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HIA REF: 299

Witness Name: HIA 299

THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 299

I, HIA 299 will say as follows:-

Personal Details

1. I was born in Belfast on [REDACTED] My mother was called [REDACTED] and she married when she was very young; only nineteen years old. Her husband was forty when they married. He was a commercial traveller. If he came home and found she was not in the house he would get angry. He started to hit her until she left him after five years and took my two older half brothers, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] with her. I was not born at this time.
2. My mother then went to work as a housekeeper for a much older man who lived on his own and had a shop in [REDACTED] He was called [REDACTED] and he was sixty-seven years old when my mother went to work for him. She stayed there with her two sons and I was born two years later. I was given the same surname as my two half brothers (i.e. [REDACTED] but I found out in recent years that I had a different father and my father had been in the Army. I was born in 1937 and then I had a half sister called [REDACTED] born after me. [REDACTED] was her father. [REDACTED] was seventy-three when [REDACTED] was born. He died when he was eighty-three. He asked my mother to put [REDACTED] in the bed beside him when he was sick and dying and she woke up to find that he

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had passed away and it was a very great shock for her. [REDACTED] had always treated me well.

3. My mother's husband had harassed her a lot as he was not happy about her wanting a divorce and giving other children his surname when he was not their real father. The parish priest, Father [REDACTED] and the police got involved at that stage. In fact the parish priest and police had been involved for some time as my mother had been subjected to domestic violence and they had been involved in her earlier marriage problems with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] father.
4. When we stayed with [REDACTED] he had accommodation attached to his shop but there was only one bedroom with a huge double bed and we all slept in the same bed. [REDACTED] kept a shotgun in the shop behind the counter. I recall one day I was inquisitive about the gun and I pulled the trigger and the thing went off and blew a hole in the ceiling and brought a tin of paint down on top of me. It must have been reported by a customer in the shop at the time and two weeks later the police, the parish priest and someone from the welfare authorities came and told my mother that if she did not put me in care voluntarily they would come and take me by force. We travelled to Nazareth Lodge on the Ravenhill Road twice in fact as they were not prepared for us on the first occasion. The second time we returned and they were waiting for us.
5. I was then placed in care in Nazareth Lodge on the Ravenhill Road, Belfast when I was seven years old.
6. In the Personal History Index notes provided there is mention made of my being fostered to a [REDACTED] but I have no recollection of this whatsoever. It was always my understanding that I was brought home by my mother from the hospital when I was two days old and I was baptised a week later. I was then placed in care when I was seven. I had never been in foster care as far as I was concerned and only saw reference to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] when I picked up these papers a few weeks ago.

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Nazareth Lodge, Ravenhill Road, Belfast (1944 - 1947)

7. **SR 100** was a big tall nun and she was in charge of the junior group of children. She grabbed me by the arm when my mother left me off at the home and she did not even give my mother time to say goodbye. She just told my mother not to come back to visit me as it would only upset me. The day she placed me in care was the last time I ever saw my mother. I never received any visitors the entire time I was in Nazareth Lodge.
8. I was in a dormitory with a lot of other children. The whole floor held about 120 kids in total. The beds were warm enough but food was very scarce; the food we got was bad and I was always hungry. We got bread and dripping and porridge every third morning. The bread and dripping was really poor quality food.
9. **SR 100** was in charge of us in the dining room. **SR 101** was a helper. **SR 101** was a good kind person but **SR 100** would walk along the tables and if you weren't forcing yourself to eat the bread and dripping she would give you a crack across the head. She would do this with a closed fist; she was really cruel. She would whack you between the ears. If you were standing up and she wanted you to do anything she would grab you by the throat and lift you up off your feet. She was big and strong and intimidating. **SR 101** used to feel sorry for us sometimes and she would say to us "Don't worry, she'll settle down".
10. We would get up and wash every morning. There were no showers at that time, just baths in the wash house and some hand basins. We went to church and then we had breakfast. We all had chores to do six days a week. We cleaned the windows in the dormitories and they were extremely high windows and we made our beds. The walls, floors, stairs and rails on the staircases in the home were all made of timber and it was all highly polished. The floors were waxed and polished. We were constantly waxing and polishing the floors and all the wooden surfaces in the home. When we

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completed the cleaning in the home and the dormitories we then had to clean the church, all the pews and the floors there also had to be cleaned. The entire building was cleaned by children aged between six and twelve. SR 100 SR 100 had a little unit in the corner of our dormitory where she could constantly watch us and that is where she used to live.

11. SR 100 was a cruel nun. I saw her hit a lot of children. She would grab them by one arm and swing them into the wall. She never used a strap or a stick to punish me; she would use her hands or her closed fists. Sometimes she would get you by the hand, stand on your feet and stretch you up. I recall one day we were waxing a staircase and one of the spindles broke and was put back in place again by one of the children. When SR 100 came to inspect our work, someone leant against the rail and it fell down again. As I was the closest to the rail she picked up the spindle and cracked me across the knee with it leaving a scar that is still there to this day. It was never x-rayed and I was never taken to hospital as a result of this incident. They took me to First Aid and administered first aid themselves. I could not kneel on it as it was so painful yet SR 100 insisted on me kneeling in church all the time. I suffered a lot of pain with that injury and how it was treated.
12. SR 100 was a cruel old mongrel. She grabbed me by the left arm once when I was about seven years old and threw me against the wall and my arm was badly injured. It was never x-rayed or put in plaster and I was not sent to hospital for treatment. The nuns just put it in a sling so that it was held at an angle for three or four months. It never healed properly and still to this day I cannot straighten my left arm out properly. I worked as a truck driver in later years and there were only manually operated trucks available at that time and I always found it difficult to change gear. It continued to cause problems for me throughout my life because the wound did not receive appropriate treatment at the time and never knit together properly.
13. SR 100 was sent to [REDACTED] in New South Wales and I think she died there in her eighties or nineties. They got rid of her and sent her to retire in Australia.

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14. We had no toys to play with and no playground within the home. The only time I recall having fun in the home were the two occasions when they took us by bus to Newcastle for a day trip and we had ice cream. I do not recall any special treats at Christmas and I was never taken out of the home by my family at Christmas time.
15. I recall seeing other children in the home having picnics in the grounds outside the home once a month but my mother was warned not to come back to see me. I was put in a classroom and told not to mix with those outside and I was left to do homework or reading.
16. We then went to school on the premises. Everything was done on the premises, and we rarely got outside the four walls of the home. We only got to the playground once a week if it was sunny.
17. I had gone to kindergarten in [REDACTED] I then went to a local school for a year before being placed in care. I learned more in that year than I learned the entire time I was in the orphanage. I was fairly good at school before I went to Nazareth Lodge. [REDACTED] SR 101 and [REDACTED] SR 100 [REDACTED] SR 100 taught us and there was one lay teacher called [REDACTED] NL 34 [REDACTED] There were three classrooms in total.
18. [REDACTED] NL 34 [REDACTED] always noticed that I looked a bit down every Monday and that was because I had seen other boys in the home spend time with their families on a Sunday and I never received any visits. She asked me on one occasion what was wrong with me and I told her how I felt and she said she would see what she could do for me. She lived close to the school and she got permission to take me home for the weekend and I stayed with her on three occasions. She picked me up on a Saturday morning and brought me back on Sunday evening. Once she asked me if I knew where my home was and I told her that the nuns had told me not to get in touch with my parents. She told me she was going to try to have a look at my records and locate my home address. The nuns found out that someone had broken into the office and to their files and I think [REDACTED] NL 34 [REDACTED] had done this in an attempt to

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try to locate my home address. She was only there one week after this incident and then she got laid off.

19. When I was ten years old I recall that a Christian Brother, Brother Conlon, came to talk to boys in the home about going to Australia. He came in 1946 as soon as the war had ended. We had to sit a test in order to qualify to get to Australia. It was a three to four page questionnaire that took about half an hour to complete and all the boys selected for Australia took the test. Brother Conlon brought books about Australia and told us that it would be good there, the aboriginals were great, there was plenty of orchards and fruit and we would never go hungry, there was plenty of open space and we would not feel confined by four walls and that we should not worry about going there. No-one ever asked me if I wanted to go to Australia. I had no idea where Australia was but I was convinced by his description of the country.

20. My mother was never told about my being transferred to Australia and they never sought her permission.

21. The nuns fitted me out with clothes for the trip. The last thing they did was change my name from [REDACTED] to **HIA 299**. I have no idea why they chose the name **HIA 299** as it has no connection to me but I think they wanted to ensure that I could not be traced. They told me not to change my name back when I got to Australia as all my papers had gone through immigration. However, I did stick with my original name and I have [REDACTED] currently on my passport.

22. My child migration document notes my name as **HIA 299** and it has been signed by the Mother Superior of Nazareth Lodge, Sister **SR 102**. She has also signed the form for and on behalf of the Catholic Council for Child Welfare, Coleshill, Birmingham. My medical form was dated 15th July 1947 and **SR 102** has again signed this form in place of my parent or guardian.

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Sailing – (29 August 1947 – 22 September 1947)

23. We got a ferry to Scotland and joined up with a group from Londonderry in Scotland. We got a train and did another pick up in Wales and travelled on via train to England. We stopped in London and picked up other child migrants along the way. The group was growing in size all the time. I do not recall doing any overnight stopover in London but we got to Southampton and sailed on the SS Asturias. This was an old troop ship from the war. The front end of it had been torpedoed and patched up but it was an old ship. It did two further trips and they scrapped it after that.

24. I was often sea sick on the voyage. Brother Conlon was the guardian on board the ship with us. The food was good and we were treated well on the voyage. There was no schooling for the boys on the trip and we just ran around the ship most of the time.

Bindoon (22 September 1947 – 15 December 1962)

25. We arrived in Fremantle and were taken by bus to Clontarf for lunch. They then had a roll call and split the children up and they went in four different directions. Twenty of the boys went to Bindoon. I arrived at Bindoon which was a 17,000 acre site that had one small building that was not even finished. The foundations for the building had been laid before the war and **BAU 1** **BAU 1** returned to Bindoon after the war to finish the job he had started. They needed to populate the orphanage and to get the Catholic institutions built up. They needed someone to do the manual labour.

26. I was born on [REDACTED] and the Brothers changed my date of birth on arrival at Bindoon to [REDACTED] making me a year older. It was **BAU 2** **BAU 2** who changed my date of birth and I think they did this so that they could put me on to manual work as soon as possible.

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27. The food was better at Bindoon. I recall getting fresh fruit which we never got in Nazareth Lodge.

28. We did not get a good education at Bindoon as the focus was more on helping with the construction of the site. We might have had two to three hours schooling during the day but then we would be sent out to collect rocks or help with the manual work. I trained for five years as a plumber there. I was taught these skills by **BAU 3**

29. Brother Conlon who had sailed from Southampton to Fremantle with us also came to Bindoon and I worked with him doing the fencing around Bindoon. We would fence an area of about half a mile a day. He was about seventy-five at the time and still working although he mainly supervised the work. He was a good Brother. He never hit me and I never saw him hit any of the other boys. I think he died at Bindoon.

30. I never saw anyone from Northern Ireland or the British Government come at any stage to find out how we were getting on in Australia.

31. **BAU 1** was in charge at Bindoon. He hit and beat me on several occasions and the boys lived in fear of him. He died in 1954. He had in fact just retired at that time and was on his way back to Ireland for a visit with his friend, **BAU 1** who was the **BAU 1**. He took a massive heart attack and **BAU 1**. He died and they buried him at Bindoon **BAU 1**. However, there was a lot of hatred shown towards **BAU 1** due to his cruelty to the children **BAU 1**

32. When I left the orphanage they sent me six hundred miles away up North to work on a sheep station because a farmer had written to **BAU 1** and asked them to send someone up to help on the farm. At that stage I had completed five years of my apprenticeship as a plumber and that was the type of work I wanted to do rather than farm work. **BAU 1** told me to go

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there and try it for a year and they would get me a plumbing job when I came back.

33. I was supposed to be picked up at the station but the farmer and his aboriginal employee who were supposed to collect me got drunk and I had to spend the night at the home of a local police officer so things did not get off to a good start. I worked there for a few years and saved up enough money to get back to Ireland when I turned eighteen. When I went to the Child Welfare Department to arrange my return to Ireland they said I could not leave Australia as I was under contract to remain there until I was twenty-one.

34. The Child Welfare Department took half my pay and they were to hold it in trust for me until I was twenty one. As soon as I turned twenty one I asked for my savings and was told that as they had helped me out buying me the clothes I needed for work I would only receive half the amount I had expected to receive. I was furious about this and also about the fact that they had blocked me from returning to Ireland when I was eighteen.

35. I stayed another five years and got married in 1959 to a [REDACTED] girl. She was also sent to Australia as part of a child migrant scheme from her country. We have been married for fifty four years. We have four children, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren. I never had any love or kindness shown to me in early life so it was difficult to show affection to my family but I never took my past out on my family. I have always been very protective of them.

Life after care

36. I suffered depression in the 1970's. It was fairly severe and lasted for a number of years. I never received any counselling.

37. I was assisted by Margaret Humphreys of the Child Migrants Trust about thirty years ago when I tried to trace my relatives. She gave my birth name and the name **HIA 299** to the Sisters at Nazareth Lodge but they said I was never

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there and blocked my search. Margaret commented that they had made things difficult for her to locate my relatives.

38. My brothers [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] had left Ireland and lived in England for twenty-five years which complicated my search. My sister [REDACTED] had got married at nineteen and I did not know her married name so things were going against me. I traced my brother [REDACTED] first. I contacted him just before 2000 by phone. He was pleased to hear from me and invited me to lunch not realising that I was in Australia. He told me that [REDACTED] had died of a heart attack in 1960. He never knew that I had been sent there and he had never been told that I had been placed in care in Nazareth Lodge, Belfast. I also contacted [REDACTED] [REDACTED] said that he and [REDACTED] had been out looking for me for two weeks after I disappeared. They had no idea what happened to me.

39. My mother died in or around 1970 due to cancer. She was in her seventies when she died. She was still living in the house where I was born and my nieces live there now. I go back and stay with my sister [REDACTED] when I visit Ireland.

40. Following the apology by former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on 24th February 2010 a £6million Family Restoration Fund was established. The fund was intended to restore family connections if possible. I visited Ireland on two occasions via this scheme. I have made five trips to Ireland in total. Two of these trips were funded by the Christian Brothers themselves from a fund they set up to assist child migrants. I visited in 2000 and 2004 and these trips were funded by the Australian government. They paid your air fare and gave you \$2000 AUD spending money and we were allowed to make two trips under this scheme.

41. I recall on one trip I met up with my sister [REDACTED]. She was working in a hotel called [REDACTED] and she did late night shifts. She would ring me to come and pick her up from work but she wanted me to stay in the car and not come in to the hotel or tell anyone that we were related. She would not tell her

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neighbours either if they met me because she was so embarrassed about our history.

42. In 2010 I received \$45,000 AUD under the redress scheme here in Australia for anyone who suffered historical institutional abuse.

43. I also received \$10,000 AUD as a result of being a beneficiary in the will of a [REDACTED] who owned the land where Bindoon was located. Those boys living in the home from 1952 – 1956 were informed that they were to benefit from her will.

44. For many years I could not sleep at night with the nightmares I suffered about my time in care. I would wake up in a cold sweat and was always glad to see the daylight. In fact I used to sleep in the afternoons to avoid the dreams and thoughts that always came to me at night. This is the first time I have told my story in over seventy years. I have never even told my own family the full story about my past.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

HIA 299

Dated

22nd 10-2013