy of our children we have not used their real names or identified them in photos unless with permission

Written by Kate Introna, June 2026