



## Message from Fr. Shea



In this latest newsletter Kate writes of the effects of COVID-19 on our staff and kids, and the new kids joining us. In the short time since Kate wrote this, we are taking in two little girls, one 5 years old, and one 6 years old, who have been molested by family members.

Despite all the precautions, the provinces along the Mekong river have not been hit by COVID-19. Since Thailand has been through other viruses, such as SARS and Swine Fever, etc. curfews and lockdowns spring up at the first sign of infections. Nongkhai has no known COVID-19 outbreaks, but you would never know it, seeing people wearing masks, washing hands regularly, etc. One good thing, not many kids with colds or flu this year.

This would be a good time to thank folks who have been so kind and generous with the kids. We are blessed with people who have not forgotten us. Many people have relatives who came down with the coronavirus, or even they themselves were ill from the virus. Many saw relatives and friends die from COVID-19. We pray for them, and for all of you. Stay safe and healthy!

Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R

# THE YEAR THAT WAS

In the first months of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Thailand, suspended all international tourism, reduced non-essential domestic travel and enacted numerous curfews. These measures combined to contain the spread of the virus within Thailand. As a consequence of them, businesses and tourism slowed to a halt, profoundly affecting Thailand's economy. Obviously Sarnelli House has also felt the effects of COVID-19, both financially with a reduction in the amount of donations received, and practically in an increase in the number of children coming to Sarnelli House. More has had to be done with less.

Practically, 10 new children have been referred by the Thai Social Services in the last 6 months. All are under 10 years of age and have already suffered abuse and abandonment. Despite Thailand being the first country in the Asia Pacific region to effectively eliminate mother to child transmission of HIV, children born with HIV are still arriving to Sarnelli House. Two little boys who are siblings and are under 4 years of age have come. Their mother died from AIDS and their father is in prison for drug dealing. The eldest boy has been diagnosed with HIV while the younger must have further health checks to determine his HIV status. Another 6-year-old boy who is an orphan and born with HIV has also arrived for care.

As well as children coming in to Sarnelli House in 2020, teenagers have graduated from schools and young adults are moving out. Six students, all of them girls, finished Grade 12, and two of them will go onto study at university, three on to vocational school to study for a diploma and one to beauty school. One boy has completed his vocational certificate course and will now study for a diploma at the same school. Seven girls have completed their vocational diploma courses, and four have left Sarnelli House and are working, while three have gone on to further studies. Finally, two students have graduated from University with degrees in Computers and Fisheries and are trying to find work this year. Congratulations to them all, 5 of these 9 graduates are living with HIV and have overcome many



obstacles to achieve their current education status. However not all teenagers make it to the end of their studies. One girl left before she had finished her last year at school and is working in Pattaya and living with her boyfriend. Another two girls who are sixteen years old have been relocated to the Thai Social Services, Mother Child Home, for psychiatric and psychological reasons. We will keep in contact with them all.

In response to the financial impact of COVID-19 on Sarnelli House, the children and staff have become more vigilant about



electricity and transport costs, and the organic garden has come into its own, and is helping to reduce food costs. It is located on the 12-rai farm, adjacent to where Fr Mike's house is situated. Ms. Peh had invested all her energy and skills into creating a most impressive vegetable and fruit garden. The small pathways must be navigated carefully, as there are string beans hanging down, cucumbers sprawling across paths, bunches of green bananas ripening on lush banana plants, and bright yellow sunflowers at head height, bringing colour and delight to the eye. Eggplants have been planted and of course, chilli and tomato shrubs are thriving. From the fishing wire latticed high over the paths hang big green gourds. Pumpkins are also growing plump and round on the ground, and on elevated tables healthy green lettuce is grown in water. Parsley, coriander, garlic, onions, and lemongrass are being nurtured for the kitchens. During the dry season, Ms. Peh was pumping water from the only fishpond on the property, using a solar powered pump – the first one to be used at Sarnelli House. The fishpond was drying out with this new need but thankfully, very generous benefactors financed two new wells and pumps, and they will now provide irrigation to the garden all year round. With the increased produce coming from the organic garden, the girls from Our Lady of Refuge home were rostered on to work every morning of the long school holidays, Ms. Peh would pick them up at 7am before the heat became too intense, and they would spend the morning



watering and harvesting crops. They would be assured of a hearty lunch using the garden's produce and made by Ms. Peh. Her culinary skills are legendary and the wisdom and advice she imparts is hopefully absorbed by the young people.

Two of Ms. Peh's workers who have grown up at Sarnelli House are now in their mid-twenties. They are both living with HIV. Sarnelli House employs them and they share a little house on site. As well as HIV, one is intellectually challenged and the other is living with a severe speech deficit. However, they have flourished as part of the 12-rai team. The boys are often seen standing in the back of the pick-up truck, going to various children's homes delivering fresh fruit and vegetables, gloriously dirty from hard work with faces shining.

As 2020 progressed, universities and colleges closed and



workplaces were shuttered up, and many of our young adults had to come back to Sarnelli House. After 2 weeks quarantine in Charlene House, they returned to temporary accommodation at Nazareth House for the girls, and Gary and Janet Smith House for the boys. Many of them went on to help at different children's houses, providing activities for the younger ones to keep them occupied in the extended school holidays. When schools finally reopened in July 2020, jobs on the farm and at different houses were found for a small handful of the returned young adults. Almost a year later, they are still working as gardeners at Charlene House and the priests' house in Don Wai, on the farm and as homework tutors and role models at the smaller children's houses.

More generally, the COVID-19 restrictions meant the arrival of visitors and volunteers to Sarnelli House was suspended. Lessons in handwashing hygiene and social distancing were taught very seriously and have been a great success. A regimen of monitoring all the children's temperatures began every day. It was a great opportunity for one of our girls, who is in her third year of nursing training, to get some hands-on experience. The children's houses were deep cleansed, and the children participated in all the cleaning. Thanks to kind donors, there was enough soap and alcohol solution for all. Wearing face masks had been accepted as normal attire in Thailand, even before COVID-19. Masks were initially bought, and many were donated



to Sarnelli House. As more were needed, the girls at Our Lady of Refuge started to make cloth face masks themselves, using the sewing machines at their house. They took apart old masks for a pattern and made their own prototype. These were a great success, and the girls were rightly proud of their contribution, as they are still used by all the children and staff.

## OAT

Seven-year-old Oat was one of the children who came to Sarnelli House in 2020. Oat was born with HIV, his mother was from Laos, and his father was a Thai national, who was 60 years old at the time of his birth. Oat was born at home as the family could not manage the hospital costs and he was not registered with the Thai government services at birth. His mother began to get sick about a year after Oat's birth. She did not seek treatment, but as she became sicker, Oat's father sought out the Outreach



Program as he could not work while caring for his wife, so could not afford to buy milk for his son. On a home visit, the Outreach Program immediately sent Oat's mother to hospital, reassured her husband that her hospital expenses would be looked after, and enrolled Oat in the milk program at Sarnelli House. Oat and his father were taken to Srinagarind Hospital, Khon Kean for assessment and treatment of his HIV. He was immediately started on lifelong ARV (AntiRetroViral) treatment, which had to be purchased by the Outreach Program. Oat's

mother deteriorated in hospital and was diagnosed with TB. She did improve somewhat and was sent home, but at home she could not swallow all her tablets for both TB and HIV. She died not long after in Nongkhai Hospital when Oat was 3 years old.

Oat's father owned an old tuk tuk vehicle, and he drove around villages and collected garbage, that he took home and sorted through for recyclables. He had no gloves to protect him and he received a pittance for the work. Their home was a bare, rented cement floored box, with the smell of refuse everywhere. Oat's father was diligent about giving him his medicine on time. He was illiterate, but he remembered the doses and times of all the medicines. When Oat was 4 years old, he started school at the local nursery school. This didn't last long however, as the school found out that Oat had HIV, and they refused to have him at their school. The landlord then evicted the little family when he found out too. Reluctantly Oat and his father went to live at a relative's house. The new accommodation was far enough away that no one knew about Oat's HIV diagnosis. The Outreach Program visited them and started to plan how Oat could apply for Thai ID papers. A DNA test from Oat's father and Oat was obtained to confirm that he was the father. After many months the results came back, and with shock and then resignation Oat's father learnt that he wasn't Oat's father. Despite this awful news he was determined that nothing would change his relationship with Oat, and he continued to try and provide for his son. Br Keng and Ms. Noi worked hard and were successful in obtaining a Laos passport for Oat. He was now entitled to free ARV medicine from Laos. Oat's father would make the journey over the border to pick up his son's medicine every three months. Then in late 2019 Oat's father suddenly died of a massive stroke. The Outreach Program quickly visited Oat and found his aunt caring for him. Long hours were spent with her, teaching her about Oat's medicine. She also couldn't read or write, and it was a struggle for her that she wasn't really invested in. The relatives decided they did not want to care for Oat, and wanted to hand him to Thai Social Services. After an assessment, Oat was referred to Sarnelli House to live. He now resides at St

Patrick's House. He has his ARV medicine given to him twice a day by his housemothers, and he is taken every three months to the hospital at Khon Kaen for his HIV checkup and to collect his medications. He has settled in well to St Patrick's and he is a funny and happy boy despite all he has been through. He has friends his own age that he delights in, and he can always be found attached to a little gang of schoolboys concocting games.

As this is the first newsletter since March 2020, apologies are in order. COVID-19 has partly been to blame, but ill health and bereavement have also been involved. It is with hope for a brighter future that this Australian and her Irish husband will return to Sarnelli House in 2021 in time for the next newsletter. We would again like to pass on our sincere condolences to all our friends, sponsors, donors and benefactors all over the world who have lost loved ones over the past year. And also to thank everyone for their ongoing support and for reaching out to us all during these isolated times.

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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, February 2021