

Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER

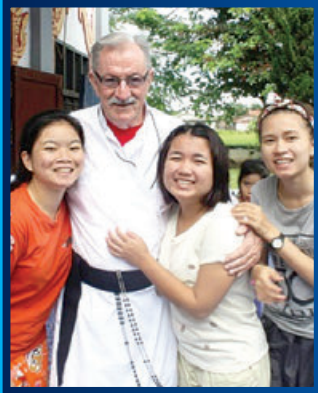


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Message from Fr Shea

Late in 2005, we were offered a piece of land behind the cemetery in the village of Don Wai. There was a small building there, and we bought the land reluctantly,

so as to do a villager a favor. But by late 2006, we built a two story home, and Gung and her husband Go moved there from a dank little room under Sarnelli House. It was by then apparent we had to construct a building for budding teen age girls. We finished Nazareth House, and blessed it in December, 2007.

But the teenagers had to wait, because in the village of Pai Si Tong, we had a building we called the House of Hope. It was our nursery, built for \$17,000 with money donated by folks from the St. Louis area. I take all the blame for a shoddy construction job. We were fighting rats, huge geckos, spiders, and bats. After a while, though, we did not find many of these rodents and reptiles around. But we decided the building was too small, and made plans to tear it down and build a two story nursery in its place.

Our nurse, Kate Introna, had her bedroom there at the time. When the workers went in to clear her room of furniture, they found out why we were not too bothered by rats and reptiles. Under Kate's bed slept a huge python! Kate said she would hear noises at night; rustling noises. The workers could not handle the python, so they had to shoot it. Thank God it had not gotten around to eat a baby.

In the meantime, we moved the denizens of the House of Hope to Nazareth House, until the new House of Hope was built. The girls finally moved into Nazareth House in April of 2009, and the rug rats departed to the new House of Hope. Since then, Gung and Go moved to their own house and property they owned in Pai Si Tong. In 2012, we renovated that house, and added bathrooms and showers, and a bakery. We had so many girls that we divided them between the two houses. I will leave it up to Kate to do her magic in explaining how the girls live and drive the housemothers nuts!

God bless you!

Nazareth House

Nazareth House which is situated a very short walk behind Sarnelli House in the village of Don Wai, is home to a motley crew of 23 teenage girls. The girls' ages range from 12 years old to 21 years old and more than half the girls living there have HIV/AIDS. Ms Nok is the house mother in charge, she also lives at



Nazareth House with the girls. She is their support, cheerleader, disciplinarian, driver and teacher all rolled into one. Mrs Fa and Mrs Taw also work at Nazareth House as cook and cleaner and general support for Ms Nok and the girls, they are locals from the village of Don Wai. Ms Nok has been working for Fr Shea for many years, she has worked at St Patrick's Home and Sarnelli House and at Nazareth House since it opened to teenage girls in 2009. A couple of times a year she needs a decent break away from all the dramas, cliques and hormones floating around and heads off to far flung destinations (usually her mother's house in the next village) to take a well-earned vacation.



In Nazareth House which is a two storey building where the sleeping quarters are upstairs, the girls sleep two to four to a bedroom and they have their own bathroom. A luxury after the days of living at Sarnelli House and Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls where there are shared bathrooms and large dormitories for the little girls to sleep in.



Because of illness affecting their learning ability and concentration, some of the girls have different levels of academic ability. One girl who is 20 years old, is still studying in Grade 9 at school – she is small for her age and looks only 16 years old but she is content to go to school and complete her Grade 9 studies. It is unlikely she will go onto further study, she will probably live and work at Sarnelli House which she considers family, for her years to come.

Nazareth House has seen some girls graduate and move on. Pen is now working as a house mother at St Patrick's Home after completing a massage, cooking and floral arrangement course at a vocational college in Udon Thani. Lyn is studying agriculture, Heaw is studying sports education and Gaew is studying accounting all in different colleges in Udon Thani, about 55 km from Nongkhai.

A working life is also part of the girls' routine and they are included in the work on Jomp's Farm, especially at the most important times of the year – rice planting and rice harvesting season. They whine and moan about heading out to the fields but quickly become resigned to their fate, and they really pull their weight and make it a lot of fun with their dramatics, teasing of each other and flirting with the boys. Planting rice in the mud is more acceptable as it is most often raining or overcast so the girls are not out in the sun all day. Despite this they are usually totally obscured by hats, long sleeved shirts and socks and gloves. Harvesting the rice is different as the rainy season is over, the sun is shining and the heat has been turned up. As well as worrying about the sun darkening their skin, there is the itch and the dust of the just cut rice stalks as they are cut and gathered up. The girls take it in turns to either wield the scythes or gather

the just cut rice and bundle it together to deposit it in a pile which will be picked up at the end of the day. This is long and laborious work but with frequent breaks and the rallying of the staff the work is eventually done over about 4 weekends. The girls also help out at planting vegetables depending on the season, raking leaves and debris and keeping their house and its environs clean and tidy.

Interested girls are learning to bake in the new bakery room in Don Wai. Sr Dominic from Khon Kaen has been



teaching them for almost a year now and they can put together some nice cookies and cupcakes in a hygienic manner. These disappear as soon as they are made, especially if the boys from Sarnelli House are lurking around pleading for a taste.

The girls have other interests as well - some like drawing and art and some like looking after the local dogs and cats that often breed close by. The girls take in a few pups and rear them, then there are little, ratty looking dogs being spoiled and pampered and yapping impertinently at visitors, much to the girls' delight. Sport is another interest the girls have and playing basketball in the afternoons in the school holidays is a favorite, especially if there are volunteers around to play with them. Joining the boys on the football field after school has also become popular with the girls, even for girls who are not so interested in sport. With the arrival of the village boys on motorbikes to join in the game, the reason soon becomes clear why normally lethargic teenagers, who can barely walk anywhere without numerous stops to complain, are suddenly avid football players. However the favourite pass time apart from playing on Facebook, is of course Karaoke. There is one machine that does the rounds of all the houses on special days. Fr Ole sets it up for the girls and it is a long night. Luckily there are no close neighbors around, and the dogs usually disappear as the girls belt out the latest saccharine, sweet Thai pop song.



Jae

More than half the girls living at Nazareth House are orphans, some have suffered terrible physical abuse and others, although they do not have HIV, have parents who have died from it. They all have their own story to tell. Jae is a seventeen year old girl who first came to Sarnelli House in November 2009. She is from Kalasin province about 3 hours from Nongkhai. Both Jae's parents died from HIV/AIDS when she was young and she was sent to live with her grandmother who did not know how to care for the sick child. After many years



of illness Jae became critically ill and finally was taken to Kalasin Hospital. In most of the hospitals in Thailand relatives provide all the care – they sleep under or beside the hospital bed and care for the sick relative – they wash them, feed them and give them their tablets. Jae was a little sick, frightened 12 year old girl with no one to care for her and look after her in hospital. Luckily a very kind doctor and some nurses went out of their way to take it in turns to care for Jae. She was diagnosed with AIDS caused by extensive TB in her lungs and in her lymph glands as well as numerous other infections that her body had succumbed to because of her poor immune system. The TB infection had broken through the lymph in her neck onto her skin and was causing an ugly, suppurating wound which she needed to have dressed a few times a day. Jae had to wait in hospital for 6 weeks until the social services contacted Sarnelli House to take her in. When she first came, she lived at Sarnelli House for the first four years, sharing a big dormitory and having her health continually monitored as she grew stronger and the ARV and anti TB medications started to work. Now Jae has been living at Nazareth House for the last year and she is a robust seventeen year old with scars on her neck that will never quite fade and an appetite that is never ending. Her reading and writing are poor from years of missed school, but she is a happy, affectionate girl who in her head is younger than her years, but who is starting to develop a healthy interest in boys. So another hormonal teenage girl joins the bunch at Nazareth House and Ms Nok is planning her next getaway.

University Life on the Outreach Program

August was the beginning of the new university year in Thailand and one of the girls from the Outreach Program has commenced her surprising new university life. Khaw Fan is nineteen years old and both Khaw Fan's parents have HIV/AIDS and were diagnosed in 2008 when Khaw



Fan was 13 years old. Because they were poor and sick they couldn't work or get access to treatment easily. The Outreach Program supported Khaw Fan and her sister through their school years by a school scholarship. Last year when Khaw Fan came to collect her scholarship money for her final year of school, Br Keng who manages the higher education of all the teenagers at Sarnelli House and the Outreach Program, asked Khaw Fan what she wanted to go on to study. Her ambitions were not big – she thought she would find work in a factory to try and make enough money to help support her parents. Br Keng pointed out that her grades were very good and that she should consider studying at university. Khaw Fan was surprised but tentative as she knew her parents would never be able to afford to send her to university. Her father sells processed meat balls on a stick on a little cart on the street and her mother sews clothes from home when she is strong enough, making collectively about 10,000 baht (US\$315) a month. Br Keng reassured her that with a scholarship from the Outreach Program Khaw Fan would be able to go onto further studies. After numerous entrance exams, sorting out admission paperwork and medical examinations Khaw Fan was accepted to study a 4 year degree course in Public Health at Srinthorn College in Khon Kaen. Public Health is a fairly new discipline in Thailand and much needed, and Khaw Fan is guaranteed a job after she graduates. Br Keng finally drove Khaw Fan and her parents to Srinthorn College last month to enroll and to settle her into her dormitory. Her parents are so proud of their daughter and cannot believe that she has been given this opportunity. The scholarship funded through the Outreach Program is US\$1800 for one year which includes university fees, living expenses, and accommodation costs.

Another rainy season has almost passed and the

precious rice – the staple food of the people of Thailand has been planted on Jomp's Farm, thanks to the efforts of the staff and big kids at Sarnelli House. The big fat mother sow has birthed twelve little piglets for the last time and has now gone to pig heaven. So far the children have evaded dengue fever despite an abundance of rain and mosquitoes, and visits to the dentist and doctor continue on a regular basis trying to prevent and treat the usual childhood illnesses and the ones related to over one hundred kids living together in rural Thailand. The latest bout of injuries have been caused by playing barefoot football after school. Finally, a mix of humidity and fungal infections has created havoc in the groin and feet of the teenage boys, requiring frequent visits to the clinic in Don Wai. But all in all, everyone has survived to happily and gratefully welcome Fr Mike back home.



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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, September 2014