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HIA REF: 179

Witness Name: HIA 179

 THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

 WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 179

I, HIA 179 will say as follows:-

Personal details

1. I was born on [REDACTED] Omagh, County Tyrone. My mother was called [REDACTED] SND 78 and my father was called [REDACTED] SND 79 have [REDACTED] brothers and sisters – [REDACTED] HIA 394 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] younger and [REDACTED] than me. My mother suffered from bi-polar and was in and out of psychiatric institutions. My father worked as a tradesman in England. When my mother became ill in early 1962 my father came home but could not look after us. He had no choice but to leave all the family of seven children in the Nazareth House in Derry. I was only [REDACTED] years old when I was placed in the nursery along with my younger sister [REDACTED] and brother [REDACTED] (both special needs children). My older sisters [REDACTED] HIA 394 (another special needs child) and [REDACTED] all resided on the ground floor of the home.

Nazareth House, Bishop Street, Derry (early 1962 – September 1963)

2. Although I felt very confused and insecure, no one ever explained why we were being separated from our parents, nor did they tell us how long we would have to remain in Nazareth House. All I remember that day is that I felt so traumatised I

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shut myself down emotionally. I do not recall my father or any other family members visiting me in the home.

3. We were supervised by nuns and civilian workers. I think there was a nun called [REDACTED] in the home but I do not recall any names of the other nuns or indeed the workers. It didn't take me long to sense that both the nuns and the civilian workers were heartless who seemed to enjoy abusing us and treating us worse than animals. Later I was told by my older sister [REDACTED] HIA 394 that our father had to pay for my family to reside at Nazareth House. Despite this we were constantly made to feel we were receiving charity and that we were a burden. This would explain all the brutal treatment that the nuns and the workers subjected us to.
4. My father bought each of his children a new set of clothes which we wore the day we entered the home. However these were quickly taken from us and replaced by the Nazareth House uniform which consisted of a black pinafore and a cardigan. We never saw our own clothes again but were made to wear the home uniform every day, except on Sundays, when we were given a different set of clothes for the priest's weekly visit. I do not recall the priest's name but he was elderly and kind. Before each visit the nuns threatened that if we did not tell the priest we were happy at Nazareth House we would be severely punished when he left.
5. The nuns prevented us from complaining or even rebelling by using psychological and physical abuse on a daily basis. I was beaten by the nuns and civilian staff. I was pushed and hit. I was hit sometimes by their hands or by a ruler on the hands and legs. Although I was very young I remember them using humiliation, shame and guilt to keep us submissive. They called us 'stupid' and 'dirty' and belittled the children. The nuns and staff never showed us any warmth. Most of the children did not form friendships inside the home. I believe this is because there was an atmosphere of Orwellian paranoia. We kept to ourselves because we were afraid of being denounced by another child, which would have meant more punishment. I felt that the nuns were not equipped for

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the type of work they were doing and it was as if they were suffering a hardship working with children.

6. While residing at Nazareth House I felt like I was in constant survival mode. This forced me to recoil into my own little shell in the hope that I would become invisible and avoid further beatings. I felt lonely and I missed my brothers and sisters whom I was used to having at home. I remember feeling completely neglected most of the time and not receiving any intellectual stimulation which is so vital during a child's formative years in life. There were no games and although there was a playground there were no toys to play with. The nuns expected us to be seen and not heard, that is, unless they asked us to speak. I also remember feeling hungry a lot of the time. We got porridge for breakfast and potatoes and bread but I remember being hungry and not getting enough food but I knew not to ask for more in case I got beaten.
7. The worst pain I experienced was feeling cold and neglected for hours on end. The nuns would send us out into the cold, without coats, even during the very cold winter months, for long periods of time. I believe it was the first winter I was in the home when I was sent out in the drizzle and I got very wet, but when I tried to go back inside to warm my hands on the hall radiators, the civilian workers pushed me outside again, where I just stood and shivered for what seemed like hours.
8. As a result of this gross neglect, I contracted a severe case of bronchitis whilst I was in the home. I had to stay in bed and I think I might have been seen by a doctor. I almost died. I later learned that my baby brother [REDACTED] had contracted pneumonia in the nursery and he had almost died too. Every year since then I suffer from bronchitis. I still experience difficulty breathing, especially when the weather is cold and damp. I was diagnosed with a heart condition eleven years ago and this compounded with my bronchitis has created certain health issues for me.
9. There are two very traumatic experiences I remember vividly while residing at Nazareth House. The first concerns food. One morning I had nausea and

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refused to eat the usual breakfast which consisted of porridge. The civilian worker refused to believe I was ill and she said to me 'you will eat'. Then she force fed me the breakfast. All the children at my table witnessed this. Although I was terrified I would be beaten, I could not prevent myself from vomiting all over the table. Instead of helping me the civilian worker started beating me about the head and screaming at me for making a mess. She then spooned all the vomit back into the bowl and insisted that I eat the vomit otherwise I would not be allowed to leave the table. She kept me behind while all the other children had left. I was so traumatised by this experience that I had problems allowing myself to vomit again for many years after that horrific treatment. I was never able to eat porridge after this. I still struggle with taking time off from work because I was made to feel guilty for being ill during my stay at Nazareth House.

10. The second traumatic experience I had at the home in Derry concerns the vicious beating of another girl by one of the nuns. I was in the toilets one day washing my hands when suddenly another girl came in with a nun at her heels. I do not know the name of the nun or the girl. When the girl was cornered the nun started beating her with a very thick stick from head to foot. She was beaten so badly that she was covered in blood and she was screaming and wailing like an animal in distress but no one came to help her including myself. I just froze on the spot and I remember feeling completely powerless, yet so guilty for not coming to her defence. It was like I was paralysed in that horrific moment because I knew that if I tried to interfere I would be beaten also. I was in survival mode. I felt so guilty for not helping this poor girl that I suffered from a recurring nightmare after that incident, and well into my twenties, that I was being buried alive.
11. My sister HIA 394 was like a surrogate mother to me due to my mother's prolonged illness and she had tried on several occasions to reach me on the second floor and come to my rescue but the nuns and monitors always prevented her from doing so.
12. Not everyone in the home was unkind, like any groups there were good and bad. I specifically remember a young nun who sometimes allowed me to warm myself

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at the hall radiators, however, she only did this when no other nuns were around as this kind of behaviour was frowned upon by the other nuns. I think her name was [REDACTED]

13. The institution did not have a very high level of cleanliness. We all shared the same dirty bath water. I remember periods when all the other children were infected with head scabs. At times everybody in the home was covered in lice and fleas.
14. Myself, and my siblings, finally 'escaped' from Nazareth House in September 1963. This was the happiest day of my young life. We were taken home to our parents in Omagh.

Life after care

15. This ugly period in my life has caused me to suffer from deep depression and feelings of worthlessness and helplessness. I started suffering from depression in my teenage years. I had suicidal feelings. I have been scarred by my experiences as a child in Nazareth House. With the help of psychotherapy and self help groups I am finally coming to terms with this brutal experience, and the realisation that I am no longer a helpless child, or a victim.
16. I still suffer from nightmares and I would awaken from the nightmares in a cold sweat I would turn to Jesus for comfort and strength to help me keep going. I still have conflicting feelings about religious communities that pretend to be charitable, but are anything but. I would describe myself as a Christian Buddhist. I am spiritual and I believe in Jesus.
17. Unfortunately, as a result of being so badly abused by those people who were supposed to look after me during the formative years, I still have difficulty trusting people or sustaining intimate relationships. I was married for [REDACTED] years and I have been with my current partner for [REDACTED] years who is very understanding and supportive. I have no children of my own. I have been so traumatised by my own experiences as a child that I didn't want to risk having a child that would

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suffer abuse that I did. My family were not rich but we were close and my parents did the best they could for us. We got what was important in life. I received a good education and I have [REDACTED] degrees. I was a [REDACTED] and now I work for a [REDACTED] company in the [REDACTED] industry as office manager and translator. I have pushed my feelings to the back of my mind and suppress them as much as possible with the help of psychotherapy.

18. I am close to my siblings in Northern Ireland and I try and visit every year. My two sisters [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] HIA 394 suffer from [REDACTED] and I have read an article recently which stated that this is common amongst children who were in institutions and abused. At present I suffer from sensitive hands and feet and it is getting worse. I practise yoga and try maintain a healthy lifestyle in order to assist with my health issues.
19. My time in Nazareth House was like a prison sentence and I thought I would never escape. I believe that the people at Nazareth House who were supposed to take care of the abandoned and frightened children have failed us completely. It has been almost fifty years since I left Nazareth House but I strongly believe that all these nuns who are alive today should be held accountable for the gross neglect and abuse the children residing there were subjected to and until this is done there will be no closure for me.
20. I forwarded a statement to the PSNI in Derry in June 2013 in relation to my experiences in Nazareth House.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed [REDACTED] HIA 179

Dated 12 December, 2013