

# Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER

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March 2025

## Message from Fr. Shea

Sarnelli House staff has many unsung heroes. Some have died, and we miss them. Others came and did their thing, and then returned. We will be forever grateful to them. But we have one volunteer who is head and shoulders above the rest. She is an Australian nurse, known to many. Her name is Kathleen Introna, known to staff and children as P'Kate. "Elder Sister Kate". Not mother or grandma. A real testimony to the affection of all, especially those of us who recognize her diligent common sense and activity.



Kate came to us in 2002. We were not her first choice. In Australia, Kate had volunteered with the Marist Fathers to go on one of their African Missions. There were no openings at the time, so a Marist priest told her that a charity in Thailand begun by the Redemptorists for children with AIDS, or orphaned by AIDS infected parents and abandoned by relatives, were looking for a nurse. Kate came to us in 2002. She was a palliative nurse and was faced with sick and dying children, since there still was no anti-retrovirus medicine upcountry for people suffering and dying from AIDS. Later, she moved back to Australia and joined the Australian Red Cross to work with victim of the Tsunami in the Aceh province of Indonesia. And then back to Sarnelli in 2007 until the present day. It was a fortuitous return, since she later met an Irish lad from Cork who had come to volunteer, and their marriage sealed the deal for Sarnelli House.

Her husband, Brian O'Riordan, monitors our high school and college kids, and is our fundraiser and helps Kate with the volunteers who come to spend up to a year helping with the children. Kate is our nurse, trained and honed by her experiences with the afflicted people of Aceh. She is in charge of volunteers, the guest house, and about everything else that is not nailed down. Even as the years race by, Kate has kept the petal to the metal. Thanks to this husband & wife team, I can relax, lean on my cane, and watch the world go by.

*God Bless you all*

*Fr. Michael Shea CSsR*

## 25 Years of Sarnelli House

In January, all the staff and children enjoyed a wonderful day of celebration, attending the opening of the new Sharon Houminer House for children with disabilities and commemorating 25 years since Fr. Mike first opened the doors of Sarnelli House. These events preceded the local parish holding its church feast, which meant that the Bishop of Udon Thani was in attendance. The staff had spent the previous week decorating the house and its surroundings with flowers and photos from the past quarter of a century. Some of the children and all five German volunteers, dressed in traditional costume, welcomed the dignitaries by performing a Thai dance and then Miss Pang from the office spoke to the large gathering, giving a brief history of Sarnelli House and explaining the need for this new house for children living with physical disabilities. Fr. Ole had travelled from Bangkok to be in attendance and he said a few words before Bishop Luechai blessed the house. The sun shone on everyone, and Fr. Mike sat through it all with his usual forbearance.

Fr. Mike has never sought the limelight as for him, the work tells the story and neither he nor the senior staff ever put themselves to the fore. 25 years of looking after the most neglected and abused children in Thai society and seeing the majority of them







flourish is its own reward and the photos that lined the road into the new house depicted happy and fulfilled children, as well as graduation ceremonies from kindergarten to university. It was also lovely to see Sarnelli kids, now adults, come from cities hours away to join in the celebrations, some with their families.

The shape of Sarnelli House has shifted by the decade as the needs of the children living here have evolved. It began as an urgent response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the majority of the first decade was spent firefighting against this lethal illness, ensuring children took whatever medicine was available and dealing with side effects and other ailments. At one stage, there were 75 children living with HIV at Sarnelli House. Nowadays, the number is lower than ten. Nevertheless, Fr. Mike, Kate, and the staff are still dealing with the legacy issues of the first wave of children born with HIV, as in recent years, there have been over half a dozen now young adults who struggle with taking their daily medicine, fall ill and need further support from Sarnelli House. Sadly, a small number of these young adults have died over the past few years, due to their non-compliance with their medication. Most of the children currently referred to Sarnelli House are seeking refuge from dangerous or abusive domestic situations or have simply been abandoned. Their needs are urgent in their own way, but differ quite considerably from the early days, when children were dying due to a lack of medicine.

## Kate's story

The 25 years of Sarnelli House has been enabled by many wonderful staff; house mothers, cooks, cleaners, drivers, office staff and farm workers. They are the pillars on which Sarnelli House stands and have helped hundreds of damaged children into adulthood. In past

issues, Kate has written about some of them and their loyal contribution to Fr. Mike's work. Now it is time to pay tribute to Kate herself, whose role at Sarnelli House is very understated but cannot be overestimated. Kate was a palliative care nurse in Sydney when she first came to Sarnelli House in 2002. Her initial preference had been to volunteer for a year in Africa but it didn't work out, so her intrepid mother Bernie contacted Fr. Ron Nissan, a Marist priest she knew in Sydney. It turned out that Fr. Ron knew Fr. Mike well and had in fact raised funds for the building of St. Patrick's House the previous year. He got in touch to see if Sarnelli House needed a qualified nurse and before she knew it, Kate found herself on a flight to Thailand. The first few



months were very challenging for Kate as she spoke no Thai and soon after she landed, Fr. Mike had to return to the USA for three months to raise funds for Sarnelli House's future. At that time, the majority of children under the care of the staff were living with HIV/AIDS and many of them were very sick indeed. There was no medication available to treat the virus and children were dying from AIDS related illnesses. Kate found the first few months incredibly difficult as she was unable to do anything to curb what seemed like inevitable further deaths. On her weekly day off, she cycled 10 km to the nearest bus stop and rode the rickety bus into Nong Khai. There, she found an internet café and researched HIV in children. She had only ever seen the disease at its end stage during her palliative care nursing. She treated the opportunistic infections that the children with HIV had as best she could but then something happened that changed Sarnelli House forever.

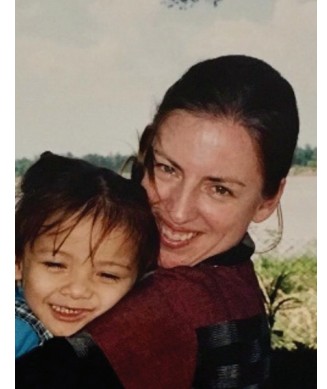


Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) – or Doctors without Borders – held a seminar for adults living with HIV in the local village. Many of these adults were already being helped by Fr. Mike's Outreach program so the event was held at Sarnelli House.

Kate attended and cornered a female Belgian doctor and explained the crisis that was unfolding around her. The doctor introduced Kate to the MSF guidelines regarding the treatment of children, recommended literature on HIV/AIDS for Kate to study and most importantly, presented an opportunity for Sarnelli House to purchase antiretroviral medication from overseas through their agency. Kate's next step was to find an ally in Nong Khai hospital. She met a pediatrician called Dr. Suraporn who agreed to carry out the many blood tests required before introducing these strong drugs to the children. Kate started by treating two children. They were in a desperate way. One had gone blind from AIDS and the other had developed early-stage cerebral meningitis. The drugs were hard for the children and initially seemed to be making no difference. The Thai staff, who had the children's best interests at heart but had no medical training, were suspicious as the new medicine seemed to be making these dreadfully ill kids even sicker. One even contacted Fr. Mike in the US, asking him to stop any further treatment. But Fr. Mike had faith in the medicine and insisted it be continued and soon after, the two children began to put on weight and get stronger. They are both still alive and strong today and one of them is now a mother. Soon after, Kate began the process same with over 20 other little children, blood tests, weight measurements and other assessments prior to starting this new medication. She was meticulous in the timing and recording of their treatment and set in place protocols that exist to this day. And most importantly, the deaths stopped. Today, we have mothers and fathers, graduates, Masters students and working, happy adults from that very cohort.

Kate left after 15 months to return to her work as a palliative care nurse at St. George Hospital in Sydney, but not before making some very strong connections with these children. One in particular was a little girl, Pam, who had to be isolated on arrival. She was only two years old and scared of being by herself so Kate stayed in the isolation room with her. Pam had never

seen a foreigner and viewed Kate with great suspicion. Kate would read Dr. Seuss books to her at night and Pam began to warm to her, repeating the words and laughing. A very close bond developed and after the isolation period, Pam would lie on the ground at Kate's feet, coloring in or playing, while Kate was working or treating another child. 23 years later, the two remain very close. Five years ago, while on a school trip to Chiang Mai, Pam returned with a Mother's Day gift for Kate and Kate is still her first call when she has a problem. It wasn't only Pam though. All of the children remain extremely important to Kate and she has been a positive constant in their lives.



## A permanent return

Kate regularly visited Sarnelli House over the next couple of years and then worked with the Australian Red Cross in Banda Aceh in Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami. She spent 15 months there, helping to restore the local ambulance service but every time she had a break from her work, she made her way to Sarnelli House. On her final visit, in 2006, Fr. Mike asked Kate if she would like to come back in a full-time role. Kate was quite unsure as the systems she had put in place were working well and she didn't know if there was enough work for her. But her heart was already with these kids and Kate moved to Sarnelli House permanently in 2007. For the past 18 years, she has worn countless hats, mainly looking after the health of the hundreds of children in that time but also managing the Outreach program, fundraising, volunteer coordination, writing the newsletter, taking care of the sponsorship program, maintaining annual updates on every single child, running a weekly clinic for people with HIV and the elderly, driving, counselling, and even getting down on her knees for deep cleaning sessions at the House of Hope. It was Kate's idea to develop the new house for the four children living with disabilities and she oversaw the project with her colleague Miss Jibb. She runs education sessions for staff, finds teachers and doctors from overseas to assist with everything from swimming to hygiene, works alongside the Good Shepherd Sisters, other foundations, and the Thai Welfare department and even found time to teach at Khon Kaen University hospital for a number of years when they were developing their own palliative care nursing team.





Kate has developed many special relationships over her time at Sarnelli House, with Fr. Mike, Fr. Ole, the staff and of course, the children. She has great friendships with donors, colleagues and volunteers and even managed to find herself a husband from among this last group almost ten years ago! These relationships all stem from her innate decency, remarkable character, and natural warmth. After all these years, Kate still derives great energy from seeing the little ones, getting down on the floor and coloring in with them or building blocks or doing a jigsaw. On a recent visit home, one of her main goals was to accumulate as many little toy cars as she could for the little boys at St. Patrick's House, the house that Fr. Ron Nissan built. Her devotion to the children is complete and unrelenting. She has endless patience and understanding and they adore her for it.

A decade or so ago, Kate was out on her weekly Outreach visit. That day, she and Miss Noi were visiting a newly referred woman living with HIV. Her diagnosis had been a recent one, as she was tested when pregnant and her family had kicked her out for being HIV positive. An uncle took pity on her and gave her a shack he used to live in, located next to a muddy fish pond. The shack was falling

down, with two walls missing and holes in the roof. The Outreach van pulled in and Kate emerged and slowly walked over to the woman, who was sitting squat on the dirty ground with her new born baby alongside her. Kate sat next to her and touched her arm. The broken woman looked into Kate's face and started to cry because Kate's quiet and kind presence gave her such reassurance and for the first time in forever, she felt value and knew that she would be all right. Kate gives that same sense of value to everyone she meets.

Kate will humbly tell you that she has only played a small role in the evolution of Sarnelli House and she was just in the right place at the right time. Sarnelli House is blessed with its staff and the team works very well together. All of the senior staff have made huge contributions to the success of Fr. Mike's mission and it truly takes a village to raise these children. But Kate's humility is one of her greatest attributes. She was only in the right place at the right time because she had the character to put herself forward for the benefit of others in the first place and the children, staff, volunteers, and guests can all testify that her selflessness and generosity of spirit makes their lives enormously better.



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 Brian O'Riordan, March 2025