

# Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER

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March 2024

## New Arrivals

For the first two months of 2024 all the kids and the staff were reaching for their blankets, socks, and scarves. The young volunteers from Germany looked on perplexed as they enjoyed what they considered to be very acceptable summer weather. As the weather heats up and the countdown to the end of the school year starts, the older kids are scrambling to study. The younger kids are oblivious to the pressure of exams and are busy keeping the housemothers busy. Since October 2023, eight new children have arrived at Sarnelli House. All except one of these is under four years of age. For most of them, their parents are in jail for drug related problems or they have been removed from dangerous situations and have no family to take care of them.



## Message from Fr. Shea

After a cold cold season, the weather has warmed up and Sarnelli is overwhelmed by babies and curtain climbers. I believe we will now have 8 new children since October added to our community of 135 children. The older children's houses have less kids, but the younger children's houses are growing. The nursery has kids crawling all over each other. This large amount of wee ones has Kate and her gang searching for solutions. In this issue, Kate will tell us stories of battles won and lost while raising these kids. Sarnelli was blessed 18 years ago, when Kate first appeared on the scene. She was later joined by Brian, her husband, and they blessed us with their knowledge, experience and love for sick, abandoned and unloved children. All our staff are caring, dedicated people and Sarnelli house is in good hands, no matter what the future holds.

God Bless you all

Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R



The eldest of the eight new arrivals was a 12-year-old girl, who had a chaotic upbringing before arriving to live at Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls. Her mother, father and older brother had lived in Chonburi, a province near Bangkok, where her father died when she was a few years old. Her mother moved the family to her home village in Thabo about 20 km from Nongkhai and left the children with their grandmother. She then resumed her employment at a place of entertainment in Chonburi. The grandmother was too poor and frail to care for the girl and her older brother and she contacted the Thai Welfare Service who consequently placed both children in temporary care. The mother then met her second husband and had a third child, a baby girl. They came back to Thabo to live with the grandmother. However, the mother returned to her work within weeks and left the new husband to care for the baby. After a few months, the neighbors contacted the mother with news that her husband was out drinking heavily and taking the baby with him. She returned to Thabo and asked the Thai Welfare Services to take the little baby into care and she returned to work again. A third marriage followed to a foreigner, who purchased a house in Thabo.







They took the two older children out of care to live with them. The girl was about 9 years old at this stage and her older brother 11 years old. In hoping for a happy family life, they were to be disappointed again. The mother and her new husband fought and drank heavily and neglected the children. After mediation with the Thai Welfare Service, where the mother complained about not having enough money it was agreed her husband would provide her with more if she reduced her drinking. Despite this concession, the situation did not improve and after some time the husband divorced her and sold the house. As the mother had no address or employment and no close family who would care for the two older children they were placed in care again. By now the girl was 11 years old and she was moved to live at Our Lady of Refuge Home for girls at Sarnelli House. She is slowly settling in and trying to develop friendships however, she becomes possessive and aggressive when her special friends talk with other girls. This seems to reflect the feelings of abandonment and rejection she has known throughout her life. She is a smart girl and is interested in school so hopefully she will be able to focus on her studies. She is supported by her housemothers and teachers as there are no formal counselling services for children like her. Often it is peer support that is so important to this group of young people. Even so they can be scarred and emotionally damaged and this can result in bad choices in relationships and risky behaviour as they enter their teenage phase..

Next month in April, there are six more children needing refuge at Sarnelli House. Five of them are from one family and the Thai Welfare Service does not want to split the family up. Their mother has had eight children with six partners, and she was living with the five youngest children in a shack



without electricity. There were piles of trash attracting rats, cats and dogs and the children were dirty and not going to school. The mother was also a known drug addict. The ages of the children range from six months to 13 years old. The two youngest will be cared for at House of Hope and the oldest boys will go to Sarnelli House, the home for high school boys. The middle siblings will live at St. Patrick's



House for grade school boys and Jan and Oscar House for grade school girls. Another six-year-old girl unrelated to the family of five will also arrive in April. She needs shelter from her family who has severe alcohol abuse problems.

57 children under 12 years of age are living at House of Hope, Jan and Oscar House, and St. Patrick's House in the village of Pai Si Tong by April. The House of Hope will be particularly crowded with 27 little ones. They all have their own personalities and behaviors, many of which arise from trauma and abandonment, so they need love and attention all the more. The House of Hope is also home to four disabled children who require specialised care. Nuna, Mary, Jodie and Titan have significant mental challenges as well as physical ones. They are all unable to walk or crawl and Titan needs feeding by a tube into his stomach. As the house gets busier with demanding babies needing time and attention to be fed, as well as small children being prepared for nursery school there is often little time for extra care. Thanks to the generosity of donors from Australia, The Netherlands, the UK and the USA, a house is being renovated in the village of Donwai for the disabled children to live in. This will give them a chance to flourish within their limitations and it will also ease the numbers at House of Hope, allowing for more small children and babies in need to be accepted. The house is a former building that was used for training the teenage girls in bakery skills. The ovens and industrial mixing machines have been moved to the Nazareth House kitchen and reestablished there. Currently Nazareth House is empty as the number of girls attending senior high schools was too small to warrant keeping the house open. They were moved to live at Our Lady of Refuge Home for girls just next door so some of these teenagers continue to train at the bakery. The house for the disabled children is open plan and the only





structural change inside the house will be the addition of a disabled bathroom. New windows will replace the old louvre windows that were not successful in keeping out the heat or the mosquitoes. A long kitchen bench will be added at one end of the house to be used for preparing meals and medicines. The other end of the house will be a sleeping area. Painting and electrical rewiring will also be needed. A designated area for therapeutic care in the form of physiotherapy, music and sensory stimulation will be available. Outside there will be a large cemented and roofed area at the front of the building easily accessible by wheelchair. Within close proximity to the Mary and Joseph Hall, Sarnelli House and Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, the children will benefit from visits to and from these places. In the future, funds permitting, a wheelchair accessible van will need to be purchased, also an electric lifter to help transferring the children onto wheelchairs and beds as they get older. At present Nuna is 14 years old and bed bound, and she is becoming too heavy for her housemothers to lift onto her wheelchair. Training staff will also be an issue but Ben an assistant physiotherapist and his wife Angelique Ummels from The Netherlands and the young volunteers from Germany will help with this. Ideally, the house will sleep approximately eight children and may be used as a day centre for children in the community who need help. It will be wonderful to see Mary, Jodie, Nuna and Titan in their own house.

Even though children arrive at Sarnelli House needing a safe shelter, children also leave to return to their families. Often families need time and space to improve their situations and be able to function as a family. An example of this is one boy who was 18 months old when he was referred to Sarnelli House because his young parents were neglecting him. After almost two years of the boy living at

House of Hope the parents approached the Thai Welfare Service to take the little boy back. A home visit and an assessment were completed and they were approved to have him in their care. The young father is working and the mother is hoping to find a job and she will be able to leave the boy with the paternal grandparents who are very keen to help. At St. Patrick's House another boy is having supervised visits to his family. He arrived at House of Hope when he was two years old and his mother had been taken to juvenile detention for selling drugs. Now he is seven years old and he has begun visits to his mother and family. The Thai Welfare Service are responsible for picking him up from St Patrick's House and taking him to his visits. It looks hopeful that a successful reunion will take place later this year.

Children are not the only ones who arrive and leave Sarnelli House. A young woman who first came to House of Hope when she was a few months old as her mother had abandoned her, has recently been employed as a nursing assistant at the same House of Hope. This young lady finished her senior high school and then completed her two-year diploma course fully supported by Sarnelli House. She had the usual boyfriend and study problems, but she kept in close contact with the staff at Sarnelli House and Fr Mike through this time. She did reconnect with her mother in her teens but decided not to have any further contact with her after this. When she graduated, she found it hard to get any job and in 2023 she came back to Fr. Mike asking for rent and food money while she searched for work. Fr. Mike offered her a three-month assistant nursing course in Udon Thani, with the opportunity to come back to Sarnelli House and work on the nursing team when she graduated. Thankfully she took him up on his offer and at 23 years old she now works



at House of Hope – preparing the medications for the children and babies, and taking them to the hospital or to the local health clinic for appointments. She is bringing a new lease of life to the staff and children at House of Hope.

Another young woman was bought to Sarnelli House by her grandmother in 2005 aged 8, after she was brutally abused by a family friend. Despite this horrific start to her life, she developed into a smart and curious girl and, with the help of her dedicated sponsors, she graduated from university with a degree in 2023. Last month, she came to ask to work at Sarnelli House as a way of giving back to Fr Mike. She is now working at Jan and Oscar House lending her art skills and her maturity to caring for the 15 little girls who live there.

These young people with similar past experiences can help improve the children's lives as they bring their empathy, understanding and post graduate education skills to a whole new generation of vulnerable children.

New developments are progressing on the farm with the completion of the chicken coop and the purchase of 150 young chickens, thanks to generous donors from Hawaii. The chickens are settling into their surrounds and in another month should be ready to lay their eggs for consumption by the children. There have been setbacks with the weather and the staff to build the coop, but despite this it has finally been completed. A big feed shed has been built next to it which will house the chicken, pig and cow feed making for a secure central place of storage. Hopefully with the regular laying of eggs from the 150 chickens Sarnelli House can save approximately US\$3,500 per year, thus lowering the food bill which has been slowly creeping up with the increased cost of living in Thailand.

In February the anniversary of Fr Mike's 60 years as a Redemptorist priest was celebrated in true Thai style. A group of teenage girls from Our Lady of Refuge Home for girls, local village girls as well as three volunteers from Germany, formed a dancing aisle to welcome the Bishop. Outside the newly redecorated church of St Cornelius Church at Pai Si Tong, the Bishop commenced



the proceedings. Various groups of students from different schools showed their Thai dancing skills to Fr Mike and the dignitaries. Finally Kru Pla, Sarnelli House's own teacher, who is trained in Thai Classical Dance, performed a solo dance that was beautiful in its precision and grace. After mass, there was lots of free food provided by people from villages where Fr. Mike had lived and worked. The kids from Sarnelli House were everywhere all at once, scampering from food table to food table with hands, pockets and bags bulging with food. For many of them, the memories of being hungry stay with them and when they see food, they want to keep it for later. When the kids' bellies were full, local football teams battled it out on the dusty field. The ambulance was called twice to transport players to hospital but there were no serious injuries. Fr Mike took a well-earned rest from his celebrity status of the day and a band played on as the afternoon drifted to an end with well lubricated villagers stumbling home and the Sarnelli football team jumping with delight at their win. It was amazing to see people from villages where Fr. Mike had lived 50 years ago, who have not forgotten him and the things he did for them to improve their lives both spiritually and practically.

Donations in the USA can be made to:

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

Written by Kate Introna March 2024