



## Message from Fr. Shea

Covid 19 certainly has influenced everyone's lives during the past 15 months or so. Even up here in the Nongkhai province and all the provinces along the Mekong river. The Thai are quite strict about masks, social distancing and hand washing. This has helped keep the virus from exploding into our population.



Here at Sarnelli House, the kids learned quickly that there would be no trips to the movies or the mall; nor to waterworld or camping. Kids that had graduated and gone on to Bangkok or other places to work were laid off and returned to Sarnelli, virtually penniless. As of now, 22 kids have come and are working on the farm and gardens, taking care of babies and curtain crawlers and working in the kitchen. They have room and board with us, food, and a little salary to help each one. Not only did these orphans return to us, we took in what seemed like a truckload of babies. Some of these babies were orphans of AIDS infected parents and had AIDS themselves, but others were babies that were mentally and physically handicapped; children of alcoholic parents or those on drugs. We have children who survived botched abortions. I personally think that these pitiful little creatures are God's gift to Sarnelli House, and are a blessing for us. And with Covid 19, we can expect more unwanted little folk. We welcome them, and our housemothers have the patience of Job, and do their work with great good humor and love. We just lost one of these women, still young, to cancer. I'd like to somehow dedicate this issue of to Meh Nu, who showed us all what it means to be a good mother, and she was showered with love from the homeless little tykes. May she rest in peace.



Fr Michael Shea CS.Sr

## University graduations

This time of year sees college and university students taking a step towards realizing their dreams by finishing their studies. This year there were six Sarnelli House students who completed their college degrees. All were delighted and relieved, but a bit disappointed that due to Covid 19, graduation ceremonies had to be delayed. Congratulations to all the students for their hard work and perseverance, and grateful thanks to their sponsors who have supported them generously over the years. One of the young women who graduated this year have had all the odds stacked against her when she first came to Sarnelli House in 2006. Miss Pin who was then 13 years old, arrived from another orphanage with her younger sister years after their parents had died from AIDS. They had been passed from relative to relative and kept as servants. Miss Pin was sexually abused during this time and she lost a lot of weight and became very sick. She was eventually diagnosed with HIV and sent to a state-run orphanage by her relatives. As she became more unwell, the orphanage decided they didn't have the resources to care for her and sent her to Sarnelli House. She subsequently developed tuberculosis (TB) and bacterial meningitis and was diagnosed with AIDS and her medical treatment was complex and extremely challenging. Miss Pin was in and out of hospital for almost two years and close to death on many occasions. The Sarnelli House staff cared for her, accompanied her and advocated for her, both in hospital and at Sarnelli House. As a result of her resilience and Fr Mike's persistence, she started to eat and walk again. It took her over a year to regain her strength fully, and she has remained a tiny figure, not putting on weight or gaining in height. She also lost the sight in one of her eyes as a consequence of her disease. During the years after her recovery, she seemed to be rediscovering the childhood she had lost. This was evident when she insisted on resuming her schooling. Even though Miss Pin was 17 years old when she commenced Grade 6, she adapted to being the oldest girl in her class for the rest of her education. Miss Pin left Sarnelli House in 2014 to



attend agricultural college in Udon Thani. She sought out her independence as she managed her doctor appointments and took her tablets in secret so as not to disclose her HIV diagnosis to anyone. She studied hard despite her poor vision. Miss Pin would come to the Sarnelli House office monthly to receive her study money and to clear the previous month's expenses. She kept in contact with the staff this way and they monitored her progress, but she never asked for sympathy or special treatment.



She returned annually for her vaccinations, and for Father's Day celebrations to see Fr Mike. She faced outward from Sarnelli House more and more, as she started to build her life by continuing her studies into vocational college. After receiving her official graduation grades for her degree in Horticulture this year, Miss Pin applied and secured a full-time job in Khon Kaen. She is a great role model for the younger ones coming up behind her, and when she heard that some of the teenagers at Sarnelli House had stopped taking their ARV drugs, for various reasons, she was totally flummoxed as to why. She came to talk with them at a seminar and explained her life story and encouraged them to make the most of the opportunities they had been given and to use their medications to ensure a healthy life and a positive future for themselves. Miss Pin is independent and thriving now and she is a true reflection of how Sarnelli House and its friends and benefactors are able to support and encourage children who arrive with what looks like insurmountable problems, to find a future for themselves.

## House Movements

With the school holidays extended because of the second wave of Covid 19 in Thailand there has been little movement in and out of the villages. However the annual move of the children who have outgrown their houses was completed in April at Sarnelli House. The House of Hope, which was overflowing with babies and toddlers saw six little ones move house. Three little girls went to live at the Jan and Oscar House, and three little boys to St Patrick's House. All three children's houses are on the same compound in the village of Pai Si Tong, so the children know the housemothers and the other children well. Preparations were made before the date of moving, and the children were



excited and packed, ready to go and live with the bigger kids and to leave the babies behind. The three little four year old girls embraced their move and they have not looked back. They are dressed in pretty dresses and have their hair plaited every day by their older sisters. They are doted on and get first preference for games and meals. They watch the bigger girls sweep and clean up around the house and join in for fun. There are a number of girls at the Jan and Oscar House who are 9 and 10 years old, and who are intellectually challenged. They love having their new little sisters at their house. On a play and social skills level they are pretty equal. Every afternoon on the playground, there is a cluster of girls, big and small devising games and squealing with excitement. Over at St Patrick's House two of the three little boys were delighted with their move up in the world, and were keen to show their climbing and running skills to the bigger boys. One of the three however, was not so sure. He had been determined to go to live at St Patrick's when he was taken over in preparation for his move. Big smiles were beamed to all as he triumphantly waved the House of Hope goodbye. When the reality set in that he would be leaving his favourite housemother, the tears started. The first few days were tough on him, but gradually he got used to his new house and his new brothers. He has a lot more boys to play with, a lot more space to explore, trees to climb and insects to inspect and he has kind housemothers who gave him a cuddle and have settled him in. For the five teenage girls moving from the Jan and Oscar House to Our Lady of Refuge House in Donwai there were no problems. The big airy dormitory and the proximity to the football pitch, were a plus. There was room to practice dancing to Thai pop songs and there were girls with much more sass who could teach them the dance moves. From Our Lady of Refuge House nine young women, all of whom had completed Grade 9 have moved into Nazareth House. They have smaller rooms where the girls sleep four to a room with their own bathroom. There is less supervision and they are expected to

be proactive when it comes to cooking and keeping their house tidy. The young women who are studying in senior vocational school or are home from colleges, also have a new residence. They have taken over the old house of Ms. Kung which is on the Nazareth House compound in Donwai. So far there are eight young women living there. Most of them are disappointed that their study plans for 2021 have been stymied by Covid 19. One girl who has been at Sarnelli House for 17 years and is now 22 years old, is in her final year of her diploma course. In May she should have travelled down to Pattaya with a big group of students to begin her 11-month work experience at one of the upmarket hotels. She was looking forward to her new adventure



and to seeing some of the world, but she has been forced to wait until it is safe to travel and live in Pattaya.

The boys who live at the Sarnelli House include four smaller boys from St Patrick's House and they have transferred five young men to live out on the Gary and Janet Smith House at Jomp's Farm. Everyone in that cohort is very happy with their move.

## Ongoing Clean-up

Covid 19 led to the cancellation of Songkran – the Buddhist New Year water festival for the second year in a row. This was very disappointing for most Thais around the country. For many of the children, not even longer school holidays made up for the cancellation of the water festival. But there was some excitement for them in the shape of an almighty storm almost like a tornado that hit Nongkhai and more immediately the villages of Donwai and Pai Si Tong where the children's houses are located. No one in living memory had experienced a storm like it. Roofs were lifted, trees felled and children were screaming. Electricity was lost for three days, which meant no showers in the stifling heat. Fr Mike bought chain saws for the farm boys to clear the felled trees, but heavy-duty cranes and professional tree fellers were needed and hired. On the third day of the electricity outage, the

old fire truck from Vienghuk turned up at the boys' house, and to their glee and the housemothers' relief, the fire hose was turned on and the boys had an outdoor shower. It has taken months to clear the mess, fix the roofs and repair the electricity, but finally it is nearing completion.

## House of Hope

The House of Hope nursery currently has 19 little ones in residence. Their ages range from six months to four years old. Four of them are children with increasing physical and psychological needs. This includes Nuna who is 12 years old this year and is completely disabled. She has been living at the House of Hope for eight years. The other two, are little girls who will both be



two years old this year, and who came to the House of Hope in 2019. At that stage it wasn't clear what particular problems they had, but as they have grown it has become more apparent. One of the little girls came from a background of alcohol and sexual abuse, and the great grandmother of the baby contacted the Outreach Program, when the baby was four weeks old. The family were only able to provide tinned condensed milk for her to drink. Her mother was 18 years old, intellectually challenged and drunk for most of her pregnancy, according to her grandmother. It turned out that the father of the baby was the mother's uncle. The extended family lived in poverty, had drunken fights and neglected the child. The Thai Social Services agreed with the immediate removal of the baby to House of Hope and have followed up with the family's needs. The baby girl responds to touch, and giggles when tickled. She can clap her hands and laugh to herself. When she is lying on her stomach, she can lift her head but she continually lets it fall on the mat again and again. She cannot grasp objects but she can eat soft food from a spoon and she seems to be happy in her own world. The other little girl was born almost three months premature, and her mother left the hospital two days after birth and has not been in contact since. Her mother became involved in using and selling drugs in the

last few years and was in jail twice. The little girl is the youngest of three siblings, the other two live with their grandmother, who is poor and does not want to care for a third child. Living at House of Hope she is unable to support her head to sit up and all her muscles are flaccid. Her vision appears poor but she seems to respond to sound. Loud noises upset her and she is soothed when sung to or music is played for her to listen to. She can now take soft food from a spoon, but she is a sensitive and easily upset little girl. All three of the disabled girls attend the Occupational Therapy clinic at Nongkhai Hospital every week. They are massaged, and strengthening exercises are performed on them. A fourth special needs child is only six months old and has been in hospital for most of his short life. His heart stopped at birth, and he was revived, he has problems with convulsions and he is underweight and has difficulty sucking. Both his parents were drug users, and his mother fell heavily when she was close to full term. She was induced into labour and left the baby very soon after he was born. He was discharged from hospital into his grandmother's care, but because of his precarious health problems she was unable to care for him. She bought him to Sarnelli House and asked that he be raised there. The Thai Social Services were contacted and he was approved for care at Sarnelli House. He needs three hourly feeds and at this stage he is a small underweight baby who is easily disturbed. His health will be monitored regularly and hopefully he will grow big and strong. The House of Hope housemothers are learning new skills and trying to provide for the damaged as well as the normal little children in their care with love and unending patience

## Outreach

Thanks to a generous sponsor a family on the Outreach Program will be provided with an electric wheelchair. Two siblings, a girl aged nine years old and a boy five years old, have been born with a painful, debilitating bone disease. They are both wheelchair bound. The little girl has been using a wheelchair donated from the Outreach Program for the last three years. As she has grown so her legs which are in a permanent cross-legged position have outgrown the width of her wheelchair.

She is also unable to manipulate the wheels of the chair to propel her forward, as her arms are painful from broken bones. The little girl attends a small government school in the same village as her home. To get to school her mother hoists her wheelchair onto a side car welded onto her motorbike, and then lifts her daughter very carefully onto the seat next to the wheelchair and off they go. Once at school the wheelchair has to be lifted down and the little girl placed very gently in it. On a recent visit to Sarnelli House the little girl asked in a very soft, shy voice if she could have a remote-controlled wheelchair. This would enable her to get to school herself, and not to rely on the kindness of her young school friends to push her around at school. It would also reduce some of the lifting her mother has to do for her. This very generous donation will change the life of a little girl who is a normal, sweet child. She does not feel sorry for herself, or her situation and she bears pain stoically, finds her little brother very annoying and loves going to school. We thank all the generous people who support Sarnelli House to help children like these.



Donations in the USA can be made to:  
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**Box 88234**  
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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 Introna, May 2021