



## Message from Fr. Shea

Back in the beginning a fledgling a struggling group of little people that had become known as the “kids from Sarnelli”, badly needed help in fund raising. The kids were all small, and most of them had the HIV/AIDS virus. There were school expenses, plus medical and daily support such as fuel for the one van; electric bills and food. Sarnelli House had just been built (one building thanks to the Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers of Thailand) and St. Patrick’s (thanks to the Marist Fathers and Brothers in Australia) was in the process of being built. At this time, two of my cousins married and came over to help. Sam Mueller was a towering ex-football player of the U. of Wisconsin, and his bride was Molly Krolczak, now a famous artist. Together they used their plentiful talents to improve many aspects of the work for the kids and older people with AIDS in the Outreach Program. Molly taught women how to draw and paint batik to sell, and one aspect of the work Sam taught was how to find sponsors for each child, so they could help with the children’s education and wellbeing. They then returned to the U.S. to start “Ceboride”, a 120-mile bike ride to raise money for medicine and hospital stays for our kids and adults. Each summer people join in to ride in Ceboride and raise desperately needed money for medical help for the children of Sarnelli. Ceboride is now in its 20th year.

Thanks to dedicated folks who give to help their handpicked kids, and the work of many people, especially Fathers Chuck Beierwaltes and David Polek, plus Deacon Reggie Bollich, almost all of our 155 Sarnelli kids, and 80 Outreach kids, have sponsors. I will now leave it up to Kate to take up the story.

**Fr Mike Shea C.Ss.R**

# SPONSORS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Sarnelli House has reached twenty years old! Thanks to his vision, drive and unending compassion for the poor and abandoned, Fr Mike’s work continues. Twenty years ago, he realized that the small, vulnerable children he had under his care needed shelter, health care and an education to help them develop to their full potential. Fr Mike could provide plenty of love and guidance but what he would need most back then was money to guarantee the basic physical needs of the children. Over the years, so many generous, faithful and ordinary people have helped Fr Mike to establish Sarnelli House. It is a real tribute to the generosity of these people, from all walks of life, and from many different countries that the children are thriving. Children who came to Sarnelli House from the hospital the day after birth are now in elementary school. Others who were dropped off by relatives terribly sick and traumatized are now entering into university life.

Raising money for Sarnelli House is a difficult and challenging task. There is so much need in the world and the competition for the generosity of people is huge. Many have become jaded and mistrustful about where the charity dollar ends up. Every year, Sarnelli House has to start from practically nothing and begin to apply to foundations and charities for funds. Often, it is difficult to even receive an acknowledgement once a proposal has been sent, particularly if there is no prior relationship with the funder. Many







foundations will only fund very specific projects in certain regions of the world, others do not take on newcomers. The generosity then of individual donors to Sarnelli House over the years is overwhelming, and has been one of the ways Sarnelli House has stayed afloat. Another way is the sponsorship program, which has reduced some of the stress of trying to find the finances for the coming year. Knowing that a certain amount of sponsorship money will come in each year means that budgeting for that year is not so uncertain.

On average, the sponsorship program at Sarnelli House has brought in about 5-10% of the total funds for the year. This is a great tribute to the incredible generosity of the sponsors, who number around 200. Many of them are now sponsoring a child who may not be the original one they started with. Many sponsor more than one child and some sponsor groups of siblings. Over the years some sponsors have had to give up sponsoring. A new baby, a sick relative, loss of a job are all financial needs that have to be met in life. This is so understandable and the children and staff are very grateful and respectful of sponsors when this occurs. Former sponsors are still a part of the life of Sarnelli House and their contribution is always remembered gratefully.

Depending on the age and stage of the education of a child, it can cost anything from 60,000– 80,000 Thai Baht (US\$1,900 -2,555) to feed, clothe, educate and shelter a child for a year. This does not include building and vehicle maintenance costs, gasoline to get to and from school or hospital appointments, electricity supply or water costs. For the university students living away from Sarnelli House, it can cost up to 150,000 Thai Baht (US\$4,800) a year. However, Sarnelli House is doing its best to reduce its food bill by growing fruit, vegetables and rice and raising cows, pigs, ducks and fish and is also looking at ways of reducing its energy bill as well.

Sponsorship of a child is usually US\$40 per month. Because of the rising costs of many economies in different countries not everybody can give the same amount. Also, within Thailand prices are rising and the cost of raising a child at Sarnelli House increases as the child grows, so some children need more than one sponsor. All sponsorship money is spent on the children, wages are managed from a separate fund. Sponsorship money does not go into a particular child's account but goes towards the cost of a child's upkeep – shelter, food, clothing and education. However, a record is kept of the individual child's sponsorship money.

For the children, being sponsored is a wonderful link to people, often unseen, who care for them. It gives them a sense of a bigger family

than the housemothers and staff they come in contact with every day. Fr Mike regularly reminds the children about the generosity of their sponsors, and encourages the kids to be always grateful for them. It helps the children to understand that without them, there would be little education, clothes, food, health care or opportunities for their futures. The children love to know who their sponsors are. They are constantly asking when their sponsor will come visit them, what country they are from and what is their name. In the past, this has been hard to answer when there are approximately 200 sponsors on the sponsorship program. As a result, a laminated card was made for the children to keep, which has the sponsor's name and a map of the world and what country they are from



marked on it. Where possible, and with permission, a photo of the sponsor is included. This is a great success and the small children like to point out who their sponsors are. They also get to learn a bit of geography as well! As a way of thanking their sponsors, the children write them a letter twice a year. The thank you letters from the children in the beginning can be a little prescriptive, as they get used to why someone they have never met would be interested in them. As the children grow into their teenage years, appreciation of their sponsor grows. Finally, as young adults who graduate from tertiary education and move on to an independent life, they come to truly appreciate the generosity and the huge difference their sponsors have made in their lives.

A tremendous catalyst for introducing people to the sponsorship program and supporting them is Fr. Chuck Beirewaltes C.Ss.R who has been working in partnership with Fr Mike for many years. His annual three month visit from the USA to Sarnelli House has been going on for 10 years or more. He helps the children put a name to their sponsors, as he introduces and explains to them the sacrifices many sponsors have to make for them. Fr Chuck's relationship with the children enables him to share with schools and other groups back in the USA, and with friends of all ages about Sarnelli House. He is willing to go anywhere and do anything for the kids. As he





recalls “I am not afraid to tell their stories and their need to live on in hope, acceptance, joy and love. I find people’s responses has been overwhelming and incredibly generous” Despite being 86 years old, Fr. Chuck continues to inspire.

Sponsors can send gifts to their children for birthdays or special events or add extra money to their sponsorship donation and make a note that it is specifically for a gift. Staff will accompany the child to buy a suitable gift with their money. Sharing food and belongings is a very common practice for the children and for local Thai people. When a present arrives for a particular child, it is always shared around whether it is clothes, stationery or sweets. This way the other children do not feel left out. Some children are lucky enough to have their sponsors visit and they feel very special. This can be difficult for the other children as they look on with a shade of envy. However, visiting sponsors are always very sensitive about this and include friends in outings or buy a gift that can be shared by the whole house.

In Donwai, the sponsorship program employs Ms Fern a very bright young lady from the local village and a young blind woman Ms Joy who works from home. Together they organize thank you letters from the children who can write, and drawings from the smaller



ones. An addressed sheet of paper with the sponsor’s name is left with the child on Saturday, who, with the help of friends and housemothers, writes the letter, and the following week it is picked up by Ms Fern. The letters have to be translated into English which is quite a process. Ms Fern transcribes them in Thai and sends them electronically to Ms Joy. She listens to them and types the translation into English and sends it back. The letter is then printed out with the original Thai letter on the back. Neither Ms Joy nor Ms Fern is fluent in English and so the children’s letters can often be a bit cryptic. Brian O’Riordan, who is helping Fr Mike with fundraising, also helps with the English translations and often has to refer back to the child for clarification. Despite these hurdles, the girls try their best to stay on top of excuses such as I lost the paper, I have no pen, I don’t know what to say etc. and eventually the letter is sent out.

With the help of donors, staff and sponsors, children grow up, attend school and hopefully leave Sarnelli House with a good prospect for the future. An example of this is Day (name changed) who is very aware and grateful for the help of his sponsors. He is now 24 years old. During all the events of his young life that are summarized below, his sponsor has accompanied him from afar and enabled him to grow and mature. Day came to live at Sarnelli House when he was six years old in 2001. Little is known of his infancy and early childhood except that his parents died from AIDS and his aunt tried to care for him but could not, and so took him to the Thai Welfare Department who gave him to Sarnelli House. He grew up with 70 other children who were all living with HIV and needing medical care. Day eventually attended Rosario School once he had started on his ARV medications and his health had improved. In 2008 he was on the Sarnelli House football team which competed in Pattaya and he had one of his first trips out of Nongkhai. He along with his friends moved to live at the Jan and Oscar House in 2009 which was the home for teenage boys living with and without HIV. He graduated from Rosario School in 2011. He then went on to study at a senior high school not far from Sarnelli House. He was a diligent boy, even tempered and softly spoken. Day’s life revolved around his schooling but also around the agricultural life of the area – rice planting and rice harvesting. Cultural celebrations



were celebrated and Day knew when they were coming up and how they were to be celebrated. Songkran (Thai New Year), Easter, Loy Krathong, Halloween and Christmas were all marked in Day's life. Day graduated from Wiencomme School in Grade 12 in 2014 at 20 years of age, all the while living at Sarnelli House. In 2015 he was accepted into Maejo University in the northern part of Thailand more than 600 km from Nongkhai to study agriculture. He graduated from university in 2018 and he now no longer needs a sponsor, but he is employed at Sarnelli House, to give back to Fr Mike for all his care of him. He hopes to eventually go onto further study and work in his area of expertise.

He wrote the following letter to his sponsors when he had finished his study.

"I lost my parents when I was a kid. It was tough to grow up as an orphan. I was very young and I didn't understand why I had to stay in a shelter for children. I am fortunate to have moved into a good environment. It is in a small village in the forest. It has a church next to a Buddhist temple. People here are very nice and friendly. Everyone lives together without conflict. This village is called Don Wai Village. This home is called Sarnelli House, founded by Father Michael Shea. I moved here when I was 5 or 6 years. This place gave me many things that I never had before such as loving, caring, nurturing. Sarnelli House is my home. It is for abandoned kids to have good opportunities to start their new lives. For me I feel THERE'S LIFE AFTER DEATH! And Fr. Shea has always taken good care of me, and I love him as my father. Also, as we have housemothers to take good care of us all the time since I lived there. I'm proud of myself to have an opportunity to study in the university like any other student. So I want to be grateful to everyone who has always supported me in every way. Life can be scary and nothing happens as we expect. And success doesn't come easily. As long as we never give up on our dream, we can have the taste of success. Lastly, I would like to show thanks for Sarnelli House which has given me everything, and given me and the other children an opportunity. Thank you so much to Fr. Shea, the housemothers and my sponsors who supported me since I was a kid. We get many chances in our lives and I am very proud to be part of this family"

To mark the 20 years of Sarnelli House and to look forward to the next 20 we are hoping to increase our sponsorship program. If you know of anyone at work, home or church who might be interested,

please share the insert that explains a little about the sponsorship program. Ways to sponsor are to be found on the website [www.sarnellihouse.org](http://www.sarnellihouse.org) under support.

A little girl who came to Sarnelli House when she was eight years old after being brutally sexually and physically abused has been sponsored by the same family since she was 11 years old. She is now studying in university and has two more years until she graduates. Her sponsored family write "Being a sponsor has impacted our life in many ways. For our daughters, they have learned that the world is larger than our immediate family or community and that we have a responsibility to help others. But more importantly, our daughters have gained an older sister. We had the opportunity to meet [.....] several times and those experiences have been an invaluable experience for our entire family. We have been able to experience through those visits and regular mail/email correspondence the joy of seeing [.....] evolve from adversity to becoming a happy and confident young adult".

Many thanks are due to all our sponsors who have contributed over the years. It is amazing to think that families have pictures of a child in Thailand, who they have never met, on their fridges. That families who have sponsored children still follow the development of their sponsored child with interest and concern. It is wonderful for the children to experience the love and care sponsors send to the children in letters and visits. And to see that love returned in the children's faces when they understand what their sponsor does for them. It is also a testament to the work Fr Mike has done. To quote Fr. Chuck "Love is like a boomerang you throw it out and it always comes back."



Donations in the USA  
can be made to:

Friends of Sarnelli House  
UA in the USA

**Box 88234  
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(The foundation can give  
tax deduction slips,  
please request)

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#### **For more donation details see**

[www.sarnellihouse.org](http://www.sarnellihouse.org) under Support

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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, March 2019