

# Reaching for the Stars

## Message from Father Shea



Back in 1998, I was novice master for the vice province of Thailand. It was my sixth and last year in the job. Not only did I have the novitiate but also small churches in various hamlets along the Mekong River. It was in this milieu that I met so many poor souls suffering from HIV/AIDS. Among my three novices in that final year, was a young lad, Brother Joe Ole, who is now Fr. Joe Ole, and my heir apparent! I completed my work as novice master, and went directly to some parishes where I did work for HIV/AIDS infected people.

When we began working closely with these families, and when the good Lord sent us Kate Introna, a nurse from Australia, we were able to begin saving lives. Children we picked up for the newly built Sarnelli House were abandoned, sick, malnourished and often unable to respond to any act of human kindness. At that time, we expected that all of them would eventually die, and too many of them actually did depart. But Kate was able to first get AntiRetroViral (ARV) medicines from Doctors without Borders, and later, finally, from the Thai Government. The kids slowly began to respond to love and the medicine. Several dedicated doctors helped Kate, and suddenly, we had a pack of urchins that began really enjoying life and had hope. They ate like wolves. Their skin lesions and other signs of HIV/AIDS gradually disappeared. It was time to look for schools which would take them. It wasn't easy. These days, there is a law that schools must take children, regardless of HIV/AIDS. The runts weren't really into education for a while but for the most part, they began to bear down and study. We will let Kate tell some of their stories.

God bless you all

Fr Mike Shea C.S.s R

## Staying together

In 1999 when Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls, Viengkuk was opened, Fr Shea accepted a family of 4 siblings and their cousin none of whom had HIV/AIDS but all of whom were severely affected by the disease. They were from an area of Northeast Thailand that spoke a different dialect from the one along the Mekong River. Their parents had died from HIV/AIDS only months before and they were staying with an uncle who did not have enough money to feed them or send them to school. The 2 girls Der aged 11 years old and Joy 9 years old arrived first. They were quiet and well mannered and gave little hint of the trauma they must have suffered watching their parents grow ill and die from HIV/AIDS. They gradually came to fit into the routine of the new house at Viengkuk and then they began to befriend the new girls who came to stay, many of them who had been abused. Later they told Fr Shea of their two older brothers Oat and Off and a cousin Jack who were also living with their uncle in poverty and hunger. When the girls had left the uncle to come to Viengkuk the 3 boys had been sent down to Bangkok to work in construction because money was not available to even feed them. Fr Shea called them back and when St Patrick's Boys Home was built



**The after school routine of washing school socks at Viengkuk**



Grade 9 graduating class at Rosario School 2012

from donations from the Marist Fathers Australia, the 2 brothers Off aged 15 years, Oat 13 years old and their cousin Jack 12 years old started their new life together. The boys were relieved and grateful to be returning to school and to be rescued from the hard labour and bad conditions of construction work in Bangkok. Together all 4 siblings and their cousin attended Rosario School. The boys helped out in the rice fields in the holidays and fed and watered the pigs and chickens. The girls helped clean and tidy house, learnt how to cook and helped with the younger girls. Over the years they had their teenage moments and their lives were not perfect but through it all their aim was to study hard and to get ahead.

Now, Off the eldest boy has successfully completed his



Der and Jack

degree in teaching and is currently a full time teacher in a respected school in Udon Thani. He comes and visits Mother Wan from St Patrick's in the holidays and he is a great inspiration to the boys living there. Oat is in Bangkok working and has not yet finished his studies. Jack will graduate in November this year with a degree in electronics and telecommunications from Sakon Nakhon University. Der has completed her bachelor degree and like Jack she will graduate in November from the same university. She is now employed in a private school where she is working as a receptionist and teaching students how to use computers in Udon Thani. She makes 8,000 baht (approx US\$250.00) a month which is an average wage and which she is so excited to receive. Der shares a room with her sister Joy who is in her third year of a degree in management at university in Udon Thani.

On reflecting on his 12 years living at St Patrick's, Jack who will graduate from university in November this year, says "I am very proud about what I have been able to achieve. And I am most thankful to Fr Shea who became my father when I didn't have one and my sponsors who helped me."

## Different Directions

Some other girls have taken an entirely different direction. June (not her real name) also grew up in Our Lady of Refuge Home for Girls from the age of 7. Her parents were poor and had separated and each went their own way abandoning June. However, June did well in her studies and became one of the outstanding students at Rosario School. She graduated and enrolled in JBAC Business College in Nongkhai to study accounting. June was always ready to help out on the



**ChatChai is not afraid to step into some big shoes**

weekends in the office at Don Wai, and Dtim and Jiib who worked there, realised how good she was at Math and supervised her work on the accounts. June would always be the first to volunteer at the end of each month when about 60 children from the Outreach Program came to write their thank you letters to their sponsors and be given their school money. June would organise games and help with preparing and giving out lunch.



**Ban and Gao from the Jan and Oscar House**

She was a beautiful traditional Thai dancer and she was happy to dance for parties and special occasions. June was affectionate, helpful and she always took an interest and loved to cuddle the little ones at House of Hope and the smaller girls at Viengkuk. When June was 17 years old, she didn't come home from school for a few nights, then she began to miss out on school days at college. After much worrying by the house mothers and Fr Shea and discussions with June, she eventually disclosed that she was in love and wanted to leave school and live with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend had previously been in jail for selling drugs and used them as well. His first wife had left him, and his mother was caring for his small daughter. Despite repeated talks June she moved in with him and distanced herself from her friends. She still came to visit Fr Shea occasionally. He gave her encouragement and money to finish her education. On one of these visits she was dishevelled and she seemed to have lost all pride in herself, she wept thinking what Fr Shea might think of her, he told her he could never not love her or be ashamed of her as she was like a daughter to him. He encouraged her again to return to school and assured her that Sarnelli House would support her to finish her education. Currently June has not gone back to school and her boyfriend was arrested and sentenced to jail again. She found herself pregnant and she now has a baby girl. June cares for her boyfriend's 2 children and the house she lives in is a wooden shack where there are always young men hanging around. She has resumed her friendship with some of the girls at Viengkuk and she assures them she is happy in her situation. June had so much potential for lifting herself out of a history of poverty, instead at this time she chose to tread a different path.

## Opportunities

Tip (not his real name) is now 19 years old and he came to Sarnelli House when he was 7 years old in 2000. Both his parents had died from HIV/AIDS and so his relatives took him in to their home to care for him. However people in the village were afraid of HIV/AIDS and they shunned him, his relatives abused him and he was eventually rescued by Fr Larry Patin C.S.s.R who worked in the area and heard of the boy's situation. When he came to Sarnelli House Tip was thin and malnourished and he had cigarette burns and bruises all over his back.

Pip (not his real name) is now 17 years old, he came to Sarnelli House in 2002 when he was 8 years old. His mother knew she was dying from HIV/AIDS, and sick and ill as she was, and with a great deal of dignity she came to Fr Shea to ask him to care for Pip once she had died and had been cremated. Both boys started their



### Sharing a quiet spot for homework

treatment for HIV/AIDS in 2003. Pip, unlike Tip was much sicker and quickly developed meningitis a life threatening condition for a child with HIV/AIDS. He was in Intensive Care at Nongkhai Hospital for weeks and it was doubtful if he would survive. Yet against all the odds he did survive, but he has permanent deafness in one ear as a consequence of his brush with death.

Tip and Pip went to school together at Rosario School and lived at Sarnelli House when there were 70 children living there with HIV/AIDS. They were the older boys and most of the time they set a good example to the younger ones. They both graduated from Rosario School and moved into the Jan and Oscar House for teenage boys living with HIV/AIDS, when it was opened in 2010.

Tip was always interested in music and computers and used to shadow one of the staff when he was called on to repair computers in the office or set up music for parties and dancing practice. Tip eventually took over

the role of resident DJ for Sarnelli House, which gave him a certain status. Tip grew tall and was fairer skinned than his friends and so he became the love target for a slew of infatuated girls, however he remained cool and seemingly unaffected by his fame. As the oldest boy at the Jan and Oscar House he has the respect of his peers and he can pull the less well behaved boys into line when needed. Pip is more relaxed with a happy, laughing disposition. He is always cheerful and takes life easily. He has no pretensions to pale, slim beauty but he has many friends and he is liked by all. Both Tip and Pip are studying in their second year at technical college in Nongkhai. Pip is studying to be an electrician and Tip is studying computers. This year as part of their study they have to gain 5 months work experience in their respective fields.

They have been given a wonderful opportunity along with 2 other friends from Sarnelli House to live and work for their 5 months on the island of Samui - some 800 km from Nongkhai. Their work experience will expose them to an environment far removed from the rural, time flexible atmosphere of Nongkhai. Thanks to the financial support of donors from The Netherlands who pay for a weekly living allowance for them and the cost of travel to the island, and to the generosity of the General Manager of the well known resort on the island, they have a great opportunity ahead of them.

What the rest of the children at Sarnelli House will eventually make of their lives is in their hands. Some will live out their lives at Sarnelli House unable to leave because of learning and behavioural problems caused by HIV/AIDS. Others will soar and fly far from home, and others will probably settle to a rural life as their parents have done before them. But all will be given opportunities to flourish, whatever their capacity, thanks to the generosity of donors, sponsors, volunteers and staff.

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#### For more donation details see

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

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Written by  
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**Sarnelli House**