

Message from Father Shea

The legal term “Sarnelli House” actually takes in all 6 of our homes. This month, Kate does an admirable job of introducing us to the nursery of the “House of Hope” (The Thai call it “Gerard House” after our lay brother St. Gerard Majella, who is patron saint of pregnant mothers and babies).

I call this house of 21 aspiring terrorists the heartbeat of Sarnelli. Here, for so many of these wee ones, life literally begins. Some are given us right from the delivery room at Nongkhai hospital. Others come in via the Social Services Department. Others come in via shamefaced mothers who can't or won't care for their child. They come from the slums of Bangkok and the



steamy city of Pattaya. Some of the children had Lao mothers. Some, like Diamond, come in dirty, sick and malnourished. But, within a matter of months, blank stares in blank slates begin to fill up with little individuals who react to their genes and their surroundings.

Visitors invariably point out how happy the kids are and how well taken care of they are by the staff. They can only admire the patience and good humor of the staff. The wee ones are incredibly fun and sweet for about two years. Then they turn into headstrong, stubborn, angry, mean, destructive little pups. Finally, after skirting the possibility of death sentences, they settle down into the sweet role and are ready for school (At which time one can hear the staff humming “O what a friend we have in Jesus!”).

God bless you all
Fr Michael Shea C.S.s.R

House of Hope

The House of Hope is a large, bright orange and yellow building in the heart of the little village of Pi Si Tong. It is one of the 3 houses under the umbrella of Sarnelli House located in Pi Si Tong.

The reasons for its existence today are very different from when it was built 10 years ago. After the death of 4 children at Sarnelli House with HIV/AIDS in 2001-2 and with the thought that many other deaths were to come, the original House of Hope was built as a refuge for very sick children with AIDS and to isolate those with contagious diseases like active TB. Eventually however, the children with HIV began to improve as the ARV (Anti Retro Viral) medication became available. Yet more and more babies were being given to Fr Shea and the House of Hope gradually made the transition to what it is today - a home for babies and toddlers without HIV/AIDS. The former House of Hope was inadequate in design and size for these little ones, so Fr Shea built a house that could accommodate them. Everyone – babies, children and staff were moved to the newly built Nazareth House while the old House of Hope was demolished and for the next 6 months the new building progressed. It was opened in 2008 and has upstairs sleeping quarters for the babies, toddlers and staff. Downstairs is the kitchen, dining room, day sleeping room and a large covered area for the children to play regardless of the heat or the wet. A wading pool, playground and trees are at the front and the back giving the children plenty of open and inviting space to run, climb trees, ride bikes and be free.



Mother Peh and her staff

Ms Peh is the manager of House of Hope and she is a true mother to all these little ones. Peh has been working for Fr Shea for many years and is one of a fine band of cousins, sisters and family members who are really the backbone of Sarnelli House.



Peh with Jonah

Peh used to be Fr Shea's housekeeper when he was pastor at Viengkuk parish, then unexpectedly abandoned children came into his life and he needed some maternal and nurturing staff to help care for the little bodies entrusted to him. Peh became manager of Sarnelli House and like everyone at that time she had very little knowledge of what she was about to face. During her time as manager 4 children died, and she felt and still feels each of those losses. She lived in a small room downstairs at Sarnelli House and was on hand 24 hours a day to comfort sick and sad children. Peh really dedicated and still dedicates her life to these children and it was her common sense and sure maternal instincts that allowed the children to feel safe and secure. In 2005 Peh moved to become manager of House of Hope and her cousin Mrs Gung took over the running of Sarnelli House.

Other staff members have worked at the House of Hope with Peh for many years and they give the babies as they grow up a stable and loving base. One such staff member is Mother Mon – she is a grandmother herself and is unflappable, she never raises her voice and is fiercely protective of the babies. An incident occurred a few years



*Miss Maggie with Ms Taw,
one of the staff from House of Hope*

ago when a relative of Baby Hippo arrived on the scene wanting to take her away. On occasions, relatives have come back wanting to take a child to sell, or use the child to beg in Bangkok and make money. This male relative was aggressive and said he would bring in his friends to forcibly take the baby. Despite these threats and because the care of the baby had been legally transferred to Sarnelli House by the Thai Social Services department, the staff were diligent in keeping the gates locked and being alert to strangers. One afternoon Mother Mon saw the same man arrive and she quickly gathered the babies and the small children that were at home and took them, along with a big kitchen knife into a room and locked it. She kept the children quiet and after what seemed like a long, long time she heard footsteps and someone trying to open the door. The door opened and Fr Shea came close to having his throat slit. Mother Mon was prepared to do anything to protect her charges.

Josie

Probably the most difficult yet the most rewarding challenge for Peh and her staff at House of Hope has been to provide the total physical care and love for 6 years to little Josie. Josie was born after a failed attempt by her mother to abort her. Fr Shea was contacted by the hospital where she was being cared for after she had spent the first few weeks of her life in intensive care. Josie's mother had long since disappeared and it was never known who the father was. Fr Shea accepted Josie who was only months old but who was totally helpless and vulnerable. She had no muscle strength in her neck or any of her limbs, she had permanent brain damage but it was unknown at the time how severe it was and she had a prognosis that was poor. Josie remained unable to move, to speak or feed herself throughout her life, yet she was an important and

much loved part of the House of Hope family. The other children learnt that she was their big sister and they played around her, climbed up on to her crib and talked to her.



Josie

She was taken out to celebrations at Sarnelli House as part of the House of Hope family. Peh and Mrs Em, another of those imperturbable, smiling Thai ladies, provided all the care that Josie needed. Despite many hospital admissions for pneumonia and many scares over the years that this fragile little child was breathing her last, Josie grew to be 6 years old. She responded more to some voices than others and Peh and Em could settle and soothe her easily. The dulcet tones of Fr Shea however had her grimacing and mewling, but in the last days of her life in 2008 it was for him she seemed to wait until she took her last breaths. Josie's vulnerability, helplessness and total innocence touched and moved many people's hearts and her loss is still felt.

Baby Dtoahu and his mother

At present the House of Hope is home to 21 little bodies all with different stories of where they came from, many of them heart breaking.

Baby Dtaohu's story is one that reflects a tragic start to life. Baby Dtaohu was the product of a relentless campaign of sexual abuse towards his mother Neeey (meaning Butter in English). Neeey had lived with her grandmother since she was 6 years old. Neeey's mother is mute and her father is deaf and they eke out a living by begging in Bangkok. Neeey used to walk to school every day from her grandmother's house.

Not long after she turned 12 years old Neeey's grandmother noticed that she was putting on weight. As this steadily increased she realised that her granddaughter was pregnant and Neeey gave birth to her son 3 months before her 13th birthday. Neeey then broke her silence. Since she was about 10 years old on her walk home from school she had been lured into a man's house and sexually abused and physically threatened if she told anyone. The police were called in to investigate and they involved the Social Services department who removed Neeey, her grandmother and the baby from the village where they lived. Neeey revealed later that the abuser was the village chief a 70 year old man. The Social Services department contacted Fr Shea seeking a safe place for the young mother and her baby and so Neeey and Baby Dtoahu who was then almost 2 months old came to live at House of Hope. Meanwhile the police sought to obtain DNA evidence from the accused to prove his abuse. The police have since discovered that the old man is not the father of Baby Dtoahu despite the abuse, and that there was a close relative of Neeey assaulting her as well. The investigation continues. Neeey now attends the local government school every day and her son Dtoahu (known as Matthew in English) who is 10 months old is in the care of Mother Peh and her staff and both mother and son are thriving.



Baby Dtoahu

After House of Hope

When the little boys from House of Hope graduate from Kindergarten they move on to live at St Patrick's Home for Boys which is next door to the House of Hope.

The little girls move onto Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls at Viengkhuik after Kindergarten. For the most part the girls enjoy the transition, and they get to be the babies of the house again and are alternatively spoiled and taught independence by the bigger girls and Ms Lek the lovely, kind manager. To date none of the children who live at House of Hope have HIV despite the mothers of Baby Eileen, Maggie, Bunny, Dome, Apak, Beh, Chat Chai, Jack and Nancy all diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and many of them already dead from the disease. Thankfully Thailand has made great strides in reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS from mother to child, but as other social, economic and medical problems remain under resourced, babies will continue to need places like the House of Hope for sanctuary and as a base from which to go out into the world.

The House of Hope costs approximately \$US43,000.00/ year to run this covers expenses such as babies' milk formula, diapers, baby cereal, clothes, health and medical expenses, school costs, electricity, water, gas and staff salaries.



Baby Matthew, Eileen and Jonah



Nancy, Ploei, Bunny and ChatChai



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Written by Kate Introna, September 2011

Sarnelli House