

## *Sarnelli House*

Don Vai - Northeast Thailand  
*Reverend Michael Shea, C.Ss.R*

The Viengkuk Children's hospice had been in action for nearly a year. I walked in the house one afternoon this past June, and two little girls sat sobbing on the floor, eyeing me suspiciously. They were "Tai Yaw" tribal girls, whose mother had recently died, leaving four orphans. Their divorced uncle told them that he did not want them, and found out about our hospice. (Since the two boys are older and in junior high school, we have them in a boarding house, studying in their hometown school). Candy and the arrival of housemothers stifled the sobs of the two sisters, and now we are entertained by their accent and language. If they don't want to be understood, they speak their dialect, as the other children vainly try to decipher the meaning of the words.

Another late arrival was a four-year-old little girl named "Nuei." One of the workers at the hospice came upon Nuei, dirty and grubby, in one of the remote interior villages. Relatives urged the staff worker to take Nuei along with her, that they didn't want her. I came upon Nuei the next day, standing at the door, gazing up the road. "Are you our latest gift?" I asked. "No," replied Nuei, "I am just here on a visit. My dad and morn will be here to pick me up at any time now." I asked Peh, the housemother who brought Nuei to the hospice, and found out that Nuei's folks were dead, and no one would come walking down that road to take Nuei home. It took several days of gentle coaxing, but Nuei has turned from being a sad, lonely little girl into the house comedian.

During the past four months, two little girls learned of their mothers' deaths from AIDS. When little Miss Mai learned that her mother died of AIDS-induced TB, she quietly withdrew into herself for days, with only tears to show her grief. Mai was born far downriver, and there were no relatives that bothered to come and comfort her. Plern's mother died recently. Plern is four years old, the tiniest of our family. Plern's mother, 21 years old, died in the Thabo hospital on a Sunday morning. Two housemothers were with her and begged the nurses not to throw her out when they learned "Lawt" had AIDS. Lawt died mercifully during the argument, since she was at the time conscious and struggling for breath and getting no treatment from the angry and indifferent nurses. The housemothers phoned me and told me to pick up Plern and bring her to the rectory until they got back. Lawt had been a prostitute, and they feared the pimp would come and take Plern away. They were very prudent, since the pimp did show up. I couldn't bring myself to tell an excited Plern, who with a companion from the hospice, were enjoying cartoons and gobbling candy. Later in the day, one of the housemothers held Plern and told her that her mother had "gone to heaven." "That's nothing," squealed Plern, "Mom even went to Bangkok once!" Same news, different reactions, but heartrending, nevertheless. Later that evening, an aunt showed up and brutally told Plern that they had cremated her mother, but Plern refused to believe it, and merely repeated her comforting mantra, "Mom is in Heaven, Bangkok."

Our Viengkuk Children's Hospice has been running for 18 months now, and currently has 22 children in the hospice, studying at Rosario Catholic School. Sixteen other children are either in boarding schools or with other family members, who agreed to keep them, if we pay the children's education and medicine bills.

We also have an OUTREACH PROGRAM. We visit families of AIDS patients, and do what we can to relieve their poverty and suffering. Several of our staff members accompany Sister

Anurak, a Good Shepherd nun, and two French volunteers. Five days a week, they visit remote villages, seeking out the abandoned and suffering. (They also go to the provincial prison to help AIDS-afflicted prisoners, especially the women whose children are incarcerated with them.) The French girls are nurses and help with the sick and suffering, while the staff members bring in rice, food, and supplements. Ignorance though on the part of villagers and families makes the lives of the AIDS-afflicted children very miserable. With their parents dying or dead, they are shunned and chased from school, and thus unable to join the noon lunch program that might give them nourishment. This cruelty often comes from people who should care, namely close relatives.

We were finally galvanized into action by one particularly heartrending example that happened in April in a village named Paw Pap. Two years ago, a little retarded girl was sold to people who took her to a brothel in south Thailand, near the Malay border. This past April they returned the girl, now 14, to the family. The family members cursed her for catching AIDS so soon, and then coming home to "bring shame on the family," and also for taking so long to die. The staff members who visited the home were shattered by the cruelty of the mother and brothers, who would not even heed the little girl's pleas for water. They cried as they related how the poor little girl's eyes sought theirs desperately for signs of compassion, love, and pity. God mercifully took that little girl shortly after the visit, and we agreed we would have to build a home so no child would ever have to suffer and die like that again. Thus, the idea of "SARNELLI HOUSE" was born.

SARNELLI HOUSE is named after an 18th-century Redemptorist priest who spent his brief priestly life in the slums of Naples, Italy, tending to prostitutes and their children; those terminally ill, homeless, and abandoned children and babies. Construction began on May 1 and was more or less finished by August 30, 2000. The building itself was funded by the Thai Redemptorists, with money actually raised by Father Leo Travis, a legendary Redemptorist missionary who is still very active in Thailand. SARNELLI HOUSE is situated in the forest behind the tiny hamlet of Don Vai, where the AIDS work began two years ago. It was then that a young lady named Kaek showed up at the dispensary run by me, to beg for help, as she had terminal AIDS. The work developed from there.

SARNELLI HOUSE is not only a refuge for little AIDS kids. It is also a center for AIDS morns and their activities and support groups. They study handicrafts and sewing, and the Good Shepherd sisters find markets for their wares. God has blessed this work, giving us a building and a furnished kitchen, and some money for food and medicine. But the home still needs funds for cribs, cots, high chairs, cabinets, fans, tables, chairs, medical supplies, and some playground equipment. Since AIDS children are hindered from partaking in school lunch programs or activities, and actually are not welcome in most schools of the northeast, we have been promised funds for a modest little two-room school. The kids will have home schooling and take their exams with other schools at the appointed times.

SARNELLI HOUSE is the only home in the northeast of Thailand for AIDS children. However, none of these children are given any medicine to counteract against the virus. Only the wealthy or government officials and their families can afford the medicine. But we feel that careful tender care, love, and attention will go a long way in helping these children, until the government realizes its duty toward these little ones. Children are coming in from places other than the northeast. One seven-year-old little lad came from Hat Yai, South Thailand. Some are from the Sa Kaew area, along the Cambodian border. Most are from the northeast, which takes up a third of Thailand, and is the poorest and most arid area.

In order to stem the flow of northeast women and girls from the "service" industry in Bangkok, Pattaya, and other places where they are sold into brothels and to unscrupulous people, we have begun "handicraft centers." With the help and cooperation of the Good Shepherd Sisters and their staff, women learn how to make Thai handicrafts and do intricate sewing. The good Sisters sell their merchandise, so as to support the women and girls, and continue the project. Both healthy women and HIV-infected women and girls are in this program together.

We also receive help through the Marists of Australia, with agricultural projects to try to keep the rural families together. We are trying to have 100% attendance at school for all area kids, Buddhist and Catholic. The poorest are helped with tuition, noon lunches, and school uniforms. We hope education will turn them into dedicated, industrious kids. Asian kids, in contrast to some other countries, desperately want further education, and it is a real sacrifice for parents, since higher education is often beyond their means.

This work is made possible only with the dedication and devotion of the Redemptorist Foundation Office of the Denver Province, who seeks funds for this work, and the sacrifice of individual Redemptorists themselves and their friends from all over the world. We Redemptorists in Thailand could never meet the pressing needs of so many children without this concern and help.

Every evening from the Children's Hospice in Viengkhuuk situated on the banks of the Mekong River and from the SARNELLI HOUSE in the Don Vai forest, you can hear childish voices, Buddhist and Catholic, earnestly and gratefully praying for those who have sacrificed to free them from their sorrow and poverty and give them a new start, a new life. Each home has a whiteboard and a statue of the Holy Family. Prayer intentions sent to us are written on the board. The prayer sessions are taken seriously by the children. The statue of the Holy Family reminds the children of the real family they will never have and of the new family they are privileged to belong.

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