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HIA REF: 361

Witness Name: **HIA 361**

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**THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF **HIA 361****

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I, **HIA 361** will say as follows:-

**Personal details**

1. I was born on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. My maiden name is [REDACTED]. There were four children, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and me. I was the youngest. Our father already had a daughter and a son from a previous marriage, his first wife having died in childbirth.

**Nazareth House, Belfast, [REDACTED]**

2. I was admitted to Nazareth House in 1941, from when I was two years of age. My brothers were sent down to Nazareth Lodge. My sister was put in Nazareth House with me but I didn't know she was my sister. I was in the infirmary initially because of my age, but my sister would have been in one of the older classes.
3. I can recall two nuns, **SR 112** and **SR 145** who were in Nazareth House whilst I was there. **SR 112** wasn't very high up the hierarchy, but she was in charge of the nuns that taught us. She wasn't too bad but she had her moments. **SR 145** was a nasty person. She was always slapping us for no reason.

PRIVATE

4. We had to get up at 6.00am every morning and say prayers at the end of the bed. We stripped the bed and dusted the bed frame and the nun who was in charge of the dormitory would have come round to inspect the beds afterwards. After the inspection we could remake them, but if she found fault, we had to clean the bed all over again. When we got dressed we had to put on our clothes underneath our nightdress, in the way we were taught. We weren't allowed to strip. We then went to Chapel for Mass. When we came back we were given breakfast.
5. We had mealtimes in the big dining room, and meals were supervised by the nuns. At breakfast we were only ever given one slice of bread and dripping and a cup of tea. I didn't know what porridge was and I didn't see an egg until I was about ten or eleven years of age. They introduced meat as well but it was usually bits of fat. If we didn't eat the food the first time, it would be placed in front of us again at dinner time, and if we didn't eat it at dinner, it would be there for us at supper. We tried to find different ways of hiding the food that we didn't want to eat. We tried to put it into serviettes, but the nuns soon realised. I always tried to sneak mine into the bin but if I was caught, the nun would make me take it out of the bin and eat it, even if I was sick. This happened quite regularly. To this day, I hate fat on my meat.
6. We were all trained in cleaning. We started our chores at the age of five and these would have been lighter chores. At the age of seven we would have been given something harder to do, and again a few years later, the chores would have got worse. I would work three months in the dining room, where I was responsible for six or seven tables, cleaning the tables, the legs of the furniture and the floors around the tables. I then worked three months in the kitchen, cleaning the pots and pans and floors, and then three months in the dormitories, cleaning the whole room. Then there was three months polishing the wooden floors and the marble corridors. We had to polish it on our knees. There would have been rows of girls, with pads on their knees, and by the time the last row finished, the floor would be spotless. Although we wore pads, our knees would still hurt. These chores had to be done every day

PRIVATE

before school, and even if we had to redo the chores, we still had to be in school on time.

7. We went to the primary school in the grounds of Nazareth House. We had to be in school every morning at 9.00am, with our uniform and hair spotless. Every child had a partner. My partner would be responsible for my hair and clothes, making sure they were right, and I was responsible for hers. We had to clean each other's shoes. We had to make sure our socks were darned. If there was a hole, we had to darn it with a hair clip instead of a needle. The nuns broke one half off a clip and bent the bit at the end to make the eye. We would line up and the nun would examine our darning. If she could put her finger through the hole we had to start again. We had a horrible uniform, made of very hard rough material which made our skin red. From the age of about ten or eleven years, we were given a dress for the summer. We thought they were beautiful because they were all flowery and we had never seen anything like it before. We weren't allowed to change our clothes after school. We had to wear the same dress all day, and we had to keep it clean. We were allowed out to play for an hour. There were four swings for four hundred children. I was never once on the swings. I was always a loner. I don't think I made one friend the entire time that I was at Nazareth House. I was going into my own shell. I used to stand in the corner. I didn't want anyone to notice me, particularly the nuns. On cold days, all the girls would stand beside the radiator and they would get chilblains. I never stood beside the radiator, because I wanted to stay in the corner, unnoticed by the nuns. I knew that if the nuns paid no attention to me, I wouldn't get slapped.
8. There were two teachers who came in from outside of the Convent, but I was always taught by nuns. I felt that they paid more attention to the girls that they thought were brighter. They didn't teach us anything other than religion. It was religion morning, noon and night. There was constant praying. We had to pray when we woke up, before meals, after meals, at the start of school, and before we went to bed. When I later went to school in England, I couldn't believe how much I knew about religion. My hand was always up, but it was the only subject I knew. I could barely read and I couldn't count. I could write

PRIVATE

but I wasn't good at it. I couldn't tell the time. Anything I learned after the Convent, I taught myself. I just listened to everything around me and learned.

9. Each class had a certain time during which we were allowed to use the toilet. No sooner was I back at my desk and I would need to use the toilet again. I think it was my nerves. I was always running to the toilet. When I asked to go to the toilet, the nun would say "no, you've already been". I wet the floor dozens of times and I would be sent to get the mop and bucket. This involved me walking through all of the classrooms so all the girls would know what I had done and that was even more embarrassing. And then I had to bring the mop and bucket back and rinse it and wring it, before going back to class. I would be mortified. I think I was just living on my nerves all the time. None of the girls ever made fun of each other, because we all knew what each other was going through. We all stood up for each other.
  
10. At bath time, we all had to queue up and wait our turn. We were washed in the first bath and then we were but into a second bath that had Jeyes Fluid in it. The nuns would dunk our heads to make sure that the Jeyes Fluid got everywhere and we would be crying with the stinging in our eyes. We were all washed in the same bath water.
  
11. I always had a very swarthy neck and my teeth were a different colour. In later years my doctor told me that it was a lack of vitamins in my diet. After we got washed we had a routine of showing our hands and arms, turning them round so they could be inspected by the nuns, and putting our heads down so they could check our neck and ears. **SR 145** would make me go back to rewash my neck repeatedly because my skin was slightly darker than the other girls. On one occasion she made me wash my neck eight times. I was a bit older at this stage and I lost my temper with her. I grabbed her and pulled her habit off, and I could see she had ginger hair. The other girls couldn't believe it because I was always so quiet. They were chanting but I told them to stop. I was made to stand on the marble corridor in my bare feet, with only a nightdress on. I had to stand there for hours with my hands on my head. If I was caught taking my hands off my head, I would be made to stand there for

PRIVATE

longer. This wasn't the first time I had been forced to do this. I just thought it was normal because I didn't know anything else.

12. I would never tell the nuns if I was ill. I recall getting the BCG and having a reaction to it. Dr [REDACTED] ordered a cream to be rubbed onto my skin. In the corner of the sewing room was a medical room where we had to go to receive any medication. Every time I took my top off to get the cream on, **SR 145** would slap me for no reason. She was wicked. The rash continued and I believe it was my nerves that were making it worse. **SR 112** happened to come down one morning past the medical room and heard girls screaming. She walked in on **SR 145** slapping a child and **SR 145** was sent off to Australia after that. We never saw her again.

13. After that I was terrified to tell the nuns if I was sick. There was one occasion when I was aged approximately eight years, I got a splinter on the sole of my foot, but I wouldn't tell anybody. It kept getting worse and I was limping with it. One night I could feel myself getting sick and I couldn't move the next morning. The nun shouted at me to get out of bed. She pulled the bedclothes off me and made me stand up, but I couldn't stand on my foot. I wouldn't tell her what was wrong because I was terrified of being beaten. I eventually passed out and the nuns called an ambulance. I was taken to hospital and again I refused to tell the doctors what was wrong because the nun never left my side. I eventually asked the nurse if the nun had to be there all the time, and I think she was kept out during the next examination. A nurse noticed the lines going up my leg and they had to lance my foot. They said if it had have gone on any longer I might have died. I was in the hospital for approximately two weeks, and I was dreading going back to the Convent. A nun visited me in the hospital at the same time as she was visiting another girl from the Good Shepherd. The nun was giving this girl a really hard time, saying it was about time that she should be out of hospital and back to work, even though the girl was really ill.

14. The nuns were very cruel. They never taught us anything positive. They just criticised us over everything. There was no affection or praise. Everything had

PRIVATE

to be perfect. If we were taken out for a walk, we had to walk in pairs in a straight line. If we weren't in a straight line, we found out about it when we got home as we would get slapped. On one occasion we were out walking and we saw a dog. We weren't used to seeing animals and all the girls started to scream. We all got slapped as soon as we got back to the home. It always struck me that there were women who would come into the home to do little jobs, sewing and mending things, and they were bound to have seen what was happening in the home but never did anything about it. They must have been afraid to speak up. We weren't allowed to speak to these women.

15. There were high walls around the Convent as if the nuns wanted to keep us hemmed in. There was an orchard at the side of the Convent. I remember trying to get into it to steal some pears and apples, but I was caught. I was put in the corner of the classroom. From where I stood in the corner, I could see the big cupboard which had a row of canes at the back of it. They were all different thicknesses. The fine canes were the worst. On one occasion I knew I was going to be slapped. The nun had a stick which was worse than the cane, so I grabbed it off her and threw it out the fire escape. I had to go get it and she hit me anyway.
16. I don't remember there ever being any birthday celebrations in Nazareth House. I didn't know there was such a thing as birthday parties. When I was approximately seven years of age, we saw Santa Claus for the first time and it scared the life out of us. We didn't know who it was supposed to be. On one Christmas Day, we woke up and found an orange and two sweets on our beds. I wanted to savour the orange so I kept it but it went mouldy.
17. The Convent had two days that were begging days, a Wednesday and Saturday. There were a lot of children in the home, and the relatives generally didn't contribute to our upkeep. There were old people as well, but we rarely saw them.

PRIVATE

18. My sister and I never met each other in the Convent. I didn't even know I had a sister or brothers. Looking back on it, it feels as if they deliberately kept us apart.
19. On the first Sunday of every month family members were allowed to visit. I never had a visit the entire time I was in Nazareth House. Neither my mother nor my father ever made any attempt to visit. I would stand and pray that somebody would come in to see me.
20. One day my father arrived to take us out, despite the fact that he had never made any attempt to visit us during all the years previous. I was about thirteen years of age. My sister was fifteen. The nun said [REDACTED] "you're wanted". I didn't know where I was going but I had to go up to a posh part of the Convent. My sister was waiting but I didn't know who she was. We weren't introduced. She was on one chair, and I was in another, and in walked my father, saying he was taking us out. Meeting my father was like meeting a stranger. He didn't make any effort to get to know us. This was the first time I ever met my sister. She was a very quiet person whereas I was quite rebellious.

#### Life after care

21. My father brought us to England, where he had a greengrocer's shop. He was a very hard and strict man, and I had had enough of that in the Convent. I wasn't prepared to go through that again so I rebelled against it. We never agreed about anything. I got the impression he took us out of Nazareth House because he expected us to work in his shop. He didn't want me to go to school but the Authorities in England insisted and I was delighted.
22. I found it very hard when I came out. I found it was actually ten times worse than the Convent. My father and my uncle sold the shop and decided to buy a farm near [REDACTED]. I was always running away, and I always ran back to the Convent in Ballymascanlon. I didn't know anyone else. I wasn't keen on going back to the nuns but they were the only people I knew. They kept returning me to my father but I knew one day I would leave and not go back. Eventually

PRIVATE

my father threw me out when I was about seventeen or eighteen years of age. I got accommodation of my own and that's when I got my independence. I met a lady called [REDACTED] who let me lodge with her until I got married. I call her my adoptive mother.

23. [REDACTED] persuaded me to look into my background and I tried to find answers. I went to [REDACTED] but every door was closed. Nobody wanted to tell me anything. At one stage I was working in a hotel in [REDACTED]. My mother came to visit me but I had no idea who she was. She asked to see me, and we chatted but I wasn't really interested. She said that she hadn't been able to get to see me before then. I only saw her once after that, when she visited me in hospital. Both of my parents have refused to tell me the reasons why we were put into care. My sister has passed away now. We kept in contact over the years but we weren't very close. I never really got to know my brothers. I only met my half-sister, [REDACTED] once, at my father's funeral. I don't know anything about my half-brother.

24. I used to resent people who had a proper family, particularly people who don't appreciate what they have. I would have given anything to have a family and a home. I have a very good family now and I am very lucky. I have two daughters and one son, and eight grandchildren. I was determined to give my children a normal home life. I was determined that they would not go through what I had to. My children were always taught about being respectful to their elders, and my grandchildren all have their own chores around my home, so it would seem I have learned some good things from the nuns. My experiences have taught me to be very independent and strong.

25. The nuns made my life a misery. They could do whatever they wanted to us. I didn't have a childhood or even a teenage phase. I would love to have my childhood back. For years I found it hard to make friends. I'm very cautious if I meet somebody, and I find it very hard to trust people. I never went to counselling and I never reported the abuse I suffered to police, because I never thought anyone would believe me.



PRIVATE

Statement of Truth

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

Signed **HIA 361**

Dated 25-7-2014