



## Message from Fr. Shea

In this issue, Kate tells the story of two of the children of Sarnelli House. Early in the work, the emphasis was on children suffering from AIDS. After a while it soon became apparent that we should be taking in all the abandoned and homeless kids who show up on our doorstep. These



days, Sarnelli has children with AIDS, orphaned and homeless children, those abandoned or molested and/or victims of rape. We have 5 severely handicapped babies. It is a testimony to Kate and her co-workers that we are able to help them all. At our nursery, the handicapped children have to be fed and cared for very carefully. Our housemothers are simple village women but were taught methods used to care for all the sick wee ones, and are quite proud of their proficiency, and rightfully should be.

We also take in our kids who grew up, left us, and then returned, sick and jobless. Usually, this happened because they stopped taking their ARV drugs, or took them incorrectly. Some died. Some recovered and left us to try again. Some are still with us, filling in for staff who quit, or because they are too handicapped to take on the demands of living and working in the real world.

The Lord has blessed us with these children and has given us dedicated people of simple faith and hidden talents, to do His work.



**Fr Michael Shea**  
**CS.Sr**

We are regularly asked where Sarnelli House is located and what the culture is like, typically from visitors and volunteers before they travel here. Thailand is divided into four natural regions; Central Thailand including the capital Bangkok; Northern Thailand including Chiang Mai; Southern Thailand containing the islands and coasts and Northeast Thailand or Isan where Sarnelli House is located. This region is the largest in size and is bordered by Laos in the north and east, and Cambodia in the south. The Mekhong River forms the natural boundary between Laos and Thailand, in fact, the grade school our children attend is situated on its banks. Nongkhai city is 20 km from Sarnelli House and is the local province capital. Isan has the lowest



per capita income in the country and has historically been the poorest region of Thailand. It has its own dialect and distinct cultural festivals, many of which play a significant part in the life of the local people. Thailand is predominately Buddhist in religion. Temples are in every village and Buddhist monks are seen every early morning, walking the streets for their daily alms. Traditionally, agriculture has been the mainstay of the economy in this region. Tobacco, rice and pineapples are among the most common produce, however the soil is sadly depleted and the crops are dependent on the once a year



rainfall. Many farmers do not have the money to irrigate their land outside of the rainy season, so depend entirely on their one rice harvest a year to survive. Poverty is linked to household debt and the lack of well paying jobs in the region. This results in fractured families from the migration of people to the central and southern regions seeking work.

In the 1980s, the deadly AIDS epidemic appeared in Thailand. By 1999, before Sarnelli House was born, Fr Mike and his team of seminarians were helping local people dying from AIDS. As fear, ignorance and desperation settled over villages affected by AIDS, he was given children who were orphaned by the disease, or simply left at his doorstep, abandoned by family and relatives, often out of fear. Their situations were dire, and many were close to death from AIDS.

In 2002, Sarnelli House had 25 orphans born with HIV, who were not on any anti-HIV treatment. Three children had already died from AIDS and are buried in the little cemetery adjacent to Sarnelli House. Many of the remaining children suffered from AIDS, which had wiped out their immune system, meaning they suffered fungal and bacterial infections in the brain, lungs, skin and gut. Seizures were common and one child had already become blind from the infection destroying her optic nerve. Terrible skin infections, mouth ulcers that prevented eating, diarrhoea and severe weight loss were common ailments. The children were expected to die a miserable death, as treatment for HIV was prohibitively expensive in Thailand at that time.

BD arrived at Sarnelli House in 2001 as a 5 year old boy, orphaned and infected with HIV from birth. His grandmother was unable to care for him and manage his severe health problems caused by AIDS. He had skin and mouth infections, continual fevers, a persistent cough and drastic weight loss. BD developed tuberculosis (TB)



and he lost more weight and became weaker still. He was one of the sickest children at Sarnelli House, and, along with a 10-year-old girl who was already blind from AIDS, they were chosen to start on the new anti-retroviral (ARV) medications. Thanks to Fr Mike's fundraising and to generous donors, Sarnelli House was able to buy the expensive new HIV drugs. In consultation with Doctors Without Borders, Dr Surapon, a local paediatrician in Nongkhai, Kate a volunteer nurse, Ms Peh and the staff at Sarnelli House, the drugs were commenced first on these two children who were already under an imminent death sentence. BD began this new regimen of ARV medication in order to reduce the HIV virus in his blood, while also being treated for the opportunistic infections of tuberculosis (TB) and meningitis. His tablet load was massive as he needed to take up to twelve tablets twice a day. Like any normal 5 year old boy, BD baulked at taking all the tablets and mixtures and would refuse them, or vomit them up shortly after. Most of the tablets had to be crushed as they were too big for a child to swallow, while some were mixed with a sweet syrup in a syringe and squirted into his mouth. If BD vomited them, it was essential they were given again, 30 minutes later because of the way the drugs worked and the importance of not missing a dose. As BD had to take these drugs on time every 12 hours, six o'clock in the morning and six o'clock in the evening became a dreaded time for him. It often took about 30 minutes to cajole, coax and divert his attention





enough to swallow the medications. Eventually with the ruse of bribery, he was able to prepare himself and get through the process successfully and be rewarded with 5 baht. BD made quite a bit of money during those early months, each baht worth it, as the drugs staved off death for a little while longer. BD survived, put on weight and grew taller and his blood results showed the HIV virus decreasing. After close to twelve months the virus was undetectable in his blood, and he was able to attend school. Because of his AIDS infections or the early type of ARV medications or his past traumatic history before arriving at Sarnelli House, he was intellectually slow, had a speech problem and was emotionally and socially challenged. But he had a million-dollar smile and loads of enthusiasm, and he stayed on at Sarnelli House after he scraped through Grade 9 at school. He was employed on the farm to work looking after the cows, chickens and pigs and helping with the rice planting and harvesting. He was also reunited with his grandmother during this time, who was delighted with the discovery that he hadn't died. When BD was 21 years old, he left Sarnelli House and went to live with his grandmother. She encouraged him to make merit by becoming a Buddhist monk for three months, which he did. Since then, he has stayed with her and has been able to maintain menial jobs in the local village. Given his intellectual issues he surprisingly continues to take his ARV medications regularly. With the progression of science, his medications now consist of one tablet once a day. The Outreach Program pays for his transport costs and lunch money for him to attend 6 monthly hospital visits for blood tests and to pick up his medication in Nongkhai. BD and many of that cohort of children with HIV are young adults now and living successfully with HIV. Some have graduated from university or vocational college and two have had children, who are not infected with HIV.

Twenty years on, Sarnelli House continues to provide shelter and care for children in need, but it has evolved and changed since the days of BD. With the effective management of mother to child transmission of HIV in Thailand under control, the children arriving at Sarnelli House from the Thai Social Welfare Centre are no longer children born with HIV. Now they are children who have been abused and exploited, children who have been abandoned through drug related incarceration of their parents or trafficked and about to be sold. Pia is a 7-year-old girl who was born in Thailand to a Laotian mother and a Thai father. The couple split up when Pia was 2 years old, and her father left her in the care of her mother. Pia's mother found another husband and Pia soon had a half-brother. That relationship broke up when Pia was 5 years old. Her half-brother went to live with his father and Pia stayed with her mother. Another man came into their lives and moved in with them soon after, when Pia was 6 years old. The three of them shared a rented room with a mattress on the floor and a bathroom, in a basic building of one-bedroom rooms. Pia's mother found work as a waitress in a local eatery where she worked long hours for little pay. Her new husband worked at the Nongkhai train station and he helped pay for their rent and expenses. Having a husband meant that Pia's mother could afford the rent, electricity, drinking water and fuel costs, as well as schooling expenses for her daughter. Pia's mother had to work evenings as well as days, so Pia was often at home alone with her stepfather in the evenings. A neighbor reported to Pia's mother that she had heard suspicious noises from their room in the evenings. Pia's mother questioned Pia, and Pia told her about the sexual abuse she had suffered. When her husband was questioned, he denied it. Nevertheless, Pia's mother packed Pia and herself up and they went to stay with a friend. It wasn't long before the husband

contacted Pia's mother and asked to come back. He was taken back, but Pia was hauled to work with her mother in the evenings. After a few months, Pia's mother had to go out one morning, and she left Pia with her husband, they were both asleep at the time. When she returned Pia was dazed and traumatized, couldn't walk properly and was bleeding badly. The husband had fled and Pia's mother contacted her former husband who came and took them to the police. Pia was taken into care by the Thai Social Welfare Centre who referred Pia to Sarnelli House. She is in the process of giving evidence against the man who abused her and has been at Sarnelli House for almost 10 months now. Initially she was very quiet, withdrawn and seemed understandably bewildered by the turn of events that saw her separated from her mother. She has since started school with the other girls her age and has been taken under the wing of one of the university graduates. This young lady returned to Sarnelli House after she could not find work because of Covid 19. She has been a great support and is like a big sister to Pia, and gradually Pia has come out of her shell and gets involved in games and activities. Pia's story is not known to the staff and her photo is not to be taken or posted on social media. The confidential nature of Pia's history is essential for her safety and security while she is at Sarnelli House.

## Covid 19 update

Covid 19 is still active in Thailand and although 2022 has seen a reduction in the numbers of Covid infected people, restrictions still apply. The seven children from House of Hope and eight staff who tested positive in December, were all released from 10 days of hospital quarantine and then 2 weeks quarantine at Sarnelli House, with no serious ill effects. The Nongkhai Hospital and the local public health volunteers were an amazing help in managing the quarantine, testing and cleaning during this period. Precautions and restrictions continue, and the children have to wear masks to

school. Periodically, schools or specific classes are closed down because of an infected student, and the children in that class have to be quarantined at Sarnelli House. Luckily for the children there are small buildings and rooms that are free to be used for quarantine, as guests and volunteers have not resumed their visits. The coordination of meals, cleaning and further Covid tests is all managed by Ms Kung and Teacher Noi. With 130 children at different schools in different houses and more than 50 staff members, Sarnelli House has so far been more than fortunate in reducing the deadly impact of Covid 19. All the children over twelve years of age have had their two vaccinations and their booster shots. We are thankful for the generosity and kindness of friends, sponsors and benefactors during this time, and wish everyone good health and an end to Covid 19.



Donations in the USA can be made to:

Friends of Sarnelli House

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(The foundation gives tax cards).

For those outside of the USA Pay Pal is available at [sarnellihouse.org](http://sarnellihouse.org)



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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 Intron, February 2022