

Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER



www.sarnelliorphanage.org

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Message from Fr Shea

In Kate's newsletters, she always attempts to describe the trials and tribulations of the children in each of our 6 houses. In this issue, I would like to explain the origin and purpose of "Charlene Richard House", which directly impacts on the activities of all our houses.

We began the work with children in 1999 and in the early 2000's people began to become interested in the fledgling project, and more people flocked to volunteer and help. They however had to stay in hotels. The old House of Hope, a one story affair built for US\$17,000 from donations from generous folks in St Louis, Missouri, USA, had one little guest room. We had another guest room at Sarnelli House. We met a man, early on, who offered to find money to build a guest house. His name was Reggie Bollich and his wife was Dottie. Reggie worked in the Thai Oil Refinery in the Sriracha area, and his wife was a volunteer at Fr Ray Brennan's orphanage in Pattaya. Reggie gave us the history of Charlene, a young girl who suffered and finally died of a rare type of cancer in the late 1940's. Her acceptance of her cross and her zeal in offering her suffering for others so touched the Cajun community that she is even now called "The little Cajun Saint". Reggie was on his way home to eventually join the deaconate program in Lafayette, LA., USA and by then, we had heard other people make promises, never to be heard from again. But Reggie did go home and began fund raising. By the time Reggie had raised around US\$25,000 we began the building. The donations Reggie raised came in regularly, and in 2005, Charlene Richard House was built, and Deacon Reggie and Dottie came with some of the Richard family (Charlene's siblings and nieces etc) and Bishop George came to offer Mass and bless the house.

Since then the six room house has often been more than full, and additions were gradually made. There is in front of Charlene House, a cameo made of fiberglass, portraying Charlene. People at St Edward parish in Church Point LA., USA were so moved by the cameo that they ordered one for their cemetery, where Charlene is interred.

Charlene House takes in many volunteers, most of them "regulars". German, Swiss, Dutch, Belgian, English, Irish and Australians make up the majority, and the Americans and Thais also come to offer their help and expertise. The children love the attention and the staff love the help these volunteers give to the program.



Reggie on a recent visit to Sarnelli House

Charlene House has 2 great cooks, Pi Da and Goi and no one goes hungry. Sarnelli House is pretty much out in the woods, and having good food and companionship keeps folks focused and content. We feel that young Charlene is watching over kids who are her age when she joined the Lord, and are grateful for the Catholics of Lafayette for sharing her with us.

Fr Mike Shea C.S.s.R

Reunited

As a lot of the sweet, little children morph into strange, gangly teenagers, more and more of them are connecting with lost relatives in wondrous ways.

Jen is 21 years old this year and she came to Sarnelli House in 2001, where she had lived in a government orphanage in Udon Thani. She was one of 3 young girls who the orphanage wanted to send to the local village school. When the villagers and the teachers



found out that these girls had HIV/AIDS they refused to have them. They set up demonstrations and these eventually reached the governor of the province and the national press. The police were called in, but they sided with the villagers and were unwilling to quieten the demonstrators. Eventually the governor contacted Fr Shea and asked him to take the girls, which he agreed to, on the proviso that the press would not be informed. He feared further fear mongering publicity for the girls, and the other children in his care most who had HIV/AIDS as well. The three little girls were welcomed to Sarnelli House in 2001 and Sarnelli House would be their home as it still is today.

Jen knew that her parents had both died from HIV/AIDS and that she had no relatives, but there were few records kept and Jen's background information was scant. Physically she had endured a terrible case of



shingles before she came to Sarnelli House and the scars on her body look like burn scars, so deep and painful the infection must have been. She developed painful mouth ulcers and went through the gamut of lung and skin infections before she started her ARV (AntiRetroViral) medicines in 2003 at Sarnelli House. She has been diligent and responsible in taking them ever since.

Jen is now living at Nazareth House and is studying in her final year of school in M6 or Grade 12, and to her credit she has got through school. Unfortunately her Thai literacy skills are very poor, learning disabilities seem to be common among this group of children and one of the reasons could be starting school very late because of sickness. The compassion and care Jen showed other children led to her being trained by Srinagarind Hospital in Khon Kaen to become a peer support worker for other children and teenagers with HIV/AIDS. Jen has attended a cooking and baking course also in Khon Kaen and she is the resident baker for cookies and cakes for the children on special occasions throughout the year. In the school holidays over the last few years as other girls at Nazareth House go off to be reconnected with relatives, Jen has always stayed at home. Despite her smiling face there has been a streak of sadness in Jen because of the knowledge that she has no family of her own. However, at the end of last year her life was turned upside down.

With the help of social media on the internet which can be accessed even in little villages like Don Wai, Jen found her family. A friend recognised Jen's surname on facebook and knowing another friend with the same name encouraged

them to contact each other. A phone call was made to Ms Kung the manager of Sarnelli House, and soon Jen was talking with her older brother. There were lots of tears shed by all present and everyone shared in Jen's shocked delight. She had no idea she had a brother and he had thought Jen had died like his parents. In December Jen met her brother and her grandmother. It was a great joy to her, and she will gradually become reacquainted with them over the coming year. Sarnelli House is still home to Jen as she decides what she will study when school finishes this year and where her life will lead her with her new found family.





A special addition

Little Dada came to the Sarnelli House family in 2013. She was referred by the Thai Social Services when someone in her village notified them of the plight of 2 little girls living in a shack in a nearby rice paddy. Dada was 4 years old and her big sister was 12 years old. Their mother had died from HIV/AIDS and their father had remarried and left, the girls had no choice but to fend for themselves. Her older sister was digging for shells in the rice paddies to sell for food to keep both of them alive. Some villagers took Dada to the hospital when she was very sick and she was diagnosed with HIV and started on ARV medicines. Dada's older sister was also tested but she does not have HIV/AIDS. The task of giving the medicine rigorously every 12 hours and caring for a sick little girl was too much of a job for her big sister and Dada's condition worsened. The welfare service found an aunt and a grandmother who were willing to help Dada's older sister and send her to school but no one wanted Dada. So she came to live at House of Hope and she is now an important part of the family. Although Dada is 4 years old she only weighs 8.5kg and her growth is stunted. She is blind and brain damaged due to an infection in her brain from AIDS, but she seems to have some hearing. Ms Peh the manager of House of Hope has taken her under her wing and from a child that showed little or no reaction to her surroundings, she now smiles and tries to make noises. Her contorted little limbs are much more supple as Ms Peh exercises and massages them every day.

Dada loves motion, and being swung around delights her. Ms Peh has developed muscles she didn't know she would need, as she throws Dada up in the air and catches her again, while Dada squeals and laughs. Dada also responds to sound such as the noise of the children laughing or the music on the radio, but it is unlikely that she will ever talk or walk. She only takes her food by sucking on a baby's bottle, so Ms Peh has blended some hideous concoctions which Dada loves. Sticky rice with liver and vegetables are blended together, tamarind juice and tomatoes and eggs and milk make up another bottle. The blended liquid is a vile colour, but it contains the nutrients Dada needs and Dada never refuses her bottle. It is wonderful to see how the smaller children accept her and talk with her, and climb all over her cot to see how she is. They don't notice her blindness, her deformed little body or her disabilities, they just see Dada who needs a friend and who is loved and cared for just the same as they are.



Moving on



When term starts for the new Thai school year in May 2014, there will be 11 teenagers moving on to study at new schools. This is a great achievement for so many of them. Nyl a 21 year old girl who was literally dying 8 years ago when she weighed 13 kg, has enrolled in college in Udon to study Forestry. Jay who has no one in the world when he was abandoned at Sarnelli House, and who has worked so hard at school, has been accepted into university to study Agriculture. The university campus is at Phrae many hundreds of kilometers away and he is nervous and scared about living there by himself, when all his life he has lived and slept surrounded by familiar friends. Two boys, one from the Jan and Oscar House and one from St Patrick's House who both had excellent marks were planning to go to Bangkok and finish their school in the prestigious Don Bosco school for boys. One of the boys was accepted and the other one was refused on the grounds that he had HIV. The stigma continues for these kids. But these are just some

of the teenagers who are beginning to get a taste for a new life away from the security of Sarnelli House. It has only been possible thanks to the generosity of donors and sponsor that these young adults can begin to reach their potential and start new lives with hope and confidence.



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used their names or identified them in photos.

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Written by Kate Introna, March 2014