

HIA REF: 377

Witness Name: HIA 377

## THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 377

I, HIA 377 will say as follows:-

Personal details

1. I was born in [REDACTED] Co Tyrone on [REDACTED] I was one of ten children. I have an older sister, three older brothers and five younger brothers. I am the fifth child in the family. My mother died suddenly from a massive heart attack on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1959. My father did his best to look after us but he died from cancer a few years later on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1963. I was 14 when he passed away.
2. After my father's death, the family was broken up. My eldest sister and brothers were old enough to look after themselves but my two youngest brothers, who were five and seven at the time, went to live with my Aunt and her husband in [REDACTED] Another younger brother went to live with a different Aunt from my mother's side of the family.
3. My grandmother wanted to look after me but the social workers would not agree to this as she was [REDACTED]

4. I was sent to Conneywarren Children's Home in Omagh along with my two other younger brothers. I ran away from the Home after a few days and the Welfare decided that I would be better off in the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast. My two younger brothers were also moved to Temonbacca in Derry but I cannot remember exactly when this happened.

**Good Shepherd Convent Belfast (April 1963 – April 1966)**

5. A social worker called [REDACTED] took me to the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast. I was told that I was moving to Belfast but I was not told where I was going to be staying. I had never been to Belfast before.
6. As we drove up to the Convent, I remember looking around at the building. It was made of red brick and there were bars on the windows. I remember asking [REDACTED] if it was a Jail. She just said 'we're here', got out of the car with my clothes and rang the bell. I realised that the building was a Convent when a nun answered the door.
7. I was then taken into an office by a nun called Sister SR 285 Sister SR 285 and [REDACTED] talked and talked and they showed me around the work places. They said that I would be happy at the Convent but that I might get upset from time to time and that would be expected.
8. I remember asking how long I would be in the Convent and they said until I was eighteen. Sister SR 285 told me that I was not allowed out of the Convent but that my brothers could visit me.
9. A few days later, one of the nuns took me down to the ironing, laundry and packing rooms. The ironing room was huge and I remember looking at the big machines in the laundry room. I was then told to help another girl fold the laundry sheets.

10. Life was tough in the Convent. I was never called by my first name, only **HIA 377**. We were woken by a bell at 7am and we went to bed at 9pm. We slept in dormitories and everyone had to be silent in the mornings and at night-time.
11. We went to Mass every morning before breakfast. I sometimes felt faint during the Mass as I had not had anything to eat or drink. Breakfast was usually porridge which I never liked. I did try to eat it but it was always full of big old thick lumps so I asked for a slice of white bread to eat instead.
12. They also gave us a lot of rice to eat which I didn't like. The vegetables were rotten and full of water. The food was very poor. After we had breakfast we went straight to work until 12.45pm. We had a 15 minute break for lunch and then we went back to work at 1pm. We would then work straight through to 5pm or 7pm depending on the workload.
13. The laundry work was very difficult and tiring. I mostly worked in the ironing room. I had to iron different garments such as shorts, towels and the white coats that bakers would wear. We did the laundry for Hotels and places like that.
14. There was so much to iron and we had to operate big industrial rollers. Everyone was scared to leave a crease in the sheets, as you would have been in serious trouble if this happened.
15. There were also times when other girls and I had to stay up all night ironing the robes for a mass when a nun or priest had died. Sister **SR 314** was in charge of the laundry and she was always very cross.
16. I remember being slapped by the nuns on two or three occasions but I hit them back. They would have slapped me across the face and one particular nun gave me a right whacking once on the hands with a ruler. I hit her back and I told her, 'I'm not here for you to hit me'. I could do that because I had a family.

17. I had noticed that the girls without families were treated very badly by the nuns. They would get more chores and heavier punishments. They were slapped harder by the nuns and would get the hair pulled out of them. They couldn't hit the nuns back.
18. The nuns did not care for or show any interest in my education. I cannot read and write and I did not receive any help with this during my time at the Convent. There were other girls in the Convent who were younger than me and they did not receive any schooling either.
19. I also remember the nuns taking us to the Nazareth House just to look at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] called [REDACTED] who was found in [REDACTED]. They would take us over to see him in groups of six or so. I remember getting very upset after I had seen him.
20. During my time at the Convent, I began to get very sick. I was told that it was due to the shock of someone close to me dying. I was very fond of my father but my sickness just went on and on. On one occasion I took a bad turn and my brother had to take me to [REDACTED] Hospital.
21. It turned out that I had problems with my blood and spleen and I was in and out of the Mater Hospital. I would get a bus with another girl from the Convent to and from the hospital for treatment. I could be with the Doctor for about 2 hours or so and the Doctor would tell me that I needed to rest but when I came back to the Convent I had to get back into my work clothes and start working again.
22. I had to do other work besides the laundry such as washing and drying dishes. We had to do this work in pairs and I remember one occasion when I was carrying dishes with a girl I had been working with. The other girl was laughing and singing and we were just having some fun but she slipped and all the dishes she was carrying fell and smashed on the ground.

23. Sister SR 285 called the other girl into the office first and she came out roaring crying. I thought that I would be in for it too when I saw how upset she was. Sister SR 285 said that she did not know where the girl was going to get the money to pay for the damage. The other girl was an orphan and did not have any family. I said that we were both to blame and that my brothers would help pay but Sister SR 285 refused. No one paid for the broken dishes in the end but I believe that Sister SR 285 was expecting the other girl to pay for the damage.

24. I recall another incident in the Convent when I was taken down to the boiler house by a woman who looked after it. When we were in the boiler house she told me to close the door. I thought this was to stop the steam getting out but when she finished stoking the boiler she put her arms around me and tried to kiss me. I'm not going to lie, I told her to fuck off to fuck. She tried to get me to go down to the boiler room with her again and I remember getting very cross. The same thing happened again with a different woman. These women lived in the Convent and I think they were in their forties at the time but I cannot remember anything else about them.

25. I was very lucky to have my family. Two of my older brothers took it in turns to visit me every week. They would bring me toiletries, talcum powder and toothpaste. They also brought my grandmother to see me. I have many old photographs from that time showing my brothers, grandmother and I standing at the Convent doors.

26. After around 18 months, my brothers were allowed to take me out of the Convent for a few hours on a Saturday. I never received any payment for the work that I did in the Convent but my grandmother would give me some money. I would save it and use it to buy clothes on my days out.

27. I remember the day I left the Convent very clearly because it was Palm Sunday. My brother came up from [REDACTED] to collect me and Sister SR 285 took me to the parlour to meet him. He had been left waiting in the parlour for 3 hours and Sister SR 285 said 'whoever let him in must have forgotten about him'. I remember it was dark by the time we were able to leave the Convent.
28. I stayed with my brother in [REDACTED] for about 6 months and then I went to live with my grandmother in [REDACTED] for a year. She had cancer of the throat and died in 1971 when she was 86.
29. After I left the Convent, I found out that I had [REDACTED] and I wasn't fit to work. In those days you could get assistance from the government and I got three twenty five per week.
30. I got married on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1970 and I have been married for 46 years. I had three children, two boys and a girl. [REDACTED]
31. After I got married, I did some home help for old people. I helped one man for 13 years despite my own ill health.
32. I was never well during my time at the Convent or afterwards. Over the years I also suffered from psychological problems and I have been admitted to mental institutions on several occasions for treatment.
33. I take over 20 tablets per day for my health problems and on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016, I was diagnosed with Cancer of the Liver. I am due to return to hospital shortly to discuss my treatment options.
34. I believe that my time in the Convent contributed to my ongoing physical and psychological ill-health.

35. I came to the inquiry to tell my story and to help make sure that the same mistakes do not happen again.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

**HIA 377**

Dated 15 . 02 2016

In response to the Applicant's Statement I would like to say the following:-

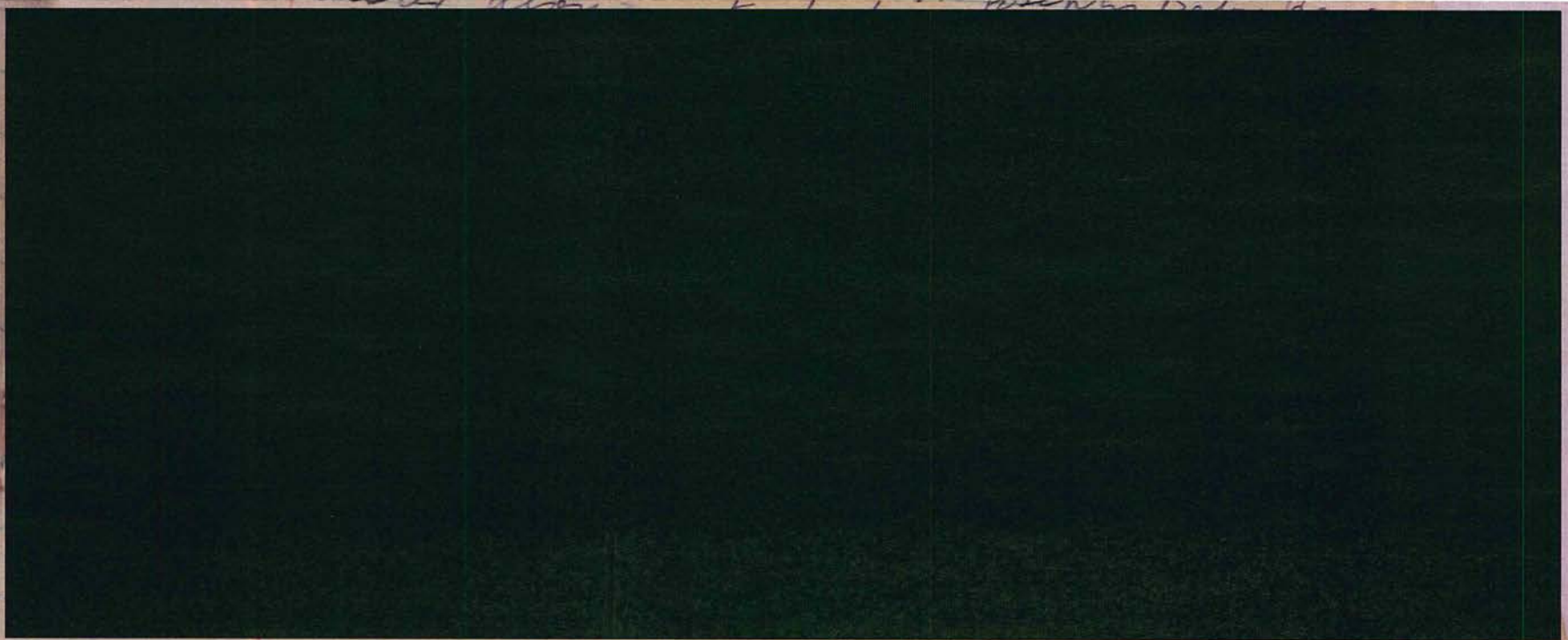
10. I was not in St Mary's at the same time as the Applicant. I began working in St. Mary's in 1968. I note that the Applicant arrived on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1963 and left on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1966. Our record states "went to her brother [REDACTED]" on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1966.
11. According to the Records held by the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Applicant was admitted on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1963 when she was [REDACTED] years old. Our records show that the Applicant was brought to St Mary's Belfast by Omagh Welfare Officer [REDACTED]
12. I read the Applicant's statement explaining that she came to us due to family bereavement (paragraph 1 GSC 080). We would often have received girls who were homeless due to family bereavement or poverty, or other complex reasons. Girls came to the Good Shepherd Sisters for all sorts of complex reasons.
13. In the Applicant's statement (paragraph 6 GSC 081) she says that the Convent building was made of red bricks. That is correct. The building was a beautiful red-brick building with honey-coloured bricks surrounding the windows and doors.
14. In the Applicant's statement she says that there were "bars on the window" (paragraph 6 GSC 081). That is not correct. There were no bars on the windows.
15. In the Applicant's statement (paragraph 7 GSC 081) she says that she was greeted by a "nun called Sister SR 285". I believe this may refer to Sister SR 285 who, as stated above, was Sister in Charge of St Mary's from 1963 until 1966. Sister SR 285 [REDACTED] was a qualified nurse (SRN). She died on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1999.
16. I note that the Applicant states that Sister SR 285 and the social worker tried to reassure her that she would be happy at the Convent (paragraph 7 GSC 081). Sister SR 285 would have done everything in her power to ensure that ladies were made feel welcome, and settled in.
17. I note that at paragraph 8 (GSC081) the Applicant was told she would have to stay in St Mary's until she was 18 years old. I note that the Applicant was placed with the Good Shepherd Sisters by the social worker. If the Applicant was in the care of the local authority, and the County Welfare Committee placed a child with the Good Shepherd Sisters, it was up to the local authority to decide how long the child remained in care.
18. I note that at paragraph 8 (GSC081) the Applicant states that she was informed that she "was not allowed out of the Convent". That is not correct. The Sisters encouraged the teenagers and ladies to participate in educational and recreational activities. Their



25. At paragraph (13) GSC 082, the Applicant complains that the work was tiring, as she had to *"iron shorts, towels and the white coats that bakers would wear"*. In the laundry, the Sisters worked together with the ladies. Towels were not ironed; they were dried in tumble driers and folded. White Coats were pressed on large mechanised pressers, they were not ironed by hand. She is correct in recalling that there were industrial rollers. These rolled large items such as sheets and tablecloths. There were shirt machines for pressing the shirts. Most of the work was mechanised.
26. I note that the Applicant says (paragraph 13 GSC 082) that they were *"scared to leave a crease in the sheets, as you would have been in serious trouble if this happened"*. They were taught to take a pride in their work, learning to distinguish between a well finished product and something that had to be done again. I recall that they were interested in acquiring skills and training.
27. At paragraph 14 GSC 082, the applicant says she had to *"stay up all night ironing the robes for a mass when a nun or priest had died"*. I remember nothing like that occurring during my time in St Mary's. Work in the laundry finished at 5pm. No one stayed *"up all night"* ironing.
28. At paragraph 14 GSC 082, the applicant says *"SR 314 was in charge of the laundry and she was always very cross"*. SR 314 is SR 314. She is still alive, and is a very kindly person. SR 314 would have been very young at the time to which the Applicant is referring. No one was shouted at or hit. Each lady was taught how to do a job properly and acquire skills so that they could find employment to support them in independent living. As Sisters in formation, it was impressed upon us that the culture and approach of the Good Shepherd Sisters to their task is one of kindness, understanding and love.
29. I was surprised to read what the Applicant stated at paragraph 16 GSC 082 that she was *"slapped by the nuns on two or three occasions"*. I was also very surprised to read the Applicant's reference to *"hair pulling"* at paragraph 17 GSC 083. There was no corporal punishment in the 1960s in St Mary's. We were trained in formation that it was forbidden to strike a child or any lady. We engaged with one another on the basis of mutual respect. From the time I arrived in Belfast in 1965, I did not see a nun hit anyone, or strike anyone, and I certainly saw no one pull another person's hair in the manner described by the Applicant. I read also with surprised that the Applicant states that she hit a nun and shouted at her. I do not believe that violent behaviour would have been tolerated in St Mary's, either from a Sister or from a lady or teenager.

30. I read with puzzlement the Applicant's references to other girls being given "*more chores and heavier punishments*". I agree that everyone was assigned a specific chore to help in the running of the house (eg. sweeping the floor, or tidying a bedroom). I read the Applicant's statement at paragraph 22 GSC 083 when she complained that she was also made to wash and dry the dishes with another girl. I accept that teenagers may not like to wash and dry the dishes. However, no one was assigned chores by way of punishment. The only punishment that I can recall was the withdrawal of privileges, such as not being allowed to go out for a treat to the sea-side on a day trip if someone had misbehaved gravely. I do not remember any other forms of punishment in St Mary's during that time.
31. At paragraph 18 GSC 083, the Applicant states that the nuns did not show any interest in her education and that consequently she cannot read and write. The Applicant arrived with the Good Shepherd Sisters when she was 15 years old, so presumably she would have been already attending school from the age of 5 years old when she was in the care of her parents. Presumably she would have had 10 years of schooling by the time she arrived in St Mary's. In accordance with section 33 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947, which I understand came into force in Northern Ireland in 1957, the compulsory school-going age was from 5 years to 15 years. The Good Shepherd Sisters placed great emphasis on education and personal development. I understand that the Inquiry has furnished the Congregation with a report prepared by Kathleen B. Forrest dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 1953 (GSC 5003) referring to children in the Sacred Heart Home Belfast stating: "*Have singing, elocution, dancing classes and girls go out to ordinary school and to do shopping for Home*". This demonstrates that from at least 10 years prior to the Applicant's time in the Good Shepherd Sisters in Belfast, the Sisters ensured that children of compulsory school-going age went out to the local school together with the other children in the local community. In general, St Mary's accepted teenagers who were past compulsory school-going age, but educational classes were offered within St Mary's. The Inquiry has been furnished with a document relating to the Congregation's charitable activities in Belfast (GSC 5012 – GSC 5028) which states at GSC 5020: "*Girls under school leaving age attend local schools [...] Those who have left school have every opportunity of furthering their education. Classes in cookery, needlework, arts and crafts, music (vocal and instrumental), shorthand and typing, and First Aid are available in the Centre*". The Inquiry has also been furnished with a visitation report dated 12<sup>th</sup> February – 16<sup>th</sup> February 1962 which states: "*All the teenagers receive lessons in the three R's and commercial*" (a further





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Date of Birth. [redacted] Brought  
here by Omagh Welfare [redacted] 7.4.1963

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