

# Sarnelli House

## NEWSLETTER



www.sarnelliorphanage.org

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### Message from Fr Shea

Back in the 1980's, even before I ever began working with children afflicted with AIDS, I knew the Marist fathers of Australia. Fr. Larry Patin CSsR and I were down to Bangkok, and we met the Marist provincial Father Peter Guiren SM. The provincial asked Larry and I about our work, and gave us each generous donations to continue on. At that time, Larry was working with lepers, and I was working with Hmong refugees from Laos. The Marists had a great guy as their Mission co-ordinator, Fr. Mick O'Halloran. The provincial, Father Guiren turned us over to Fr. Mick, and he continued helping with the work.

Flash now to 2001. The work with kids afflicted and affected by the AIDS virus had begun. The first house was in Viengkhu, with little guys and little girls crammed into a little wooden house, with two rooms. The boys, a minority, were fond of releasing toads and other creepy crawlies into the girls' room, at night. It was great fun for the boys at night, but when morning gilded the skies, mean, vengeful little girls would track down each little oaf and beat the daylights out of him.

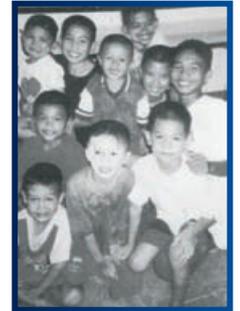
Thankfully, the Marist Fathers again stepped into the fray, and probably saved the lives of some obnoxious little guys. The Marists had money to build a house for the boys. It was to be called St. Patrick's, in memory of a great Marist named Father Pat Reynolds. This donation was given by Fr. Ron Nissen, Fr. Mick's successor. Years before this, Fr. Ron had enriched the lives of villagers in four villages, by working with AusAID, for seed and fertilizer money for them all. This project has expanded and continues to run successfully to this day).

Fr. Ron graciously came to bless the new building on October 2001. It was built by Marist money, \$26,000 (820,000 Thai baht). The Marist Fathers continue to funnel money and volunteers to Sarnelli House. Their greatest gift was nurse Kate Introna, who is penning this tale of the lads of St. Patrick's Home.

God bless you!

Fr Mike Shea C.S.s.R

# St Patrick's Boys Home



St Patrick's Boy's Home is located in the village of Pi Si Tong and has a real family feel to it. The building itself is like an old home - a bit run down, but well loved and lived in. Built in 2001 specifically to provide a safe house for orphaned and abandoned boys, it is a two storey building with a dormitory for the boys, a bathroom, and 2 smaller bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs was the kitchen and the TV room and another bathroom. It is very basic but clean. Now that the kitchen has been moved to the large dining room next door, it has been converted into a homework room, and with the generous



support of donors there are now sturdy desks for each boy so that for the first time in 12 years the boys can do their homework sitting at their own desks, and not on the floor.

The backbone of St Patrick's has always been Mother Wan. She has been the cook, the mediator, the mother, the farmer, the manager and the constant for the boys. Mother Wan has two daughters and she is a grandmother now. Her youngest daughter Nok, is Manager

of Nazareth House and Kung is Manager of Sarnelli House and second in charge to Fr Shea / Fr Ole. Despite having chronic diabetes, Mother Wan would not dream of giving up the boys' home or moving out to a quieter life in the village as her daughters often suggest.

Mother Wan is assisted at St Patrick's by her constant companion and minder, Boy. He helps with the laundry, helps gets the boys up in the mornings for school, and he also performs his other very important job of greeting the guests at the airport in Udon. Boy sleeps upstairs in the dormitory which he has done for many years now. A full time cleaner who prepares the school uniforms for the boys and keeps the house clean is Ms Duk (not her real name). She is the mother of one of the little disabled girls at Sarnelli House and both she and her daughter have HIV/



AIDS. Working at St Patrick's allows Ms Duk to rent a small house in the village of Don Wai where Sarnelli House is located and to have her daughter come over on Saturdays when she is working, and then to spend the day with her on Sundays. On Monday its back to school for the little one.

Mother Wan is practical and full of common sense and hard won wisdom. Fr Shea recounts the many meetings he has held over the years with the staff. When it has become heated Mother Wan has been the sensible one, she is able to pull every one into line, including her daughters with a telling comment or a realistic viewpoint. Dealing with this group of women who are all first cousins and sisters and the managers of the different houses, is a like walking on a tight rope some days. On those days Fr Shea often threatens the ladies that if cloning was ever available he would get rid of everyone and make all the staff clones of Mother Wan.

Although her cooking skills are prodigious, Mother Wan

no longer cooks at St Patrick's now that the kitchen has been relocated. She oversees the ladies who cook for the children at the Jan and Oscar House, St Patrick's and the House of Hope in the big dining room next door to St Patrick's. On certain nights when mass is celebrated in Pi Si Tong and Fr Shea stays in his little rooms behind the church, Mother Wan cooks his meals for him and monitors



how much he eats and questions him about why there are leftovers on his plate. He has to think on his feet at moments like these, as it does no good to say anything in the slightest bit negative about a Thai woman's cooking. Brother Tik a new Redemptorist member of the Sarnelli staff, now lives at Pi Si Tong, and Mother Wan makes sure he is well cooked for and looked after.

Little boys from the House of Hope gradually move over to St Patrick's, and keep it full. This year there are 16 boys aged from 8 to 17 years old keeping the house lively and noisy. In the last 2 years, five boys who have graduated from Kindergarten have made the transition. For the first few months they stick very closely to Mother Wan, they sleep with her just like they used to sleep with the house mothers at House of Hope. Then they gradually gain more independence and move into the dormitory to sleep with the other boys and begin their life as the big boys of St Pat's.

The grounds of St Patrick's originally had 3 fish ponds and it was the start of the farming enterprise where fish were grown in the ponds to eat. The boys fed the fish with scraps from the kitchen and every year took their massive net and dragged the ponds for fish grown big. Despite the colour of the water which went from muddy brown to slimy green you would always find some boys getting relief from



the heat of the day and swimming in the ponds. Others made fishing rods with thin rods of bamboo and somehow found wire to make a hook and fished in the ponds. They mostly caught little fish which they threw back, but there were moments of elation when a decent sized fish was landed. The fish ponds still exist but there are only two, one has been filled in and a pig pen and chicken coop has been built on the site. With the building of the new filtered, salt water pool, which was bequeathed by a generous donor, the fish ponds don't have the same allure, and the pool is now the big summer attraction for the boys— water you can actually see in and through, what a treat!

A large cement basketball court built at the side of St Patrick's has seen much play over the years. Village men come by in the afternoons to play takraw with the boys. Takraw is an incredibly skilful and agile game, played with a rattan ball and a volleyball net where the two teams are only allowed to touch the ball with their feet, knees, head and chest. Soccer or football also gets a work out, and the boys share a couple of gym shoes, wearing them on their

kicking foot only and coming off and sharing them with the next player. Of course the basketball hoop is always popular especially when the volunteers are around and money is the prize for the most number of hoops shot. After a day at school the boys are free to play outside, they enjoy playing marbles, riding old rusty bikes, digging in the dirt and just being outside doing what boys do – having adventures.



## Ping

This year there was a new addition to St Patrick's Boys Home not from House of Hope. Ping (not his real name) is 13 years old and comes from the Beung Gan province about 2 hours west of Nongkhai along the Mekhong River. Ping's mother became sick from HIV/AIDS about three years ago and the Outreach Program in Beung Gan funded by Sarnelli House tried to help her. She wasn't taking her ARV medications properly and would miss appointments at the hospital. Despite a lot of support from the Outreach Team the virus gradually overcame her and she sadly died when Ping was 11 years old. Ping himself does not have the virus and after his mother's death he went to live with his aunt in the same province. The aunt however, thought she could make some money from Ping and sent him off to Muay Thai or Thai Boxing competitions, where he was mostly beaten up. The Outreach Program heard of his plight and rescued him from his exploitative life and bought him to live at St Patrick's. Despite being underweight and malnourished, he has fought a few kids and they know not to pick a fight with him. He has latched onto Mother Wan, where she goes there he can be found. He attends Rosario school with the other boys and he is studying in junior high - Grade 7. He is slowly getting involved in the activities that the other boys do like feeding the chickens, ducks and the pigs, and going out to the fields to help on the weekends. It has also been discovered that Ping is a star football player and he is much in demand after school to play football with the big boys.

While St Patrick's has cared for, nurtured and taught young boys the meaning of work and responsibility over the years, it has also seen its share of difficulties and challenges. Stealing has been a problem with some boys, as well as easy access to drugs in the area, and the usual temptations of smoking and alcohol. Many of these boys have come from backgrounds of abandonment and poverty. Some boys have left St Patrick's because they could not fit in, some have been moved to a different school for more discipline, others have gone back to families because of being involved in gang fights, where they continue to be supported to finish their education by Sarnelli House. Boys like Off and Oat have graduated to become teachers and engineers and to start their new working lives with optimism and hope.

While these and other challenges continue in the lives of many teenagers, the lads now living at St Patrick's are in a great place as they learn how to live together and respect

each other. They learn from people wise in the art of love and compassion, and the boys reciprocate with joy and laughter. We thank the many kind and generous people in Thailand and abroad who support them.



Friends of Sarnelli House UA  
in the USA

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To protect the privacy of our children we have not  
used their names or identified them in photos.

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Written by Kate Introna, September 2013