



## Message from Fr. Shea

In 1999 after I completed my six year stint as Director of Redemptorist novices in Nongkhai, and began the work of caring for families with HIV/AIDS, we had nothing. A lady who had cleaned my house and did my laundry, asked me to buy her little wooden house in the village of Viengkuk for 80,000 baht (US\$2,500). Her house was located just

off land owned by the diocese; not the Redemptorists. I asked the bishop for right of way, and the Bishop of that time, Bishop Yod Phimpisan, readily agreed to let me use and build on the church land, if needs be. I agreed to rent the land from the diocese for 2000 baht (US\$60) a month. The lady moved to Pai Si Tong to be with her daughters and relatives. It took six months to find money to pay her for her house. I re-wired and renovated the house in 1999; drilled a well, and started with eight children. A grandma and two young women began working with me.

These days we currently have about 160 children in seven houses with children divided by gender and age, spread out in three villages; Don Wai, Pai Si Tong and Viengkuk, about five miles apart. Nearly half of these children are afflicted by the AIDS virus. Others were abandoned and given to us to raise by the Thai Welfare Department. We have a great number of very young girls who came in beaten, molested and raped. Some were pregnant. All of our facilities for girls are full. This year, alongside the site of Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls in Viengkuk, the government put in a four lane highway. The highway is much higher than our property; about 15 feet. It spilled into and covered the drainage ditch that runs east-west through the village of Viengkuk. With no shoulders, the road is dangerous, especially since, for our girls, the road curves just as it approaches the property. There have been two accidents so far on the other side of the road, with one truck narrowly missing the nuns' house. If a vehicle runs off the highway on our side, it will wind up in one of our dormitories. The diocesan land where we are situated is lower than any land surrounding it. By the beginning of the monsoon season, that land will be like a lake, with no way to drain the water. We have to pull up stakes, and build a new house for these girls.



The children living at Viengkuk 2001

I have a parcel of land alongside our Nazareth House for senior high school and college girls in the village of Don Wai. There, we plan to build a building to house 40 girls and their housemothers. I had a well drilled on that land. Besides building the new home, we also have to build a water tower and a fence around the property, for the safety of the girls. The total for the house and water tower is estimated as US\$200,000. The wall is a separate estimate of about \$14,500. So far, I have received \$150,000 in donations. Since we are going to move out in middle May (as the monsoons come), we must begin construction now. Usually, I never buy anything or build anything until I have the amount I needed collected and on hand. I also try never to ask or beg for funds for the kids. People are very kind and generous, and the Good Lord and His Mother have watched over and helped these kids. Like I once wrote, I am not as religious as I should be. But I did promise the Lord that I would do the work but He would have to find funds for the kids. I am in my eightieth year, and never planned on building anything big or making any grandiose plans, but the work for beaten, raped, trafficked, abandoned and lonely little ones is only going to increase in the future.

**May God Bless you all**  
**Fr Mike**

## A Sudden Relocation

Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls in Viengkuk has never had its doors closed since it first opened all those years ago, despite being rebuilt and renovated in patches throughout the years. There was one time however, and Fr Mike takes great relish telling this story, when the mighty Mekhong River overflowed its banks and flooded Rosario School across the road



from the girls' home. The water steadily rose over the road and the girls had to be evacuated to the village of Pai Si Tong for a few days until the water subsided. Before they were evacuated, there was great merriment amongst the girls as they waded through the flood waters at the school and enjoyed the excitement of playing on a school day. Fr Mike came upon them and told them to get back home in no uncertain terms. Of course they asked why, when it was obvious to anyone that they were having such a good time. The reply consisted of the words overflowing toilets and floating turds and apparently as the story goes, the girls shrieked and walked on water to get out of there.





Since 1999, there have been almost 100 girls who have gone through the doors of Viengkhuuk. Some were siblings or cousins and others arrived alone with no one and nothing but the clothes they had on. Ms Lek the manager has always been there for them so the girls have had a stable mother figure and role model. She has tried to develop structure and routine in the girls' lives which they have appreciated – maybe not at the time but girls who have left and come back to visit have said that growing up at Viengkhuuk gave them a sense of security and of purpose. There have of course been challenges - girls climbing over the wall at night to meet friends or boys, the advent of mobile phones and the internet, how to get the girls to study hard and the usual intense teenage girl alliances and groups being formed and reformed and the fallout from that.

Now with 21 teenage girls, 16 of whom attend Rosario School across the road from their home, and five who attend senior high school in the next village, the girls know what to expect in their daily lives. As well as the usual household chores such as keeping their rooms clean, sweeping around the house, doing their laundry and cleaning up after meals, they have set

times for homework in a separate class room with their own desks, and set times on the weekend when they can watch TV. Most of the girls have a mobile phone, and, whether it is a cheap one they have bought by saving up their birthday and Christmas money or a more state of the art one a relative or sponsor has bought them, they can't seem to live without it. However, they have restrictions on when they can use their phones. On Sunday night, the girls must sign them over to the housemother and they are locked up for the week. On Friday evening they are signed out and they can use them on the weekend.

Another way of giving the girls a sense of purpose and community are the handicraft initiatives Ms Lek has developed over the years. Making costume jewellery, ornaments and most recently beautiful woven bags, the girls have times when they join together to make these items. There is also a



branded jewellery product made from rice stalks off Jomp's Farm and organic dyed cotton called BraceLove which the girls make and sell. Thanks to friends of Sarnelli House in Thailand, a contract was given to the girls from a local private hospital to make simple cotton bags for medications that patients take home with them when they are discharged from hospital. Under Ms Dak's tutelage they have learnt how to make the bags using her sewing machine. So far they have made 500 bags and together with the money they make from their handicrafts this will be saved for their future education needs. A mushroom house is also located at Viengkhuuk and the girls grow and sell mushrooms to the local village. They also contribute to the sustainability of Sarnelli House by helping plant and harvest the annual rice crop on Jomp's Farm.

For some girls, Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, Viengkhuuk will always remain home to them and they will return regularly to visit, understanding as they have got older the crucial opportunities given to them. One such girl whose mother died from cancer and whose father remarried a woman with small children of her own was kicked out of the family home by her stepmother when she was twelve years old. She was forced to live in a shack in the rice fields as no one wanted her. Her father did not want to cross his new wife and asked Fr Mike to take her in. Her father died not long after from cancer as well. This was in 2004 and the young lady lived at Viengkhuuk for nine years. She had the usual teenage rocky

starts but after she completed her senior high school and a business certificate in Nongkhai, she left and enrolled in a one year nurse assistant training course, and she is now working in a private hospital in Rayong near Bangkok. She has a partner and a baby daughter. She does not forget the start she received in life when everyone else but Fr Mike refused to help her. She is in contact regularly with Ms Lek and Fr Mike and visits to support the girls living in her former home.



One teenage girl, who has only known life at Sarnelli House having arrived aged three years old, has moved on to study at a private school in Khon Kaen, about a three hour drive away. She lived at House of Hope until she was five years old and for the last ten years has grown up at Viengkhuuk. During that time she has matured and developed in to a self-possessed young woman. Her grades at school have been consistently high and she has had to work hard to get them there. She has grown to be a reliable and strong presence, especially around the younger girls when they first move there. She has taken on responsibilities and her common sense and gentle nature have consistently held her in good stead. She has pursued her ambition to speak English by engaging with volunteers and visitors, and has always tried to take any opportunity given to her to learn and experience something new. J. is determined to succeed academically so she can go on to university and find herself a career. Despite being just 16 years old, she is managing living away from Viengkhuuk for the first time ever. She has had to make new



friends in her new school and it has been a struggle to go from being well known and a leader in her own house to being alone on the weekends left to study. Even though J. really misses her friends and Ms Lek, she stays in contact with them and any holiday will always see her on the local bus travelling home.

As the girls prepare to move from Viengkhu and start afresh in the village of Don Wai in their new house there is lots of excitement and curiosity about what it will be like. Some want to keep their regular routine and others are eager to be near friends and weekend activities, knowing that when the holidays come around they won't

have to wait for volunteers to arrive, but will be able to easily join in activities in the hall and at Sarnelli House. The girls will be a short walk from the bakery so they will have lots of opportunities to learn there and they will be closer to the farm and the sports field where the boys play football in the afternoons – so they will have to be closely chaperoned there! Opportunities for play and new friends will abound but they must try and keep their heads down and keep studying to increase their hopes for a better future for themselves. Even though the building and location will be different, the essence of providing a safe and loving house to girls in need will remain and continue in the same generous and loving spirit that Sarnelli House was founded on.



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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 2018