

HOUSE OF HOPE AND VOLUNTEERS

Even though the school year is half way through in many countries, for Sarnelli House and for the children in Thailand, the new school year has only just begun. Last month in May, nursery school opened and four little boys from St Patrick's House, one little girl from Jan and Oscar House, two boys and a girl from House of Hope were dressed and all ready ahead of leaving time, on their first day back to school. To add to the mix were four brand new recruits from the House of Hope, three of them little girls under three years old and one little girl four years old. Dressed in uniforms that will fit them for the next three years, with their oversized backpacks almost dwarfing them, they were gradually coaxed out of House of Hope into the converted pick-up truck which is the transport for the nursery children. Tripping over their new shoes, which they were not yet used to wearing and clutching their baby milk bottles, which they had to relinquish on entering nursery school they innocently clambered aboard the pick-up. For some, the tears flowed as soon as they left House of Hope, their housemothers tried to soothe and reassure them that they would see them in a few hours but when the pick-up started to move forward, reality set in and the noise from the children increased. Inexorably the vehicle pushed on, and the troop of 12 children, housemothers and volunteers, arrived at the school. Some of the children were wet faced but their crying had stopped as they realized they had enjoyed the ride. Others were almost stoic in



Message from Fr. Shea

Kate, our nurse and regional Mother Superior, has again written an interesting and riveting article about the happenings at the House of Hope, and of volunteers who come to stay and help with the children.

Despite the fact that I started Sarnelli to help sick and abandoned children, I never really liked kids, so I was in my 60's when I discovered what a joy and a mystery it is, when a tiny, helpless little baby grows and develops a personality. There is a period when they are three or four years old, that one searches their heads for the sign "666", to make sure they are not pawns of the devil. (This doubt arises again when the child is 15-17 years old, and goes through another period of emotional turmoil). But it all is worthwhile, just to help a kid reach his or her potential. Some children struggle, others are slow and have learning disabilities. We are there for them all. We praise the bright ones, and always admire the effort slow kids put into their physical and mental development. Fr. Flanagan, the Founder of Boys' Town, in America, often said there is no such thing as a bad boy. I often have to keep telling myself that.

And Kate sings the praises of our volunteers. Wonderful kids and adults, who are able to adjust and bring good example into the lives of our kids, and even our Thai Staff.

Read on and enjoy!

Fr Mike Shea C.Ss.R



their attitude, sitting stiff and stony faced. They were helped to disembark into the waiting arms of the teachers, and the crying started again, particularly loudly from one of the little boys who was in his second year of nursery school and had been so confident and keen to go back to school. This of course started the new recruits off, but with the job done, the pick up quickly turned around and headed quietly back home. The day was unusually long for the waiting housemothers but fortunately, the children came back in the afternoon smiling and happy, still with their big oversized backpacks on, and their uniforms a bit smudged and worn. For the first few months the infants will only go to school for four hours a day – just enough to get them used to some order and routine. That leaves only six children during the day at House of Hope from a total of thirteen, who all need to be cared for and nurtured.



The current House of Hope building that was officially opened in 2008 in Pai Si Tong, has seen its fair share of wear and tear over the years, as it has consistently housed babies and toddlers up to five years of age. A few years ago, the kitchen and medicine room were renovated and a big open, tiled area for playing, covered with a roof was funded generously by Friends of Sarnelli House, The Netherlands. However, work still needed to be done and thanks to the generosity and time of Sarnelli's Angels (a group from Singapore), Fr Seamus Enright CS.s.R and his parish, from Limerick Ireland, and Deacon Reggie Bollich and his supporters in the USA, the refurbishment and refreshment of the House of Hope is almost complete. The front and back gardens have been stripped of the hedges that commonly harbored snakes and other creepy crawlies, and were perfect places to stash rubbish that children were too lazy to put in the trash. Once the hedges, banana trees and old playground equipment was removed, turf was lovingly laid



under Fr Ole's supervision. Every blade was nurtured and examined daily, and the children were a little bewildered for a while that Fr Ole seemed to pay more attention to the grass than to them. Once the grass was established and the children were again the center of Fr Ole's attention, the playground equipment, formerly housed at Nazareth House, which had been stripped and repainted by the boys at Sarnelli House, was placed in the front garden of House of Hope. The big open yard gives the children plenty of space to run around in and they love climbing all over the brightly colored equipment, using the swings, and sliding down the slides.

All the downstairs rooms at the House of Hope have been repainted and brightly and lovingly decorated. The bathrooms now have child sized toilets and lower sinks for the children to use. The old iron cots that the children sleep in during the day have been stripped back and repainted. Outside a sink was built that is lower and easier for the children to use. There is a tap up high, which only the adults can operate to prevent water fights from breaking out.



On the first floor of House of Hope, where the children sleep at night, beds are being bought which will be literally a step up for the children. Normally they sleep on the floor on mattresses with the housemothers. But as the children grow up and have to move from the House of Hope to either St Patrick's House for boys, or Jan and Oscar House for girls, they must get used to sleeping in a bed alone. So, this will be their first introduction to independence at House of Hope. The old storage room, which is a separate building in the back garden of House of Hope, was cleaned out and its former glory revealed. Hans and Natacha, previous volunteers from Belgium, who had lived and worked at House of Hope, were responsible for the beautifully painted murals around the walls. They still look as bright and fresh as they did when Natacha painted them in 2006. The empty room was soon equipped with hardy handmade shelves, placed out of the children's reach, and fans were installed in the ceiling. The play room is now used at set times of the day and the volunteers supervise the play and the sharing of toys.

Trying to improve the function and the physical design of the House



of Hope all hopefully leads to better care for the children, where they feel more secure, safe and have more opportunities to develop and grow. Without the assistance of volunteers who come and offer their skills and time to Sarnelli House some great improvements for the care of the children would not be sustainable

The housemothers at Sarnelli House are by and large untrained in child care, but they rely on their compassion and their own experience of bringing up children, to care for those in their charge. They do an extraordinary job and are loyal and loving to the children. In recent years there has been more attention given to education for child care workers about child development and special needs children. The staff have begun attending courses and meetings at the local hospital and government offices. However, because of the numbers of children living at the different houses at Sarnelli House, giving attention to each child, all of the time is impossible, so volunteers close this gap, and provide extra care and interests for the children. During the school holidays they are invaluable. The added benefit they bring in practical terms, is a way of improving the children's lives.

The play room at the House of Hope that has recently been developed is an example of a sustainable improvement that 'Sarnelli's Angels' created and the volunteers have continued. Even though it is still a work in progress, in only a few months of the play room being opened, the small children have gradually become used to sharing toys. In the play room there are tents to sit in and play games, tables and chairs to dismantle, books, balls, blocks and soft toys to play with. Pretend kitchens are set up and fried rice and som tam (spicy papaya salad) are made in toy saucepans and woks, but usually one of the little girls has hidden these as she has an obsession with kitchen utensils, and so some other toy is designated as the wok. Then the imaginary meals are sold to the

volunteers who visibly enjoy them or find them distasteful, which is of course hilarious to the children and the scene replays itself time after time. Simple sturdy toys like building blocks, that were first used as weapons, are now being used to build towers and learn colors. At the end of play time the brave volunteers try to teach the children about replacing everything they have played with. There are still a few tantrums thrown, and desperate means are used to hide toys when they know they have to go back in the storage box, but on the whole, it is much more orderly and manageable.

While the play room contributes to the development of a large number of children, some projects are specific to a particular child with their own special needs. Nuna lives at House of Hope and has been since 2013, she is eight years old, chair bound and blind from AIDS. Nuna's limbs are contracted and she cannot speak or walk, she can however exhibit joy. Nuna has been attending the Nongkhai Hospital occupational and physiotherapy department once a week with a housemother, for the last two years. Her overall condition has improved significantly, she has put on weight and her hands no longer have to be bandaged up to prevent her chewing on them. The house mothers care for Nuna and her daily needs diligently. They blend up all her meals and feed them to her in liquid form through a baby's bottle. They crush her medicine and give it to her twice a day on time as prescribed by the doctor. She has time sitting in her wheelchair and time lying on the mats where she receives massage to her limbs. Water therapy in the swimming pool, began for her in the holidays and she is responding very well to this therapy – the happiness in her face and the relaxation in her body are great testaments to the benefit of the therapy. She also has a hammock custom made by the girls at Our Lady of Refuge House, to lie in for a few hours a day to reposition her body. All of this would not be possible for Nuna without the specific skills of dedicated volunteers.

More general activities that volunteers bring their energy and time to include just being with the smaller children, pushing them on the swings, playing silly games or serious ones like Uno or Bingo or sitting quietly at House of Hope with a baby on their knee. These are valuable and joyous experiences for both the volunteer and the child. Other activities that need some organizing and sometimes some financial output, involve taking the children on outings to the water park, the local shopping mall, to eat a meal in town or go to the aquarium. These outings cause such excitement, as most of the small children rarely leave their houses, except to go to school during the year. Art projects are great for expanding the children's imagination and over the years there have been many, with competitions for drawing and designing cards that teach the children confidence and new skills in their drawing ability. Sport is an activity that the children never tire of. Many of them are so competitive that the badminton tournament held every year is looked forward to and practised for, well in advance. Football and volleyball in the afternoons on the dusty dry field brings with it a great gathering of teenagers. Having the volunteers join in and encourage those who are not as skilled, and praising all, is a great lesson in mentorship and confidence for the teenagers. The swimming pool that was bequeathed to Sarnelli House in a benefactor's will, gives a wonderful opportunity for the children to improve their fitness and stay cool in the hottest months of the year. Supervision and safety is a priority, and without the volunteers scheduled to supervise the swimming, the pool would not be the favorite pastime of all. Teaching English is also another important task of the volunteer. In the northeast of Thailand speaking English is not as proficient as



in other parts of Thailand. Although local schools teach English, there are very few, if any native English speakers employed at them. Despite the relative short time span of eight weeks to learn English, lessons are prepared and taught and slowly the children become at least more exposed to English than they would have been. Other more specific projects like the embroidery project, where the girls from Our Lady of Refuge House learnt how to do beautiful cross stitch and developed their own designs is a more specific project bringing a special set of skills to the children. Then there are the hidden jobs that volunteers do, such as maintenance work. Maintenance is never ending and whether it is the regular and always complicated care of the pool, the filter and surrounds, or putting up shelves and fixing taps and wardrobes, it is always done expertly. Work like this is not as evident to the children, but it is just as valuable to Sarnelli House

Charlene House is the guest house for volunteers and visitors, and it is located in Don Wai on a separate compound from the children's houses. Airconditioned rooms and free WIFI are available. Volunteers are required to submit their CV and a police check if they wish to be accepted to volunteer. Students are not expected to pay for board and lodging in cash, but they end up paying in enthusiasm for the work they do. Volunteers come and go, some staying for a week, others for six weeks or more during the holidays. Friendships develop, and even a wedding has been known to occur. A sense of fun and camaraderie grows between the volunteers as they learn about each other, Sarnelli House and the challenges they have overcome to volunteer so far away from home. Volunteers come

from many countries around the world, and once they experience their first stint at Sarnelli House, they often return again and again. This helps to build their relationship with the children and the staff, and they become valued members of the Sarnelli House family. Particularly in the school holidays, volunteers continue to be a vital part of Sarnelli House. They bring a new perspective to challenges, a new energy and a generosity of spirit that is instantly recognized by the children and staff. Even without a common language, friendships are made and love and caring shared.



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

Written by Kate Introna, May 2019