



away and such small things like having no toothbrush or not enough underwear was quickly remedied by finding extra toothbrushes and more clothes. They were led by a posse of girls to the kitchen, shown the House of Hope and the babies. The trampoline was explained in great detail and they were exhorted to play as often as they wished on it, they were invited to swing on the swings and climb on the playground. All the joy that the girls derived from their home was explained to them. The two new little sisters gradually came to belong to the Jan and Oscar House and now they attend school, do their homework together and race up to Fr Shea for an all encompassing hug and blurt out all the days' goings on and who annoyed whom, and who got in to trouble at

school. While there are no trained counsellors or social workers available, the Jan and Oscar girls acceptance and the house mothers care and love help these little ones to regain their confidence in the world and find a place to belong and to be themselves.

The girls at Jan and Oscar House demonstrate what love, security and a house full of friends can do to help children who have been through abandonment and loss at such a young age. The day to day exuberance and joy which is palpable is a real testament to having friends on hand at all times –to do your homework with, to share your food with and to go to bed and share stories and dreams with.

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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, February 2016

Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER



www.sarnelliorphanage.org



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Message from Fr Shea

We made some changes a while back. When the AIDS virus was new, and TB was prevalent, we kept the children with HIV/AIDS separate from the kids who did not have the virus. But we decided, after consultation with doctors, to integrate them in each house. This plan worked out perfectly. Each house have children with and without the AIDs virus, and they get along well and there is no discrimination among them, or with house parents.

Jan & Oscar used to house older boys with AIDS. However, with the generosity of Gary and Janet Smith, a house for older boys was built in the fields. These boys, 15 of them, go to school and work on the farm. Their house, Jan & Oscar, was given to our grade school girls. Right now, we have 23 girls in this house.

They are a delightful little group. We have girls who were with us right from birth. We have some who came later, who have the HIV/AIDS virus. We have abandoned little girls. We have little girls who were abused and raped as early as 8 years old. We also have a super Housemother, Grandma Wan. She loves her little charges. Wan has diabetes and high blood pressure. That does not stop her, even though she is in her early 60's. She brings safety, stability, love and discipline into the lives of these kids. The kids love her, and she has no behavior problems, and the kids are happy and obedient. Wan is helped by two of our girls, Mae and Cebo. At the end of this month, we hope to bring back another one of our girls; the first girl we took in, back in 1998, to help with homework and other chores that Wan has taken upon herself. The warmth and happiness of the denizens of Jan & Oscar can be traced right back to the love and protection of Grandma Wan.

Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R

The Ladies of Jan and Oscar House

A change of gender for the occupants of the Jan and Oscar House in Pi Si Tong has brought with it a whole lot of extra noise, pink clothes and hair accessories. This has been the result of the occupation of the house by 23 little girls. Last year the teenage boys moved out to the Gary and Janet Smith House on Jomps' Farm and the little girls moved into their new big home to make their mark on the village of Pi Si Tong.



All 23 girls and Grandma Wan sleep upstairs in a big open dormitory with three housemothers, two of whom grew up at Sarnelli House. The leader of the house is Grandma Wan and her right hand man is Boy, who also graduated from Sarnelli House. Together they manage to bring some sort of order out of the chaos that is the girls' Jan and Oscar House.

The ages of the girls range from 8 – 13 years old. There are two sets of siblings in the house, as well as 4 girls who have siblings living at the other children's



houses. One 10 year old girl has Down Syndrome and two girls have walking problems due to the HIV virus. Five of the girls are living with HIV as well as two of their young carers. One 10 year old has rheumatic fever causing her to be tired and breathless at times and needing frequent hospital visits.

Four of the young girls were given to Sarnelli House after being sexually abused. Seven of the little girls had been abandoned to Sarnelli House in their first few months of life, and have graduated from the House of Hope. While less than half of the girls are orphans, the remaining girls have one parent alive who does not want them or is unable to care for them. Such is the case of Pla Nin who is 12 years old. Her father died and her mother is from Lao and cannot find work. She gave Pla Nin to an aunt to care for, but the aunt bought her to Fr Shea. When Fr Shea asked Pla Nin why she wanted to stay at Sarnelli House she looked up and said because no one else wanted her. Of course she was welcomed into the family.

Routine and school

The Jan and Oscar routine for a school day starts with a 5.30am wake up. They then have to do their chores – tidy their bed and surrounds, sweep around the house, shower and make their way to the communal dining room for breakfast.

After breakfast they line up to get their pocket money for the school day from Grandma Wan. They do each others hair in intricate plaits and sit patiently, their heads

pulled this way and that knowing the end result will be more than satisfactory. The girls seem to have an innate skill for hair creations! If there is spare time before school Grandma Wan has the girls sit in rows and recite their multiplication tables in loud monotonous voices. When the driver arrives there is a scramble to grab bags and climb on to the converted cattle truck to get the best position – the most favoured being in the air conditioned cabin with the driver.

After finishing the day at Rosario Witthayu School in Viengkhuuk, the girls arrive home at about 5pm. They drop their bags by their desks where they do their evening homework and race upstairs to shower and change their clothes. Dinner is ready for them in the dining room and they pull up chairs, grab a tray and are dished up the meal of the day. It is always with rice – usually sticky rice and then a stir fry with meat and vegetables, or deep fried fish made crunchy or chopped up into larb (a spicy specialty of the area). The variations are endless and the girls go back as many times as they want for seconds. No utensils are used if it is sticky rice they are eating. Girls both small and big alike, know exactly how to eat it using only three fingers and sticking the meat, vegetables or fish onto it with practiced ease.



The playground outside of the Jan and Oscar House contains a climbing frame, swings, a slippery dip and the most favourite of all a trampoline – known as a spring board. Everyone loves it –both the older and younger girls devise elaborate games on it, or they lie down and look up to the sky and day dream, in the brief 5 minutes when there are fewer than 3 children on it. Not surprisingly its most popular use is to jump as high and as fast as possible, regardless of how many kids are also jumping. The utter surprise of having the trampoline is that there has not yet been any broken bones, sprained ankles or jumped upon body organs. With the House of Hope just next door and the gate always open the young ones manage to find their way over in the afternoons. The playground is usually awash with kids' squeals, chatter, and game instructions.

At any one time in the evenings or on the weekends



three eight year olds can be found swinging gently on the swings talking between themselves the whole time. Four little 5 year olds climb the colourful playground frame in and out and over and under – constantly finding variations of how to get up and get down. Two 13 years old girls sit on the love swing looking with disdain at the younger ones getting caught up in their games, and discussing subjects only 13 year old girls know how to discuss. Meanwhile over on the trampoline a group of girls have pulled two little toddlers onto the tight black rubber, and are cuddling them and pulling them back as they try to crawl off. There is laughter and gentle teasing and the toddlers love it. Two five year old boys are on the grass under the trees playing mock kung fu fights



with long bamboo sticks, they feint and jump as the other advances and retreats and it looks like a highly professional choreographed fight. It can go on and on and the boys never tire of it.

The close proximity of House of Hope to the Jan and Oscar House means that the girls can often be found cradling babies who are almost half their size, organising games for toddlers and playing at being big sister. One or two of the older girls even go over on the weekends and help out with feeding the babies and settling them for

their afternoon sleep and then helping the housemothers. For some of them who grew up at House of Hope it is a chance to visit home again and to show and practice the care and love that was given to them as babies.

At the back of Jan and Oscar House there are vegetable gardens and mushroom houses as well as the storage shed for the harvested rice. There are always cats having kittens and the girls get to play with them. Jobs need to be done too and Grandma Wan has the girls weeding the gardens, sweeping and picking the mushrooms. After meals they have to wash their own dishes and they learn how to launder their own clothes and keep their school desks neat and tidy.

Despite the large number of girls they all seem to get on most of the time. There have been a few fights, one between the most pliable of the little girls who has a face like an angel and one of the more feisty ones who is 9 years old turning 19 years. These altercations are resolved quickly and amazingly forgotten just as quickly. The little cliques and factions in the house are amazing to follow and whenever you think you have it worked out - who belongs to what group and who is leading what little gang... the alliances change and everyone is in a different group. However, it is lovely to see the developing personalities of the girls and the way they are accepted and bought into the family when a new child arrives.



Last year two sisters arrived aged 8 and 9 years old. Their mother had been beaten by their father and was paralyzed from the beating. The relatives did not want to care for the girls and a relative notified Fr Shea of the girls' plight. They were traumatized from their experience and totally uprooted from all that was familiar to them. The little girls' transition to the Jan and Oscar House was cushioned to some extent by the warm welcome they received from the girls and Grandma Wan. They were immediately accepted and their belongings were packed