

Sarnelli House

NEWSLETTER

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June 2023



Message from Fr. Shea

In this issue, Kate writes about our volunteers. Since both Kate and her husband Brian have been our volunteers for the longest time of anyone, she well knows the problems and blessings and satisfaction of working with children; some abandoned at birth, others later in life; all of whom would be bereft of love and attention, if not for Sarnelli House, and its Thai staff and foreign volunteers. From young people, especially from the Lutheran church in Oberhausen to Catholic youth from Redemptorist Volunteer Ministries in Bonn, from long time volunteers from Maastricht in Holland and young just trained doctors from the University of Wisconsin, from older volunteers like Debbie Willis from England and Jim Snell from Wisconsin; they all bring something special and needed to the children of Sarnelli House..

God Bless you all

Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R

The Stuff of Sarnelli House

There is just six months of the year remaining and the children returned to school in May for the first term of the new school year. They looked tidy, clean and enthusiastic as they climbed aboard the Sarnelli House school trucks. The children experienced their school holidays in the middle of the hot season, and this year the hot season lived up to its name with temperatures in the 40Cs for weeks. Rising early offered no respite from the relentless heat and in the afternoons there was no relief either, making nights very uncomfortable as kids moved down from their beds to sleep on the cooler tile floors. Fans whirled all night and all day, and the line for the drink cooler grew as kids were encouraged to drink plenty and often. The swimming pool behind the House of Hope was, as always, a great treat for the children, and even though the pool water heated up, the children didn't seem to mind. In April, the highlight of the holidays for most of the children and staff was the festival of Songkran or the Thai New Year. After three long years of cancellations due to the Covid 19 pandemic it was a time of celebration where water was thrown and work was suspended for three whole days. With the arrival of the rainy season this month, planning turns to all things agricultural. Preparing rice paddies and vegetable and fruit gardens, building chicken coops and cow sheds, and planting rice have all taken centre stage.



A Visit Worth Waiting For

While the children were counting down the days to their exams and school holidays, two newly qualified doctors from the University of Wisconsin, USA were warmly welcomed to Sarnelli House in February. Their arrival was the culmination of almost three years of planning. The connection to Sarnelli House for one of them began with the annual Ceboride fundraiser. This bike ride was started in 2000 by Sam and Molly, relatives of Fr Shea. It was a 126 mile/200km trek in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin and continued annually until 2016. The Ceboride raised a lot of money for Sarnelli House from its small and very generous base of riders and sponsors. This helped immensely with the cost of medications and health care for the children. In 2014, a young aspiring doctor named Madi joined and completed the



Ceboride and continued to ride in it until 2016. In 2019, as a first year medical student, she contacted Sarnelli House to ask if she could visit as she was interested in developing a health initiative program. She was keen to share her medical knowledge to improve the lives of the children. Before plans could be finalized about visiting, Covid 19 arrived and all visits were off. However from the initial contact, Madi and her friend and colleague Rylee had regular Zoom meetings with Kate and Brian about the health training needs of the Sarnelli House staff. Their interest and enthusiasm resulted in a partnership between Sarnelli House and the Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Wisconsin.



A needs assessment survey was developed to identify gaps in the hygiene knowledge of the housemothers and children. The survey was translated, tested and administered to the staff and young adults at Sarnelli House. After the results were analyzed, Madi and Rylee began to develop their training package, which resulted in Healthful

Habits, a 5 lesson curriculum addressing Germ Theory, Hygiene Behaviors and Caregiving Practices. It included handouts and references and was a comprehensive teaching tool. It was finalized while Madi, Rylee and their colleagues were in the middle of their demanding medical studies. Fast forward to 2023 and Madi and Rylee finally arrived to Sarnelli House. Both had just finished their five years of medical training and were ready to start their residency. On their arrival, they started giving lessons from their curriculum. Over the course of two weeks they taught three topics - Germ Theory, Proper Handwashing and Clean Diapering and Toilet Training. A total of 36 people attended the course including house mothers and

teenagers, and a local translator was hired for the lessons. The topics were made interesting with practical and interactive activities, as well as with the bright and warm personalities of the presenters. Things sometimes did not always go completely as planned, but they adapted with good humor and always with encouragement. As well as the teaching part of the visit, Madi and Rylee assessed and offered treatment options for some of the children with health problems. And as a most welcome byproduct of their visit, the diaper changing station at House of Hope was reviewed and improved. A new sink close to the changing table was promptly installed for handwashing, as well as shelves put up to store the necessary items used for changing diapers, and lots of cleaning products



were also purchased. Madi and Rylee were able to buy cleaning equipment and refillable hand soap for all the children's houses, thanks to an appeal to their friends in the USA. Their visit was a real success that has led to sustainable change, and we hope they will be back soon to complete the curriculum.

Physical and Sensory Therapy

The disabled children living at House of Hope amongst the very active babies, toddlers and preschoolers have needs that are different to the normally developing children. The housemothers at House of Hope are able to provide excellent basic care for them but the physical and sensory stimulation that they need can often be overlooked. Two long term volunteers from The Netherlands have filled this care gap. Ben and Angelique have focused on the four children who have varying degrees of brain damage and have set up a room to cater to their needs. The room was previously used by Fr Mike when he stayed over on the compound of St Patrick's House, the Jan and Oscar House, and the House of Hope. The room has been renamed the "Snuzzle Room" and it provides a quiet, specially designed space where the children are offered more sensory care and stimulation. Music, touch, smell, and mirrors are all used as therapy. Physical therapy has been developed by Ben in collaboration with his colleagues in Maastricht. As an assistant physiotherapy for many years, he provides



hands on therapy for each child. Recently, water therapy has been added using the Sarnelli House pool and the children have responded well to this. Together Ben and Angelique bring out each child's unique response to therapy that is focused on what the child is able to do rather than what they can't. Perhaps the most significant part of their therapy is that these children with special needs receives one on one concentrated loving attention.

Formal Volunteer Programs

The four young people who have come to volunteer for 12 months at Sarnelli House have completed their high school study. They arrive having already participated in preparations through **accredited volunteer programs in Germany**. Introduction seminars are attended before they leave, where they learn about the challenges of living in different cultures. During their time at Sarnelli House, they have to complete activities about their experience and on returning to Germany, they must attend a final reintegration seminar. This all helps to prepare them for their year at Sarnelli House where they are embedded in the children's lives. They live in separate rooms attached to the children's houses and share in the children's daily routines and activities.



There are language and cultural difficulties to adapt to, food and weather differences and living in a remote, mostly agricultural environment is new for many. They often surprise themselves with their resilience and their ability to cope at times of loneliness and homesickness. Many volunteers who have

completed their year return and reconnect with Sarnelli House. Each of them brings their own gifts and they all add value in unique ways.



Faithful Friends

Debbie from the UK has been coming to Sarnelli House for 17 years, often twice a year in March and again in October. She brings with her the unconditional love of a mother and grandmother. The children experience a wealth of generosity and fun while she is here. Playing games like Bingo have become legendary and are forever linked to Debbie's visits. Being enveloped in warm hugs and handing over disgruntled babies for Debbie to soothe is also a customary activity. Every visit Debbie buys individual gifts for the children, wraps them up and gets as much joy from handing them over as the children do at receiving them.

Jim, from the state of Wisconsin, is always happy to do any handiwork or sponsor a water park or cinema visit for the children. He is one of the original volunteers who came with the legendary and much missed Fr Chuck, who is now residing in the USA. Jim is appreciated for his enthusiasm as a swimming supervisor or as a help with any activities going on. He likes to be active and despite the language difficulties, he can hold a child on his knee or join in with English or sport classes equally well. He brings his own life experiences and shares them where he





can, and has developed real and lasting relationships with other volunteers, staff and children.

Leon and Henriette, both retired and from The Netherlands, have visited twice a year for many years. Leon heads out to the pool to clean and maintain it, which is not an easy job with so many children using it. When the pool is not in use out of school holidays, the local staff provide basic maintenance, so when Leon arrives, he always has a big job on his hands to get it to working order for the holidays. Water pumps and filter machines have to be replaced at some cost and Leon directs and supports this work. Henriette gets around to all the houses with coloring or craft activities and brings warmth and unconditional love to the children. They are a loving support for many of the local staff.

International mission groups visiting from Singapore have also been inspiring and generous. Two such groups have visited in the last few months. Later in the year there will be a two week program from six volunteers from the Association of Solidarity, a Redemptorist NGO in Spain. They also will bring fresh skills and energy to Sarnelli House.

As well as international arrivals, visits from the local

community in Nongkhai, and further afield in Udon Thani and Bangkok are hugely beneficial to the children. A recent day of activities by a local Christian youth group from Udon Thani was a great success. The children joined in all the activities which were new and fresh to them and they loved the older students and the genuine interest they showed in them. Annual visits from the students at the Redemptorist International School in Bangkok open their eyes to the less fortunate reality of other children in their country. They bring generous donations of goods along with their energy and friendship.

Visitors and volunteers from outside Sarnelli House, professional or not, all contribute in their own way. They help to lift the standard of care and improve the way Sarnelli House cares for the children.

However, without the local Thai staff there could be no bedrock on which to build and to strive for improvement. Their loyalty as well as their own personal skills, which may not come from education and qualifications, are of utmost importance to the children's lives. The housemothers who are always present and always at the coal face, deserve so much respect and praise. Despite problems and challenges which there will always be, they remain steadfast in their care of the children.

We would sincerely like to thank all our visitors over the years for their generosity and support of Sarnelli House.



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To protect the privacy of our children we have not used their real names or identified them in photos unless with permission

Written by Kate Introna, May 2023