

## Message from Fr. Shea



The June newsletter is packed with news about our 5 little wounded children at the Sharon Houminer House, and the teenagers who go on to further study, and their efforts to have a natural life. These kids are lucky to have Brian and Kate and Dtim and Fern, all who are ready with advice and encouragement for kids who for the most part have spent their lives in the protected cocoon of Sarnelli House. Most are able to make the change from Sarnelli life, to life in the world. But we also have those boys and girls who return to work and live at Sarnelli House. The is not a bad thing, since we have farm work for the boys. And the girls work with the children in various houses. Ladies who began working with us 25 years ago, are retiring, and our young women who are trained by the older staff, are stepping into the breach. The farm has plenty of work, with the fields and gardens, fishponds and cattle, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys plus rabbits.

So, the Good Lord has blessed us abundantly, and we ask his blessings on our benefactors and friends, whose interest and sacrifice makes all our work possible.

*God Bless you all*

*Fr Michael Shea C.Ss.R*

## Sharon Houminer House

After the long preparations leading up to the opening of the Sharon Houminer House and the celebration of Sarnelli House's 25th anniversary on the 18th January 2025, routine again returned to Sarnelli House. At that time in the newly opened house, there were four residents. Nuna is the eldest. She is 15 years old, blind, unable to feed, dress, speak or move herself. Mary and Jodie are both five 5 years old and have varying degrees of responsiveness, although neither can walk or feed themselves. Mary is developing some speech and can comprehend spoken language, she is the most cognitively able of the house's residents. Finally, Titan is



four years old and needs to be fed by a tube in his nose that goes to his stomach as he is unable to swallow safely. He requires all physical care and his health is the most precarious, as he has an increased risk of dangerous lung infections needing treatment in hospital.

A day at the Sharon Houminer House begins with an early rise and the four children are showered separately in the disabled bathroom, which is equipped with a custom-made stretcher, where the water is able to drain and not pool while showering. Then it is a short transfer by lifting the child to the changing table. Clothes, diapers and creams are at the staff's fingertips and the children are dried and dressed.

Breakfast follows, already prepared by another staff member who has been cooking in the kitchen. There is a big table in the centre of the kitchen which the children are seated around for meals. Depending on the mood, meal times can take some time, as Mary and Jodie in particular are picky about their food. After breakfast, they are lifted down on to the soft rubber tiles on the floor of the sensory room. Usually, the children are visited by the volunteers Angelique and assistant



physiotherapist Ben who play music or use toys and balls as a form of activity that aims to improve the children's core and muscle strength. Lunch time is followed by a nap. In the afternoon, the children are showered and stay in the sensory room or sit in their wheelchairs for a push around the village. Dinner is not far off and after a change of shift, the children are settled down for the night.



Amidst this childcare routine, there is the laundry, cleaning, cooking and preparation of the medications to be done by the two staff on the morning shift. Regular visits to Nongkhai Hospital for assessments, follow ups, reordering of medicines and occupational therapy sessions for the children are also part of the routine. At times, there are emergency hospital trips for the treatment of Titan's breathing problems. This can often involve admission to hospital, with a staff member staying with Titan for the duration of his hospital stay. On the weekends, as the Sharon Houminer House is located next door to the hall, Mary or Nuna often attend the big lunch parties that are held for all the children. They get to see more of their Sarnelli House family and are warmly welcomed and enveloped in everyone's love.

A month after the official opening of the new house in February 2025, a new child arrived. Lisa is eight years old. She lived with her mother and two siblings. She didn't develop normally and was unable to walk or feed herself or speak in sentences. She sat in a cane chair every day and her family did the best they could for her without any medical support or the finances to buy diapers or a wheelchair. Lisa's mother had

to work to support the family, she was a day labourer, finding work where she could, which meant that Lisa was often left with the old people of the village. They couldn't toilet her, so she was left wet and dirty most days. Eventually, this was reported to the Social Welfare office and her situation was assessed. They found that she was not receiving adequate care for her diagnosis of cerebral palsy. With the family's agreement, Lisa was referred to the Sharon Houminer House to be raised and receive appropriate care. Lisa loves music and her whole body responds to it as she squeals and shouts to the beat. She cannot walk, toilet or feed herself, but she has an animated personality and sings songs the old ladies have taught her. As the other children adjusted to their new noisy friend, a freak storm hit the villages of Donwai and Pai Si Tong on 1st March 2025. What seemed like a mini tornado caused power lines to fall, roofs to fly off and large limbs of trees to split. At the Sharon Houminer House, a massive branch fell on the new roof causing it to collapse directly over the bed of the sleeping Lisa. A staff member who had started work on the night shift that very night frantically started pulling the debris off Lisa, and with the strength born of an adrenaline rush, lifted a 27 kg Lisa out of her bed and out of danger. Amazingly Lisa had no injuries, and all five children were moved to safety. Their temporary accommodation was next door at the clinic, where they stayed in cramped quarters for six weeks until the repairs were completed. Replacing the roof of the Sharon Houminer House, while the most pressing of the necessary repairs, was only the beginning of the list of work following the storm. A roof of a building at the boys' house also had to be replaced, farm buildings were severely damaged and various other electrical repairs needed to be done. Finally, many established trees growing close to Sarnelli House children's homes were felled. All these repairs and replacements were costly, but thanks to the quick response of generous friends and benefactors the money was raised, and all the work has been completed. Finally, the occupants and staff of the Sharon Houminer House have settled back into their daily routine.

## Reunions

As new children, like Lisa, arrived at Sarnelli House, other children have been reunited with their families. This is a truly heartwarming time for them. A three-year-old boy who arrived at Sarnelli House late in 2024 to live at the House of Hope was reunited with family last month. His parents had separated, and he was a victim of domestic abuse amid drug and alcohol addiction from both parents. It seems that the extended family needed time to plan for his safe return. Seven months after his arrival, his aunt and uncle were in communication with the Social Welfare office and decided to raise him. They were assessed and their situation approved, and he now has the chance of growing up in a loving family.

Another boy who came to Sarnelli House when he was seven years old has been reunited with his mother six years later. She was a single, teenage mother who was living with HIV. She was struggling with the poor choices she had made regarding the men in her life, and she was lurching from one







abusive relationship to another. She was not taking her Anti Retro Viral (ARV) medications properly and she developed a brain infection and needed urgent medical care. With the support of the Outreach Program, and after discharge from the hospital she was referred to the Good Shepherd Sisters' Garden of Friendship and her son came to Sarnelli House to live and go to school. He is now 12 years old, and his mother has recovered but has residual weakness on her right side. However, she benefited from the Good Shepherd Sisters' education program for young adults living with HIV and when she left them, she was equipped with better life skills and knowledge about living successfully with HIV. She started a new job and she has been in employment ever since. She has met a different type of man and has been in a stable relationship for the last three years. During the school holidays over the years, her son spent weeks with his mother to maintain their relationship. She never lost sight of having him live with her again. She and her husband are now both working in Bangkok – they have hard working jobs; she works in the laundry in a hotel and he is a motor mechanic. They

are committed to saving their money and she is taking her ARV medications responsibly and her health is the best it has even been. Last month, her son left Sarnelli House with her and her husband to move to Bangkok and to resume his education there. His smile was wide and happy as he left. The Outreach Program will grant an education scholarship for the next few years, to help the family get on their feet.



## Tales of further education

The last few months have seen some of the young adults from Sarnelli House graduate from higher tertiary education. One very smart young woman has graduated with a degree in Environmental Science from Khon Kaen University at 23 years old. She came to Sarnelli House when she was 12 years old. Her mother had mental health problems and her father had a stroke and was disabled and unable to work. She came from terrible poverty but from these poor beginnings, she showed her ambition by consistently getting top grades all through her school years. Going on to study at university was inevitable and she had to learn how to be self-sufficient in her academic life and manage her scholarship money for her daily expenses, rent and social life. She lived frugally and came home to Sarnelli House in the holidays where she worked to earn money. Completing her degree successfully was a huge achievement for her, and she may study for her master's degree in the future, but for now she is considering her employment options. Surprisingly this is more complex than it seems. Some university graduates from Sarnelli House are working in lesser jobs unrelated to their study. The chances of getting a good job post degree are difficult as there is a huge number of graduated students looking for the same jobs and the competition is fierce. Often without



family connections job opportunities are scarce. But thanks to her sponsors and her own talent she has made it this far and she will decide herself what path to follow for her future.

Many young adults who have spent their whole lives at Sarnelli House are able to move on to live independently. They demonstrate their courage and determination to go from where everything is familiar to start new lives in the big world outside the secure home of Sarnelli House.

One such young man arrived at Sarnelli House 14 years ago. He was born with HIV and he has no idea who his family are. A woman gave him to a man to look after him for a short while at a railway station in Bangkok, and she never came back to claim him. He was five years old. The man took the boy to the police station and he was sent to a government orphanage in Bangkok. It was discovered that he had HIV and he was sent to a government girls' orphanage in Udon Thani, then to a government boys' orphanage in Nongkhai and finally he was welcomed at Sarnelli House. He was seven years old when he arrived and he grew up a shy, quiet boy, not very good at school and with very little confidence in himself. After finishing Grade 9 at Rosario school, he didn't want to go onto any further study but with no other plan and lots of encouragement he completed his senior high school at a local school. He had little ambition and felt safe at Sarnelli House and so stayed on to work on the farm. After a few years, he became restless and knew he needed a change and to experience the outside world. Against all expectations, because of his shy, quiet nature he asked to train at Pimali Hospitality school. He had seen some of his friends graduate there and go onto financial independence. He was accepted and trained in housekeeping. The training includes an internship at a 5-star partnership hotel, usually in the big tourist areas like Bangkok, Phuket or Krabi. Leaving the culture of Isaan is a huge challenge that other students had faced when going on to internship. They had to cope with being away from all that is familiar to them – their friends, food, and a slower pace of life. However, he completed his internship successfully in Bangkok, and he was offered a full-time job. This young man at 21 years of age is working hard and earning more than a good salary in Bangkok, more than he could ever make in the northeast of Thailand. He has adapted to his new life and has made new

friends as well as becoming a mentor to new students from Pimali Hospitality school who are doing their own internship in Bangkok.

Two young women entering tertiary education this year have gradually grown and developed enough confidence to imagine a future that could mean leaving Sarnelli House. These young women came to Sarnelli House a year apart at one month old. Sarnelli House is the only home they have known. They are now 18 and 19 years old respectively. They have moved through living at the different girls' houses and have developed strong bonds with their housemothers and their housemates. They have survived their teenage years without too many mishaps and are excited to embark on the next few years of study to discover a world outside of Sarnelli House.

Another young lady came to Sarnelli House seeking shelter and acceptance during her teenage pregnancy. She is an orphan, and her extended family rejected her when they found out she was pregnant. Her son is now five years old, and in the last five years while she has been working as a staff member at Sarnelli House, she has also done a bridging course to get her up to a high school equivalent certificate. She has enrolled in a vocational school in Nongkhai to study accounting with her two other friends. She hopes by studying at tertiary level she can achieve independence and give her son a better life.

For whatever reasons children progress through Sarnelli House in many different ways. Some of them are too traumatized by emotional rejection or physical damage to be able to see a future for themselves away from Sarnelli House. Others only have a short respite at Sarnelli House before their families are able to take them back, and some leave Sarnelli House with great ambitions but bounce back when they find out that the world does not care about them. The children at Sarnelli House continue to grow and develop at their own pace and within their own capabilities. It is only with the help and support of generous sponsors, friends and benefactors that Sarnelli House can provide a safe and loving home and a future for the children who live here.

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Written by Kate Introna, May 2025