

Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER



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March 2020

Message from Fr. Shea



Now that Sarnelli House is 21 years old, I have been meditating on how we got started, but especially who has helped us throughout the years. At the beginning, a widow gave us a little wooden house, with our promise of paying her when we got the money. I asked for help from two young ladies and a gentle grandma (who later died of leukemia). A house, workers, but hardly any money and at the end of the first year, we had 12 children. I remember praying to the Lord to do the work with the AIDS infected, and the widows and orphans with His guidance. But God had to find us the money, and that He did. Not enough to save up a large amount, but sufficient for the day. At first, Redemptorists of the Denver Province gave money to drill a well, and Redemptorists gave money to rewire

the house. Fr. Joe Maier from Mercy Center in Bangkok sent up money for food and education, as did Fr. Pat Morrissey from Pattaya. Fr. Leo Travis found us one million baht to build Sarnelli House. One day I had a visit from Sister Mary Hayden of the Good Shepherd Sisters, together with a German Lutheran lady, Dr. Margot Weyer. She was a member of "Eltern fur Kinder", and gave me almost 24,000 Deutschmarks. We were able to pay for the house, owed back salaries, and food and school expenses. She was followed by Lutherans of the APO church, who still help us greatly. The APO is not a big church, nor is it in an affluent part of Oberhausen, but the pastor and people are very interested in Sarnelli and the children. They come yearly and also send young volunteers, some for a year at a time, to stay and help at Sarnelli. Other donors and friends have visited us too. A group called "Hilfe Aktiv" sends all donations collected from people to us every month, and they often add to the sum sent. A German school has a Christmas bazaar where kids sell cookies, cake and artifacts for the children of Sarnelli. We have a foundation set up in Holland, which is very active in helping us with expenses of all sorts. The Jan and Oscar Foundation in Switzerland, together with other friends has built us a home for grade school girls, bought us vehicles to ferry the kids to and from school and help with education. The Redemptorist parish in Limerick Ireland, keeps our 20

babies in milk, baby food and Pampers. We get regular help from Safe Child Thailand in the UK, and help from the Australian Marist Missions through the years. Foundations and businesses in the U.S.A, together with individual donors, have helped us with every aspect of the work with Sarnelli kids. Most have never been able to come and see us but we report to them regularly and are always grateful by their generosity. Our Friends of Sarnelli House Foundation, set up and run by my brother Kevin, my nephew Mike, and Laurel Bowar and her sister Elizabeth Bitter, have contributed greatly to Sarnelli in time and money. Old friends from De Pere and Lafayette are kind and generous and have also been to see us. There are so many more, and even though I did not list them all, we know who you are, and so does God. And that is what counts.

God bless you all.

Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R



As we enter a new decade at Sarnelli House, many things continue the same – feeding, clothing and providing a safe shelter for the children living here. Other things change and adapt, like the educational needs of children of different ages and capabilities. The focus on giving the children an education continues in order to prepare them for life after Sarnelli House. In particular, this year in March the focus will be on the Grade 9 graduating class. Currently there are 29 teenagers studying in Grades 7 to 9 at Rosario Witthayu School in Viengkuk. This school is run by the St. Paul de Chartres sisters who know Fr Mike and Sarnelli House well. All of the children of Sarnelli House have been attending this school at grade and junior high level since 2002. Students who have made it to Grade 9 have big decisions to make before their graduation,



and by the time this newsletter goes to print, ten students will have already graduated. They will have enjoyed their graduation ceremony immensely, which will be complete with erudite speeches from dignitaries, and performances of traditional Thai dancing by students. The graduating students will then receive their certificates in a formal ceremony. Afterwards, there will be photo opportunities with Sarnelli House staff and children, and flowers and sweets given out as gifts.

Once the euphoria of graduation has died down, the next step for the students will be further meetings to finalise their education plans. In fact, almost a year before the graduation ceremony, the education team led by Br Keng talks with the students about what and where they would like to study for their senior high school years. Like many adolescents around the world, deciding on their future study path at 16 years of age is no easy matter. The Sarnelli House children have a fairly narrow focus of what might be available for them. Professions like medicine, engineering or teaching are often out of most of their grasps. Few students graduating in Grade 9 understand the commitment and stamina needed to continue to senior high school or vocational college and then on to university. Because the teenagers live within an agricultural based society in northeast Thailand, they have been exposed to and have participated in the very physical work of planting and harvesting rice, caring for livestock, pulling weeds and starting vegetable gardens. For many of the girls they have cared for small children and been around toddlers and infants most of their lives. However, they also see alternate lives on social media, and many have decided they want this sort of life as well. Some teenagers talk about wanting to study computers, simply because they like to play on Facebook. Others would like to work in a beauty salon because they like to wear makeup. A few have said they want to work in a hotel, so they can eat nice food and see beautiful people. Trying to distinguish between reality and fantasy can be challenging for a 16 year old, particularly if there are any cognitive development issues. Br Keng and Brian O'Riordan try to gently steer and direct the teenagers into areas where they will have more realistic opportunities, and will in time flourish and hopefully succeed in that area. There are other factors that influence the education team's decisions about school placements. They include the constraints of cost, proximity to transport and hospitals, and Sarnelli House. These have to be considered on an individual basis, especially when the teenagers



have behavioural or learning problems or are living with HIV.

Of the ten teenagers graduating from Grade 9 in March, two are boys and the remainder are girls. Two boys and a girl are living with HIV, another girl has a chronic health problem, and one of the boys living with HIV has walking problems. The past histories of these ten students are harrowing, and it is with considerable resilience that they have come this far. Two of the girls were sexually abused by male family members, and came to Sarnelli House to seek refuge and to restart their lives. One of them is a slender, slip of a girl with an artistic flair and a love of sports. She arrived at Sarnelli House when she was 13 years old, accompanied by the Thai Welfare Department, after her stepfather was finally jailed for what he did to her. She is a shy girl and she hides a lot behind a fragile smile. Now, she is 16 years old and she is nervously ready to venture out into the big world. As she enjoys playing volleyball and football, she hopes to be accepted into a sports school. She has gathered all the information about the school and she is keen to try out for entry. With hope for her success, a plan B, has been gently proposed, and she is happy to realise that she needs this in case her primary dream cannot be fulfilled.

Another of the young ladies who graduated in March came to





House of Hope as a five-year-old. Her parents were impoverished and drinkers of a lot of rice whisky. They didn't have the capacity to care for her, and were planning to sell her older sister to an old man in the village. The sister had a small child at the time and all three came to live at Sarnelli House. Eventually the big sister and her child went back to live with other members of her family, and found a job. The family didn't want the younger sister, and Fr Mike was fearful that they would try and sell her, so she grew up at House of Hope. She is now 16 years old, and has graduated from House of Hope many years ago, to live at Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls. As a teenager graduating from Grade 9, she is full of energy, noise and initiative. Wherever she goes a whirlwind follows her. She is intelligent and funny, always quick to laugh at herself and to help where necessary. She decided a few years ago she wanted to be a Sister in the Camillian Order. As well as being a religious sister, the nuns from that order are trained nurses who minister to the sick. Not many of her friends took her decision seriously, but she has stuck with it and has already visited the school where she will begin her studies. In the last year she has also reconnected with her parents, and has discovered that her father has diminished in stature and is now suffering badly from the effects of a life of hard living. He has open wounds on his legs, that won't heal because of his diabetes and he is unable to walk unassisted. One of the reasons this girl wants to be a nursing Sister is to be able to help people like her father. In May she will leave Sarnelli House to start her big adventure.

For three of the other students who graduated in March and who have consistently scored high marks in their school exams since Grade 7, an education pathway has been developed to foster their academic abilities. Hopefully this will lead them on to university degrees and more successful options for their working lives. One of these three students is from a poor family and her father died when she was young. Her mother was from Laos and could not find work to support herself and her daughter, so she gave her daughter to her husband's sister to care for and has made no contact since.

However, her aunt didn't want the burden of raising another child and they had heard of Fr Mike and his work with children. The aunt bought the little girl to see him, she wore big, thick lensed glasses and squinted forlornly up at Fr Mike. When he asked the little girl, who was then 11 years old, why she wanted to come and live at Sarnelli House, she replied because no one else wanted her. She has since flourished and lives at Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, sharing her daily life with 25 other teenagers. When she first arrived, her eyes were tested, as she was perpetually frowning through her glasses, but with new prescription glasses her natural intelligence improved dramatically. She loves to read books and she has an enquiring and curious nature. She is also kind and gentle, demonstrating these virtues by befriending one of the other girls living at Our Lady of Refuge Home, who has a walking problem from an AIDS infection as a child. She stays close by her friend and helps her with climbing the stairs and getting in and out of vehicles. She also forfeits sporting activities, which her friend would not be able to do, because of her disability, and instead keeps her company. It will be a real wrench when these two have to go their separate ways to different schools. For these three teenagers graduating in March, the pathway for academic achievement involves attending a private school in Khon Kaen for their senior high school years. The school is well known for its academic prowess and its success with students accessing universities. There are sporting and extra curricular activities which the students are encouraged to participate in, as well as an extra study day on Saturdays for those who need it. The students live in a teacher's home, and she rents a room to Sarnelli House for the students. She is well known to Fr Ole and she is able to watch out for the students in the evenings and on weekends. The students share a big room to sleep in, there is a study room and a kitchen and they have to do their own laundry and cooking in the evenings. The students must be responsible and mature enough to organize their own study times. Currently there are five teenagers from Sarnelli House living and attending the school. Two years ago, one boy from Sarnelli House graduated from the same school, and

he is now in his second year of a business management degree at Khon Kaen University. This senior high school pathway for academic achievement obviously costs more money than vocational training schools or regular senior high schools. The cost is approximately \$US3000 / year for each student, and includes school fees and living expenses, which has to be raised by Sarnelli House. However, donors and sponsors have been very generous in supporting this initiative so far, and there is a strong hope that this will continue.

While there are successes after Grade 9 graduation, there are also teenagers who face huge challenges and have done since their infancy. A young man who also graduates from Grade 9 in March, has had a troubled and fraught life since childhood. He came to Sarnelli House when he was 4 years old. Both of his parents had died from AIDS and he went to live with his grandmother, but she was sick herself and couldn't care for him. He started to contract lung infections and ear infections and his relatives would have nothing to do with him. He was taken to a local hospital and diagnosed with HIV but there was no ARV (AntiRetroViral) medicine available to treat him. The hospital contacted Sarnelli House and he came to live here and started his treatment for HIV when he was 5 years old. He survived this precarious period, but was left with some deafness, and possible delayed cognitive development. Since childhood he has been volatile and has had anger problems, taking his frustrations out on the smaller and more vulnerable children. He was moved to live with the teenage boys on the Gary and Janet Smith Farm, in the hopes the older boys would curb his behavior and be good role models for him. He did mature and has become more socially responsible in the last few years. However, in his last year of Grade 9, he has taken up with a different group of boys and has been stealing and refusing to ask for permission to go out with friends after school, as well as not coming home at night. He has been referred to the limited psychiatric services available at the local hospital and has been started on medication. To complicate the picture, he has now decided not to take any medication, including his ARV tablets for his HIV. For teenagers like him, the options for ongoing education are limited. The hope is to keep him from harm and keep others safe, as he continues to get through his teenage years and hopefully mature. He will attend the local senior high school, which is not demanding academically, and

he will continue to live on the farm and be supported by his friends, the staff, and the local hospital services. For the many teenagers who will succeed and achieve success in their education at Sarnelli House, there are also many who have been emotionally damaged and physically limited from a young age, and who will need love, support and care for the rest of their lives.

Sarnelli House Foundation

Thanks to the hard work of Fr Ole and the dedicated team of office workers at Sarnelli House, Foundation status has been granted to Sarnelli House. This will allow Sarnelli House to be more financially independent, and ensure the future to be directed by a board, made up of core Sarnelli House senior staff. Foundation status also allows for greater financial transparency, and in a few years' time, the issue of tax receipts in Thailand will be possible. Another benefit will be improved ease in applying for visas and work permits for long term volunteers at Sarnelli House. The new Sarnelli House Foundation bank account details are available below and on the website. Pay Pal is also available on the website for those wishing to donate outside of the USA. Friends of Sarnelli House UA retain their IRS registered charity status for those donating from the USA. We would like to thank all the very generous donors, sponsors and friends of Sarnelli House, for their continued support in helping us care for the children growing up here.

Donations in the USA can be made to:

Friends of Sarnelli House
UA in the USA

**Box 88234
Milwaukee**

WI 53288-0234 USA

(The foundation gives tax cards).

For those outside of the
USA Pay Pal is available
at sarnellihouse.org



For Donations by Bank Transfer

Bank: Bangkok Bank, Thailand

Branch: Mitraphab Road

A/C No: . 575-0-46655-8

Account: Saving

A/C Name: Sarnelli House Foundation

Swift Code: BKKBTHBK

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Tel. +66 42 413011 - 3 Fax +66 42 413014

If you make an international bank transfer,
please let us know, so that we can notify you
of its safe arrival. Contact info@sarnellihouse.org

For more donation details see

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quarterly newsletters by email or be removed
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info@sarnellihouse.org

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

Written by Kate Introna, February 2020