



Message from Fr. Shea

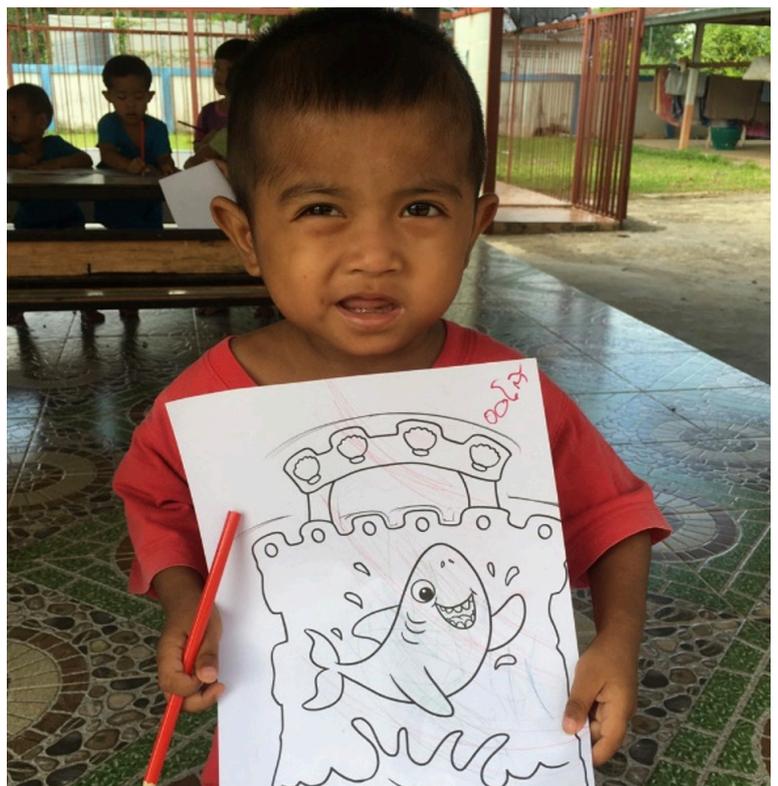
In this issue of Kate's newsletter, she will talk about Covid and its effects on the children of Sarnelli House, and some of the many infants we have in the nursery; numbering 25 as of now. For about 18 months or so, ever since Covid entered Thailand, provinces up in the northeast were relatively untouched. That is no longer the case. The lack of vaccine, and returning folks from the highly infected areas of Bangkok and the central plains, brought the virus to the northeast. Recently, the government grounded all planes, trains and buses that usually fly or run from the Bangkok area to the northeast. Then, with beds fast filling up in Bangkok. they began running Covid trains. These trains are filled with Covid patients, sent back to their home provinces to be treated in their own sectors. Some of these people would jump off the trains before they reached the station, avoid the health authorities, and make their way home. Clusters of infected people would be left in their wake. The Thai are very faithful in being masked up and maintaining social distancing, but these returnees are usually infected with the Delta variant. So, we have to be very careful with our kids, making sure as best we can, that they are keeping the rules and staying safe. Covid certainly would be very bad for a child with Aids and we are trying to prevent this happening.

Fr Michael Shea CS.Sr

In the time of Covid 19

Covid 19 struck the village of Don Wai in August, when five members of a family of seven tested positive for Covid 19. They were taken to a special field hospital in Nongkhai for two weeks. The current Covid 19 regulations in Thailand place people who test positive for Covid 19 in hospital irrespective of their symptoms. Three Sarnelli House staff members who live in Don Wai were then placed under house isolation for 14 days as they had been in close contact with the family. Thankfully Covid 19 has not infected any of the children or staff at Sarnelli House so far, despite the poor vaccination rate. Hand washing and cleaning have been stepped up, and food vendors and visitors banned. Only emergency hospital visits are now permitted. The children that can are studying online. Even at the House of Hope, workbooks are picked up by the staff for the pre-kindergarten children, and the housemothers encourage them to complete their books. Activities to keep the children occupied are being devised by housemothers on a regular basis. Cleaning and keeping houses tidy are routine activities for the kids. Coloring in, playing with wooden puzzles, listening to music and dancing have all been used to engage the children. It is a real credit to them how they have adapted to a new normal, despite missing their school friends badly. All praise must be given to their housemothers, whose loyalty and dedication are so impressive.

Nationwide, the increasing numbers of Covid 19 infections and deaths in Thailand have resulted in tougher lockdown measures. Many workers are returning to their homes up country to escape



the lockdown in Bangkok, the effects of the diminishing economy and the high unemployment rate. Their preference is to be with their families, however poor, rather than living in cramped quarters with no job or income. As people like this return home, the knock-on effect is that more people are looking for work locally, but more small businesses are drying up because of closures from Covid 19 restrictions.



Since the last newsletter in June, House of Hope admissions have increased. Four new children under three years old have come to live at the House of Hope, all referred by the Child and Welfare Department. One little boy has parents who are both living with HIV. Because of their diagnosis and the stigma associated with it, they had moved out to some rice land at the end of a village, living in a lean to shack with no running water or electricity. The family used to wash and get their drinking water from a scummy, green fishpond. The boy's parents did try and place the little boy in a local nursery school, but the owner found out that the parents had HIV and kicked him out. The little boy is three years old; he is very poor at socializing and talking, he is not toilet trained and he has signs of neglect on his body. According to the Child and Welfare Department he had been left alone for long periods of time in poor sanitary



conditions, while his parents were looking for work or drinking. They have followed up with the parents to try and find them work and the parents are happy that their boy has somewhere safe to live. When they have a more stable lifestyle and jobs they plan to return and care for their son themselves.

Another imminent arrival to House of Hope is a baby boy who was born to a young mother living with HIV. She was born with HIV and grew up at Sarnelli House after her parents died. She left with a boy when she was 18 years old and hadn't quite finished her last year of senior high school. The young couple went to Bangkok to find work with his family, until Covid 19 infections began to rise, and the business and the family couldn't support them. They returned to Nongkhai and she delivered a healthy baby boy. He has to take prophylactic ARV (AntiRetroViral) medicines for a month to ensure he hasn't contracted HIV from his mother. Given the current situation in Bangkok, they have decided that they cannot return to find work there yet. With help from the Outreach Program, they want to look after the baby themselves in the short term. Baby bottles, baby formula milk, diapers, and baby clothes have been provided for them and they are visited on a regular basis to check on the baby's development.

While one of the objectives of the Outreach Program is to keep families together and children with their parents, this is not always possible. The safety of the child comes first. Taking the child to where the work is in order to keep the family together is a common decision. This young



couple have no skills and neither of them have completed their senior high school certificates. Their likelihood of a stable well-paying job is slim. They will probably work in the heavy, back breaking construction industry where workers do not have to be skilled, are paid poorly as day laborers and have few rights or protections. If there is no family or social support, the child will most likely grow up on a construction site or in a small empty rented room with just a mattress on the floor for all three of them to sleep on. Strangers in the room next door will probably keep an eye on the child when the parents are working. However, this young couple want to leave their baby at House of Hope when they return to Bangkok. They talk sincerely about their intention of returning and taking the child back when their economic situation improves. Hopefully they will be

able to do this. However, despite many similar assurances of the same over the years, there are very few parents who have actually returned to Sarnelli House to take their child back. In many cases the couple breaks up, they find a new partner, and the first child is generally not wanted by the new partner. Sarnelli House has many children in its care who are in the same situation.

Tourism has been seriously affected in Thailand by Covid 19. Normally the tourism sector would account for 11-12% of GDP, but in 2020 there was an estimated loss of 1.45 million jobs in the industry. Young people studying in hospitality and tourism are having big problems, First, finishing the college course, and second, finding a job after graduating. Many diploma and degree courses



include as their final year a 12-month internship at a hotel, usually in Bangkok, Phuket or Pattaya. These internships have been drastically curtailed because of hotel closures, and students have nowhere to go or nothing to do for this time. Graduating in the last two years has canceled out a future job in the industry for these students. To date Sarnelli House has eight young adults who have returned home because of hotel closures and are now working and living at Sarnelli House. Their current jobs are far removed from their training, as they learn new skills for working in the gardens or caring for children. Sarnelli House pays them a monthly wage and they are provided with free accommodation and meals.

Schools, universities and vocational colleges remain closed, but are optimistically reviewed on a week-by-week basis in Nongkhai, to determine when they can re-open. Five senior high school students have all returned home from different provinces due to Covid 19. One young man from the Redemptorist Seminary in Sriracha, three female students from the Holy Redeemer Northeastern Region School in Khon Kaen, another young man from The Fr Ray Foundation School for the Disabled in Pattaya. They are mostly studying online now, and like students all over the world are finding it very challenging. There is a limited number of computers available at Sarnelli House,



and studying online using their mobile phones is difficult. On top of that, students must find the self-discipline to actually do the study, and the work given to them by their teachers. A lot of the less motivated children and the ones with learning difficulties will lose a lot of school time that unfortunately they won't be able to regain.

As well as the young people working in the tourism/hospitality industry who have come home and the senior high school students, there is another group of young adults who are returning to Sarnelli House. They are the most vulnerable group – the young adults living with HIV.

Two young women in this group returned to Sarnelli House in July. They had lost their vending jobs, selling clothes in a small stall in a big shopping mall. This sort of work selling food, water, souvenirs etc in Thailand makes up about 50% of the workforce. Both girls worked in different towns, working a long boring 10–12 hour day. One girl could not easily leave to buy lunch or have toilet breaks, as she would have left the merchandise unprotected. These girls occasionally had a day off a week but one day off a month was more normal. Their daily wage barely covered their food money. In an effort to allow these young adults to keep their independence, Sarnelli House supported their rental costs, and extra food money. However, when the customers dried up, so the malls closed and they lost their jobs. During this period the two girls had stopped taking their ARV medicines properly. This was demonstrated in their blood results which showed an increasing viral load because of poor ARV adherence.

After they lost their jobs, Sarnelli House supported them for a few months by paying their food, rent and living expenses, while they tried to find work. It soon became clear that they could not find any. The girls already had health issues that impacted on their ability to work. One has a hearing deficit from chronic ear infections before she started HIV treatment as a child. The other was losing her hair, becoming fatigued easily and losing weight rapidly because she had not taken her ARV medications in months. Given that Sarnelli House has limited funds and is totally reliant on generous donors, the expense of supporting young adults in the community is more expensive than them living at Sarnelli House. Coupled with

the financial challenge of supporting the girls, there was the health aspect to consider. Their current course of not taking their ARV medications properly would lead the girls to severe illnesses and inevitably death from AIDS.

This downward trajectory was bought home recently by the death of a friend of theirs, a young man who grew up at Sarnelli House. He was born with HIV and had no family. He left when he was 18 years old and had completed his education to Grade 9. Despite all the information given over the years at seminars, hospital appointments and by housemothers this young man chose not to take his ARV medications properly. He would stop and start them and was inconsistent about his attitude to his health. About two years ago, he developed tuberculosis (TB) and received treatment but didn't take those tablets regularly either. He eventually succumbed very suddenly to a second bout of TB, and died in July this year at 24 years of age.

A serious discussion was had with the girls about financial support and self-help, and the pointlessness of their friend's death. It is hard to understand why young adults like these choose to live so precariously. Some of them have serious self-confidence issues and very low expectations of what life can give them. Rather than trying to carve out a life for themselves, they have in a way become passive participants for whatever life is going to throw at them. Their past experiences of being born with HIV and an orphan, growing up in the days where treatment was not available and with the expectation of imminent death, and then starting school late or missing a lot of school because of their health, all seem to contribute to their general malaise about their health and their futures. The stigma of HIV is still present and alive in Thailand and the fear of disclosure and the shame of discovery seems to drive these young adults into decisions that are not always rational. Eventually an agreement was reached and they have accepted the serious responsibility of taking their ARV medications correctly. In exchange for food and accommodation and a wage, they work with the toddlers at the House of Hope in the play room, a couple of hours a day to earn their wage. They hope to leave Sarnelli House when the Covid 19 restrictions ease, and resume their

independence. They know they will always be connected to Sarnelli House by invisible threads of love whatever circumstances they are in.

Titan

Our smallest and neediest little fellow named Titan is going from strength to strength. Still with a feeding tube in his nose that goes into his stomach to provide his milk requirements, he is also getting used to sucking from a bottle. At 11 months old, he is taking six different types of medicine, from anticonvulsants to vitamins to iron supplements, which the housemothers have to mix up in syringes and give through the tube three times a day. Every four hours, around the clock, he has to be sat up and fed his milk to encourage his sucking. If he gets too tired and cannot finish the bottle, the remaining milk is poured down a big syringe attached to his feeding tube, into his stomach. Titan is not smiling or moving his limbs purposefully, but he is looking around and he seems more responsive to sounds. He cannot support his neck and all the normal milestones that should be passed for a child of his age, have stalled. Even so, he is a sweet, totally vulnerable little boy with the longest lashes ever seen, and the pale beauty of a creature from another world. We hope he can reach 5 kg on his next hospital visit and have the feeding tube removed. Go Titan!!



Donations in the USA can be made to:

Friends of Sarnelli House

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](https://www.sarnellihouse.org)



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A/C Name: Sarnelli House Foundation

Swift Code: BKKBTHBK

Bank address:

Bangkok Bank Public Company Limited

854/1 M.5 Mitraphab Road, T.Phochai,

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PO Box 61, Nongkhai, Thailand 43000.

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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, August 2021