

## Message from Father Shea



Back in 1998, I had just finished my job as director of novices at the monastery in Nongkhai. During that last year, I was in contact with women who had HIV/AIDS and their children. There were no drugs available then in Northeast Thailand, and I and 3 novices were just trying to keep their families fed and help as much as we could with whatever poor supply of medicine we had (one of those novices Father Joe Ole will now take over as Director of Sarnelli House later this year).

Any child that had HIV/AIDS died quickly. Grieving mothers who were dying, pleaded with me to take care of their children. They were spurned by relatives and villages. I actually started taking in kids while I was still in the monastery in Nongkhai. The vice – provincial told me plainly that the novitiate was not a proper place to raise children. I was then stationed in Viengkhu, a large town on the banks of the Mekhong River and was given three other Catholic villages to develop as well. I was hunting for a house for the wee ones I had taken in, and a widow right across the road lived in a little wooden house bordering the diocesan land. This would become Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls. I asked our Redemptorist Bishop George Phimpisan for permission to use the land and buy the house. I still had no money, but the widow moved out to her daughter's house and I began to ask for money to rewire the house and drill a well. I knew if we took in children with HIV/AIDS we would not be allowed to use the village water. Munich province and Denver province Redemptorists responded to our needs. Kindermissionswerk from Germany gave me the money to buy the house and pay for salaries for 3 women for 1 year. Priests here in Thailand like Fr Pat Morrissey, Joe Maier, Leo Travis and Bob Martin helped with money so we could feed the kids. German Lutherans stepped in to help as well.

Today those little twerps are now in college and more kids come in, some of them from the Thai courts: girls brutalized, raped and abandoned. Love and concern bring them out of their shells, and they turn into the happiest children we have.

God bless you all

Fr Mike Shea C.S.s R

## Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, Viengkhu

**Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, Viengkhu is a complex of buildings across the road from the large Catholic school - Rosario Withaya School run by the French order of St Paul de Chartres nuns. Most of the 170 children at Sarnelli House attend this school.**

Currently there are 37 girls living at Viengkhu, ranging from 5 years to 19 years old. The girls living here do not have HIV/AIDS but many of them have been affected by HIV/AIDS in their family life. 21 of these girls attend Rosario school, 6 girls have recently graduated from Rosario school and are now attending JBAC - a business college in Nongkhai. A further nine girls are studying in college in places as far away as Bangkok, Udon Thani and Khon Kaen. They are studying a variety of subjects such as languages, hospitality and management and continue to be supported financially by their sponsor and one girl attends the prestigious King's School about 2 hours from Nongkhai.

The original little wooden house that houses the girls at Viengkhu has been repaired and added onto over the years. The house contains a kitchen, dining room, a large recreation room and a small office. Up the narrow rickety stairs are 3 single rooms for the older girls who come home from college in the



Bob and Jane

holidays and a small room for volunteers. As well there is a now a separate house where the younger girls sleep in a big dormitory style room with the manager Ms Lek. Another building has 8 bedrooms for the teenage girls who sleep 2 -3 in a room. There is a small separate building that previously was the office when Sarnelli House operated out of Viengkhu but has evolved into a TV/ homework/dancing practice room. The property also has a sala or large open sided wooden pavilion where the girls can relax in the heat or shelter from the rain, a basketball/volleyball court, and a vegetable garden complete the grounds.

Life at Viengkhu has its structure and Ms Lek tries to keep a balance between the older girls' freedom and the younger

girls' routine. There is food to be bought and cooked, washing to done, the grounds and houses to be kept clean and tidy and the girls' rooms to be made liveable at



Ms Lek painting faces for Halloween

least. Working with Ms Lek are 2 housemothers who work 6 days a week. Ms Lek has a room in the girls' dormitory where she lives, and girls that are newly arrived sleep in her room until they adjust to life at Viengkuk.

Doing their own laundry, helping with the cooking and cleaning are ways the girls learn life skills, they also have a jewellery project where they make and sell the jewellery and the proceeds go back to Sarnelli House to contribute to the girls' livelihood.

Our Lady of Refuge Home, Viengkuk is the only house out of the six houses that make up Sarnelli House to have their own night watchman; this is not so much to keep undesirables out but to keep the girls in. There have been times when the girls feel the need to stretch their wings and push against the rules. However stealing out at night and getting up to mischief such as joining gambling rings, drinking and dancing with the local ruffians soon became a little much for Ms Lek. Even though Fr Shea is known to be a soft touch when it comes to his girls and a big hug and an "I am sorry I will never do it again" usually gets the culprit off the hook, the night watchman was duly installed.

## A Place of Safety

Jin (not her real name) was three years old when her mother left her with her father. When she was 5 years old her father started to abuse her physically and sexually, he moved her from school to school when people became suspicious of his behaviour towards his daughter. However when Jin was 10 years old people reported Jin's father to the police and he was arrested. Jin gave a harrowing 5 hours of testimony to the court who consequently convicted her father and gave Jin - a beautiful, quiet and shy 11 year old into the sole care of Sarnelli House.



Jin slowly made new friends and attended school with the other girls living at Viengkuk and life seemed to become better for her. When Jin was 15 years old however, her father reappeared and no one quite knows how he got out of jail. He found a job selling ice cream on his motorbike and came to Viengkuk to make contact with Jin again and to take her to live with him. The police were called and numerous confrontations were had, until one afternoon a meeting was made with Fr Shea, Ms Lek, Jin and her father. The meeting was to categorically refuse to give Jin back to her father as the court had ruled. It was a tense and worrying time for Fr Shea and he came out of the meeting almost upset that he didn't have to use his .38 to stop Jin's father once and for all. The courts were appealed to again and Jin was taken to live with a court judge who is a great supporter of Sarnelli House, given a new identity and then enrolled and started boarding school at the King's school in the countryside. Jin still comes back to Sarnelli House and stays at a different house than Viengkuk in the holidays, but her friends at Viengkuk don't know this. She is doing well at school and should graduate next year and she remains a sweet and shy girl, but she is positive about making something of her life.

## Dancing Queen

Normally little girls from the House of Hope move to Viengkuk when they graduate from kindergarten. Don Rak, however put her foot down and refused to budge when her time came. Don Rak came to Sarnelli House when she was only 2 months old and was abandoned by her mother.





Her big sister King who is barely a year older was also abandoned at only weeks old.

The girls' mother is still alive and living with HIV/AIDS, she works as a sex worker and having children in her life was not what she wanted. Both girls grew up at the House of Hope, they tested negative for HIV/AIDS and were beautiful babies and toddlers - loved and admired by all the house mothers. They started school and King eventually moved to Viengkuk. Since then she has attached herself to various house mothers and has become something of a



Nook, Yoi, Jane and Too

nomad. Presently she is living at Nazareth House the home for teenage girls living with HIV/AIDS. But this stay may be running out for her, as she is known by the girls to run to Fr Shea or the house mothers at the slightest sign of misbehaviour. In fact as Fr Shea puts it she is a squealer. King loves sport and is competitive in everything she does. Don Rak on the other hand loved the House of Hope, she loved having the housemothers follow her around to spoon feed her like Thai mothers do for toddlers, she loved organising the toddlers to play any game she could come up with and she loved best of all to teach them to dance.

Numerous attempts at talking sense then bribery and blackmail were taken over the years to shift Don Rak from

her implacable position as queen of the kids at House of Hope. She would try a few days at Viengkuk and then call Fr Shea on the house mother's telephone and recite a litany of woes of why she couldn't stay. At one stage when her big sister King was living at Viengkuk, King really did try and beat up on Don Rak for coming to stay – such was their intense rivalry. King then moved on to live with Mother Wan at St Patrick's Boy Home. However in 2011 when she was 10 years old Don Rak finally felt it was time to give the new world another try – maybe the toddlers did not quite have the dancing skills she needed. She gallantly made the move to Our Lady of Refuge, Viengkuk and she has found life there not bad after all. Her passion for dancing continues unabated, but now much to her satisfaction her dance moves are improved as the bigger teenage girls choreograph her dances.

Some children living at Sarnelli House have reconnected with their family after many years of abandonment. In 2010 both King and Don Rak were taken to meet their mother who is still working in the same profession. Her reaction to her two beautiful girls was shock and disbelief and the girls' reaction was fear and a deep sense of abandonment. They refused to return to their mother but they did meet their grandmother again and a half brother they never knew they had. So the door is open to them for the future should they wish to pursue their family connections.

## Living the Girls' Life

Two young German girls Lena –Teresa Nutzel and Marcia Meier have spent a month living with the girls at Viengkuk in the October school holidays in 2010. These are some of their thoughts on life there.

"It is an almost indescribable experience to spend a longer period of time with the Viengkuk girls. In Viengkuk you can be a girl again, paint each other's nails, put make up on, braid your hair and on and on and on.

All the girls have different little "jobs" to do. Some sweep, some tidy up the kitchen or other rooms. They also help in



Lena and Marcia and friends from Viengkuk

the kitchen with cooking and all the girls do their own laundry, except the little ones. Mostly every Sunday is swimming day and the girls love it! All the girls who want to, get in the pickup



truck and Ms Lek drives them to Pi Si Tong because behind the Jan & Oscar House is the pool. Everyone jumps into the water as quickly as possible. They play games and enjoy the coolness of the water, and always have a fun time.

During school holidays most of the girls still get up at 6 o'clock, but the daily routine becomes a lot more relaxed for them. Every day they do something different. Sometimes they make jewellery and beautiful pendants. Afterwards they will sell them for a bit of extra money for Sarnelli. It is amazing how creative the girls and especially the house mothers are, and how fast they can do handicrafts. We tried it and it is really not so easy. Other times they make wonderful flowers out of paper. Just so simple but at the end it looks so good. We played a lot of "UNO" and painted their nails a hundred times with all the colours of the rainbow. They loved to put make up on our faces and their own and to take crazy pictures after. It never gets boring living with them. The girls love to dance and to sing. Sometimes the ground in front of the house becomes a dance floor, with the help of the big music box. In the evenings they are allowed to watch television. Mostly they watch funny Thai series. The girls also help with the rice harvesting. They do an amazing job, because it's really hard work! We also did it and we are glad that we never have to do it again.

During our time there we were allowed to get to know these

wonderful young ladies and they all now have a special place in our hearts! We really became friends and we are happy every time we see them."

## ARV medicine 10 years old at Sarnelli

It's 10 years this year since the children at Sarnelli House who have HIV/AIDS were first started on their AntiRetroViral (ARV) medications. Despite 4 of these children dying from AIDS before the drugs were able to be accessed for Sarnelli House, they have since saved the lives of the 25 little ones that were living at Sarnelli House in 2002 to today. None of those children who started their ARVs back then have died although many went through terrible side effects and the effects of advanced AIDS before they were strong enough to even attend school. Over 80 children with HIV/AIDS have come through Sarnelli House's open doors and have started on the ARV medications at Sarnelli House with amazing results. Two teenagers who came to Sarnelli with AIDS in 2010 and had only recently been started on ARV drugs were not so lucky and they did not survive, they are a sad reminder of the deadly effects of the HIV virus.

We would like to thank volunteers, donors and staff for all they have done to give these children a second chance.



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Written by Kate Introna February 2012

## Sarnelli House