



RETURNING HOME

The purpose of Sarnelli House has always been to provide shelter, love, an education and a new life for children in need. Many of the children who have arrived at Sarnelli House over the years have been significantly damaged both physically and emotionally. Despite this, some have gone on to leave Sarnelli House and carve out their own lives in Thai society. The very fortunate ones have done so after completing university or vocational studies. This year there have been three young adults from Sarnelli House who have graduated from universities around Thailand. They now have degrees in Business Management, Public Health and Psychology. What a great new start in life for them. As many families know, the love and care of a child does not stop once they have gained an education. Sarnelli House tries to be the family many children have never had, and so, is always open and welcoming to the young adults who can't quite make it in the world outside. This is reflected in the paid staff working at Sarnelli House. A total of 14 young adults who grew up at Sarnelli House are now employed in various roles. In fact, the policy of Sarnelli House is to offer employment to its own "graduates" as the first preference. Of those 14, ten have issues that prevent them from living and working independently. Their diminished ability to read or write because of learning difficulties and profound speech problems arising from the effects of AIDS as very small children, and the early ARV medications and their side effects contribute to their easily exploitable natures. This made living and working outside Sarnelli House too insurmountable a challenge for them. Some of these young adults never left Sarnelli House, but now work in the only family they have known. Others have returned, for many reasons including abusive relationships, their inability to keep a job, or because they were escaping lives of misery with relatives who used them like indentured servants. Others had partners who were



Message from Fr. Shea

Many events at Sarnelli House were not planned; they just happened. Some people are perplexed that we could not foresee the return of some of our kids, after unsuccessful outings. So many of our older kids leave Sarnelli, savoring freedom and the opportunity to call their own shots. Most do very well, but Redemptorists have always held a special place for the weaker and those incapable of making the right decisions. I will admit that some of this might be the fault of training at Sarnelli.

Most of the children from Sarnelli or our Outreach Program do well after they leave us. Some come back with gifts for the children, a few others come pregnant and destitute. We receive them all, and try not to be judgmental and also to train the staff not to be judging or despising these kids. Some kids leave us, and if they are afflicted with AIDS but neglect or refuse to take their antiretroviral medicine, return gravely sick and debilitated.

Kate does a splendid job describing the experiences of some of our kids who made it back to us. We are happy to be a place of refuge for them.

Fr Mike Shea C.Ss.R

in the midst of illegal drug problems and were drawn into using and selling drugs, and for some the persistent stigma of HIV was destroying their relationships. A number of boys who completed junior high school at Rosario School, Viengkuk and who weren't academically equipped for further study, went home to extended families to live and find work. One particular boy came back to Sarnelli House after a month. The family had spent the money he had gone home with, and sent him back. The fact that he was living with HIV was a huge obstacle for the family in accepting the boy.

Another young man, Toey, was desperate to go home and live with his grandmother and his aunt when he graduated from junior high school. This young man is mentally slow but able bodied and good natured, with a simple all encompassing optimism. He arrived at Sarnelli House when he was four years old, with both his parents dead from AIDS. He was a terribly sick and neglected boy, who hadn't started any treatment for AIDS and was lucky to survive to four years of age. Through the ARV medication that he received at Sarnelli House, and the loving care and friendships he made, he finished his junior high school education when he was 19 years old. However, he had few of the skills that boys years younger, would have on finishing Grade 9, or the academic capacity to go onto further study. Toey had been re-introduced to his grandmother when he was 16 years old. All the children who are orphans at Sarnelli House, are reconnected with extended family where possible. Some families are delighted and overjoyed, thinking the child had died of AIDS years before. Others are more ambivalent and some are not interested at all. Toey spent a few weeks of the school holidays every year at grandma's home. Like all the children at Sarnelli House, what he most wanted was his own family. The Outreach Team took him home and talked with his grandma and aunt who had accepted his HIV. He had a place to sleep, on the



floor, on a mat with a mosquito net over it, and he was happy. His aunt went to work and bought food back and looked after him. He remembered to take his ARV medications every day, and the Outreach Team were in contact with him. Over a few months however, things turned a little haywire. His grandma's benign drinking problem escalated and she would send Toey out to buy booze, and encourage him to drink with her. She spent most of the money her daughter earned on drink. Toey was not happy seeing his grandma drunk and became distressed. After some time, his aunt changed jobs and moved out of home, but still sent money home. Toey was put upon, more and more by his grandma and began to forget to take his ARV medications on time and became more distressed. He was in a risky situation, exposed to alcohol and neglect. However, he contacted the Outreach Team and begged to come back home to Sarnelli House. He was bought back of course and, after talk with his aunt about the situation it turned out that



she had known of the problem from the beginning, but declined to talk about it, when Toey first went home to them. Toey took a while to readjust to living at Sarnelli House as he was 20 years old on his return. He had to live in the dormitory with the junior high school boys, but not go to school with them. The majority of his friends his age, had moved on to work or study and had left Sarnelli House. Both he and Sarnelli House had to discern where and what was the best place for him. Gradually he found himself working with the handymen team. They were happy to have another able bodied person on their team. The two young men took Toey on, and with great kindness they taught him simple jobs. He is now a paid member of the team, helping to repair and make items for the houses and the farm. He is always smiling and has learnt many things from the more experienced men. Toey has found his niche and will remain a part of the Sarnelli House family.

Despite the best efforts of everyone concerned, some young adults make choices which seem to be a backward step in their young lives. A young woman, who was orphaned by AIDS and who came to Sarnelli House when she was 5 years old in 2003, herself sick from AIDS, has grown up funny, smart and sassy. She has a personality that is able to laugh at herself, but a quick and judgmental tongue that has got her into trouble. However, she is utterly charming and able to win the most hard hearted over. She has always been very

emotionally needy, latching on to friends and adults who could meet her needs. Unlike many young Thai girls, she has a curiosity of the greater world and she has many designs for her future. One is marrying an old foreigner and becoming rich! She had made up for her poor school grades



by sheer personality. She started training for hospitality work and finished her internship in a five star hotel in Phuket, an island way down in the south of Thailand. With the big world open to her and a chance of full time work with triple the salary of what she could ever make in Northeast Thailand, she turned it down and went in search of an old boyfriend. She then found out she was pregnant and came back to Sarnelli House looking for help. She hadn't taken her ARV medications for three months prior to her pregnancy, and she was in need of good medical care to ensure the baby had the best chance in life. She will stay at Sarnelli House and she will have her baby at Nongkhai Hospital. After this, like many girls from Northeast Thailand she plans to leave the baby with Grandpa, or in this care Grandpa aka Fr Mike and the House of Hope, and she wants to head off back to her boyfriend who lives in a poor village far from the city. She is hopeful she can find day work in the fields or in a small noodle shop. She will still need to attend the hospital for her appointments and her medications and the Outreach Program will support her for this.

In a rational sense she is letting a career that would have given her opportunities for a better life, slip her by for a boy with little prospects and a baby she does not really want. But to her mind she is seeking love and a person who is uniquely hers, and this trumps all the monetary, career and maternal opportunities that have come her way. Supporting damaged young adults like her is part of what the Sarnelli family does.

OUTREACH NEWS

As well as the three newly graduated university students from Sarnelli House there is a fourth who also graduated in 2019. She was a girl who was supported on the Outreach Program, and who now has her Nursing Degree. Her parents first came to Fr Mike in 2008 when she was 13 years old. They asked for financial assistance to put their daughter through school. Both the parents

are living with HIV and find permanent work hard to come by. Both work hard in day jobs and have only ever asked Fr Mike for help with their daughter's education. This year they are so proud of her achievement, and are so grateful for all the help she has been given. Help even from people they have never met, like her sponsors and donors to the Outreach Program. What a positive difference these generous people have made in this family's life

In a previous newsletter, five years ago, a young woman named Na, from the Outreach Program was introduced. Her struggle for survival, while living with HIV, and bringing up her son was recounted. Since then she has split up with the father of her son. Domestic violence was the main cause. Na tried to find a job to support herself, and the Outreach Program introduced her to the Good Shepherd Sisters and their program of creating livelihoods for people living with HIV. However, she left there very soon, not liking the routine or the work. Jobs as waitresses didn't work out, she ended up taking her son



with her, as there was no childcare available to her. Na developed severe psoriasis, a skin condition that eventually required phototherapy treatment. She needed this twice a week at the university hospital in Khon Kaen a three-hour bus ride, one way. Her son had started nursery school and Na received a scholarship from the Outreach Program to pay for his school clothes, bag and books every term.

The Outreach Program also supported her bus fare and food money for the phototherapy treatment days, and the cost of the treatment. The treatment continued for many months with small improvements and then recurrences. The local hospital was contacted to check on Na's ARV drug adherence. They responded with the news that she hadn't attended any appointments for the last year, which meant she hadn't been taking her ARV medications. A crisis point was reached when Na was confronted with this after assuring everyone that she had been taking them. She then went on to develop neurological symptoms of difficulty walking and talking, as a result of staying off her ARV medications. She tried to stay at home and manage, but her illness became too much for her, and she agreed to be admitted to the Good Shepherd Sisters' Garden of Friendship. This is a refuge for people with AIDS. There they make sure people take their medications on time and they incorporate physiotherapy and educational activities into the patient's daily lives with the aim of returning them to their homes in a more independent state. Besides her precarious health status, the other issue for Na was what to do with her son while she was at The Garden receiving care. She had never asked for her son to be cared for at Sarnelli House. In fact,

she had always made it clear that she wanted them to be together. But the insidious and severe nature of AIDS had taken away her independence. There were no government handouts or safety net, or even sympathetic relatives to help her care for her boy. Finally she asked for him to live at St Patrick's House which is home to grade school boys at Sarnelli House. He was of course welcomed warmly by the other 14 boys living there. Every Saturday, her son who is six years old, is driven over to visit his mother at The Garden of Friendship. He stays the night, and on Sunday he is picked up and returned to St Patricks House to attends nursery school with the other boys on Monday. Na's future is uncertain, but the goals of care remain to keep mother and son together wherever possible.

Another Outreach Program follow up from a previous newsletter last year, about a baby boy born with hydrocephalus, has some sad news. His teenage mother had gone off to find what work she could, with her new boyfriend, and the grandparents were left holding the baby. This is not unusual in many circumstances around the world. However, Baby Tong needed extensive medical care and was getting it at three different hospitals. His grandparents who are both not yet 50 years old, and who had not completed high school, loved this baby boy with his extreme deformity and multiple

medical problems. They themselves lived in a poorly built cement brick house where the walls barely reached the rotten iron roof, and where the padded down dirt floor, was thoroughfare for dogs, cats and occasionally chickens. Baby Tong needed constant feeding, his head was so heavy he had to be cradled carefully to drink and sleep. The Outreach Program provided formula milk for Tong and transport money for hospital appointments. He was in and out of hospital, and even though he had an internal shunt to drain the fluid from his brain to his abdomen he kept getting infections in it. His grandparents had to reduce their work of itinerant laboring and even though they kept some pigs they had not land to farm. Once a month eggs, rice, milk and tinned fish were provided by the Outreach Program to ease their burden of finding food. There was no question that they wanted to care for Baby Tong themselves, he was well and truly loved. In the last few months he had started to put on weight and become more responsive. However late last month he died suddenly at home with his grandparents. He was 15 months old and he quietly and quickly slipped away. The grandparents were so upset and miss him badly but also are painfully realistic about what a limited future he had. To be able to provide aid to people who have few choices in life but who consistently choose love and family is a true privilege.



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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 Intra, August 2019