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HIA REF: 326

Witness Name: HIA 326

## THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 326

I, HIA 326 will say as follows:-

Personal details

1. I was born on [REDACTED] Downpatrick. My mother was called [REDACTED]. She was unmarried when I was born. My father's name was [REDACTED] and he was a wealthy businessman. He was well respected in the Catholic church and my mother's family were poor so they were never going to be together. My mother went to court when I was five months old to fight for me as my father's family wanted me and her last words to my father were "you will never see this child again". When she walked out of the court a nun said to her that they would give her child a good home. They agreed to take me until she got herself sorted out and then she could come back and get me.
2. My mother placed me in Nazareth House when I was about five months old on the understanding that she would come back for me when she was established and working in England.

Nazareth House, Belfast (1945 – March 1950)

3. My name was unlawfully changed from [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and my birth date was changed from [REDACTED] [REDACTED] did

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not discover this until I was twenty one years old and received my papers from the Child Welfare Department.

4. My mother went to England after she left me in the home. She was going to set up a new life in England and then come back and get me. My mother returned to Nazareth House to take me home when I was twelve months old. She was told by the nuns that I had been adopted and was living in England. My mother had not signed any papers authorising my adoption but she was pleased that I had been sent to a good home.
5. In March 1950 I was sent out to Australia on the SS Asturias. My mother did not sign any papers consenting to my migration.
6. I remember being terribly sick on the boat. I don't recall who was looking after us on the boat, it must have been nuns. I recall live music on the boat. There would have been a lot of children on the boat although I cannot recall how many came from Belfast. I think there were about half a dozen children from Nazareth House, Belfast on the ship. There were boys on the boat travelling with us. The younger ones were sent to Castledare and the older boys went to Clontarf or Tardun upon arrival in Australia.
7. I came off the boat with my coat and my suitcase in my hand and some shoes on my feet. I recall those things being taken from me when I arrived and I never saw them again.

**Nazareth House, Wembley - St Joseph's Orphanage - (1950 – 1960)**

8. On arrival I was taken initially to St Vincent's Foundling Home in Wembley. I was moved to St Joseph's Orphanage which is on the same site when I was six where I stayed until I was sixteen. I had no idea why I had been placed in an orphanage or why my name and date of birth had been changed. I felt as if my identity had been virtually taken from me. You don't know anything when you are only five years old.



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9. My records at Nazareth House stated that I was undernourished and slow to develop physically. I was only thirty five pounds in weight when I came out of the orphanage in Belfast when I was five years old. I was supposed to go to Nazareth House in Geraldton but they would not take me as I was too small and undernourished.
10. The nuns gave us dreadful beatings in the orphanage. I think my hearing is severely impaired now due to the beltings I got and being hit on the head all the time by the nuns. I think they were frustrated at having to look after so many children. Some of the nuns were only young girls themselves. The American and Australian nuns were more understanding but the Irish nuns were brutal.
11. If you wet the bed in the home you got a smack in the face. I recall one night I wet my bed when I was about seven years old and I tried to dry the bed all night so that I would not get into trouble the next morning.
12. I recall being told in the orphanage that I had a mother and that she wanted me back. I remember always being aware in the orphanage that I had a mother. When I was six years old a lovely family called the [REDACTED] wanted to adopt me but the nuns told the family that my mother wanted me back so I was not available for adoption. They were a farming family. I remember being allowed to spend time during the Christmas, summer and Easter holidays with this family. They had a little girl called [REDACTED] who was close to my age and they wanted her to have some company. They loved me and I loved that family.
13. When I turned eleven these visits ended and I asked the nuns why the family did not want me anymore but the nuns simply told me that the family no longer wanted to see me. I contacted the family when I left the orphanage and I visited them and asked them what happened that our contact ceased and they told me that the nuns told them that I no longer wanted to visit them. I could only put that down to the fact that I knew too much at that age. I might report to the family what was going on in the orphanage and the nuns would not allow that to happen.



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14. After these visits stopped I became a slave in the orphanage. From the age of twelve I did the night shift looking after the babies. My education ceased at that stage. I was only a child myself and I was supposed to do the night shift and then go to school for an hour but I had hardly had any sleep and so I could not concentrate at school. I did that for twelve months without ever being paid.
15. I saw horrendous things being done to young pregnant mothers in that orphanage. I was only twelve and I had to be there to look after the new born babies. I often heard young unmarried mothers who had just given birth screaming "don't take my baby away!". I should never have been exposed to those incidents in the home. I recall one nun, [REDACTED] SAU 17 [REDACTED] saying to me "you are never going to be any good" and I responded by saying "well why didn't you give me an education?".
16. I was eleven when I took my period in the orphanage. I thought I was dying. When I told one of the nuns I got a smack across the face. I said I was bleeding and she said "what have you been doing you dirty girl". I had to go to one of the other girls and tell her and she told me not to worry and explained that it happened to girls each month. There was no sex education and no-one explained to us that this was going to happen to our bodies. They did not have pads in those days either and we had to wash our own each month. They would give you rags and if they were not kept clean they would give you another smack in the face. We were made to stand in front of the class if we took our period. That was our life. The nuns were just horrible people and they should never have been allowed to treat children in that way.
17. When I was thirteen I was sent to work in the laundry. I was exposed to a lot of noise in the laundry and I think this is a further reason why my hearing is so badly impaired now. I recall having to push heavy sheets through a mangle. I received no education at all from the age of thirteen until I was fifteen, almost sixteen.
18. I never saw anyone from the Child Welfare Department throughout my time at the orphanage.

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19. When I was almost sixteen the nuns told me I was leaving the orphanage and going to a home to look after a family with five children. I had to get up during the night to look after their new born baby. I was not paid very well in that job. I worked for that family for about a year and then I went to another family and another family. I felt as if my entire life was going to be spent looking after children until another girl from the orphanage met me one day and said she was going to get me out of there and away from having to look after children. She suggested I live with her and her friends and work with them in a commercial laundry. I went to work there because at least it kept me away from the orphanage and from looking after children.
20. I met my husband around that time. He worked for the railways and then joined the police force. We married in our early twenties and we have been married forty seven years.

#### Life after care

21. My husband and I had three children and when my youngest girl was twelve I decided to look for my birth mother. It took twenty years however to find her. I was not called [REDACTED] my name was [REDACTED] My date of birth was [REDACTED] and not [REDACTED] When I met my husband I was known as [REDACTED] When we wanted to get married I had to send to Ireland to get my birth certificate and my mother's birth certificate and that is when I saw a different name and a different date of birth.
22. I had to contact the Child Welfare Department at that stage and I remember asking them why I had not seen any representative from their department whilst I was in care. They said they did visit the orphanage but I said "you never came and saw me". I remember telling them that the only time we had dolls at the orphanage was when people from the Department or similar visitors arrived and those dolls were then taken from our beds the minute they walked out the door. The nuns also did this when they would open the home up to the public on



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certain days giving the impression that we all had toys when the reality was that we never saw a doll and never got to keep any dolls.

23. A friend of mine, **HIA 274** who had also been in the orphanage was travelling to Ireland in 1986 so she put an advertisement in the local paper for me asking for anyone with any information on the whereabouts of **[REDACTED]** **[REDACTED]** to get in touch with her. She was contacted by a cousin and she told her that **[REDACTED]** daughter lived in Australia and was trying to find her. This cousin was nine years old when I was born and recalls my mother having me in her house. She said my mum and I stayed at her house for a while and then my mother disappeared and never brought me back so they had no idea what happened to me and no-one asked any questions after I had been placed in the home.
24. I attended a funeral in Perth some years ago for a former nun and **SAU 17** **SAU 17** was also in attendance at the funeral and she came over to speak to me. She apologised and asked me to forgive her for what happened in the orphanage. I told her I could not forgive her because what they did to me in that orphanage was unforgiveable so I could never turn around and be her best friend.
25. I stopped going to Church after I left care because of how awful that orphanage was and the memories stayed with me over the years. It was mainly after I found my mother that I stopped going to church because I found it very hard to accept what the representatives of the church had done to her.
26. I had also been trying to locate my mother via the Salvation Army and they had forwarded a letter to her telling her that I was trying to contact her. My cousin also told her that I had been trying to get in touch. She rang me during July 1986 and she commented that I sounded very Australian. She asked if my adopted family in England had brought me to Australia. I told her that she put me in a home and that I had not been adopted. She said she came back to get me after twelve months and was told that I had gone to a lovely family.



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27. My mother had had another child after me but never told her about me at any stage. My sister [REDACTED] was thirty five years old when she found out about me. She was going to take that secret with her to the grave. No-one other than my aunt knew she had a child out of wedlock. I wanted to meet her and my sister but she got cold feet and asked me if she could just describe me as her niece from Australia. I said I had nothing to hide and she could not describe me as her niece. I said I would not come to visit her if she was going to pretend that I was not her daughter. My sister then took the phone and said that my mother was finding it very difficult and asked me if I could be described as her cousin. I refused not to be acknowledged so they reluctantly agreed to accept me as mum's daughter. I was annoyed that the focus was on hurting my mother's feelings and no-one seemed to be at all worried about me.
28. I went on the first visit to Kent in England during December 1986 to meet my mother on my own. I met my mother at the airport and she asked me if I had brought any cigarettes for her from Duty Free. She could not accept that I had been brought up in an orphanage. She kept saying that nuns would not do that. I struggled to explain to her what my life in care was like and to convince her that I did not have a lovely life as she had thought over the years. She was a Catholic and therefore struggled to accept that the nuns would have been responsible for the treatment I received during my time in care.
29. When I went on my first trip to England it was not very good timing for me. I had three children at the time and my youngest girl was fourteen and was having a lot of problems at the time. I left her with her father and she felt I was deserting her. As a teenager she did not understand my position. She commented "you are doing exactly what your mother did to you. You are walking out on me". My trip to England was for eight weeks. It was very difficult to leave in those circumstances but I had to find my identity. I didn't know who I was. For a long time my daughter could not accept that, she even turned to drugs after I left but we are a close family and we were able to work things out.
30. My family would say that for the duration of their childhood I was with them physically but not mentally or emotionally. I was never shown how to be



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affectionate or loving and my family had to teach me how to show and accept love. My daughter [REDACTED] would say that she always felt as if I was a million miles away. However, my family realised that I needed to go on that trip. They noticed a difference in me as soon as I returned. I had found my voice and that trip enabled me to do that.

31. I went on a second trip called the "Sentimental Journey" in 1988. The Catholic Church paid for this trip. We went to Ireland and visited the Sisters of Nazareth, Belfast on this trip. One nun said to me when I went there "My God you are your father's side of the family. You look like them. If you were to walk down the road someone would say yeah that's [REDACTED] laughter". I do not recall the identity of this nun.

32. It was during this visit to Nazareth House, Belfast that one nun showed me a register entry where it noted that my mother had made one payment towards my upkeep to the nuns after she placed me in the home but that was the only payment she made to the nuns. My name appears in the register entry as [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

33. I went to look for my father in Downpatrick during this trip but we just missed him by ten minutes. I had returned to my cousin's house to see where I was born and my cousin said she used to work with [REDACTED] so she took me to the markets to see him and we had missed him by ten minutes. I went on television when I was in Ireland and made an announcement asking if anyone knew the whereabouts of my father. A man rang me in response to this announcement and said he knew my father and he would tell me about him when I returned home to Australia. He said he would call me but he never did. I think it was my father who made this call. I never got to meet my father so when I returned to Australia I wrote to him. I enclosed photographs of my children. I sent the letter by recorded delivery so I know it was signed for upon receipt. I think he received the letter but I think it was his wife who signed for it. He never wrote back to me.

34. My daughter [REDACTED] became a single mother when she was quite young. She remained a single mother and is now a grandmother and I am a great



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grandmother. [REDACTED] had a difficult childhood but she and I have been able to heal our relationship in adult life.

35. My mother died from cancer in February 1989 only a few years after we met each other. We had kept up good correspondence with each other from the date we met. However, she repeatedly refused to accept that the nuns could have treated me cruelly or lied to her about my whereabouts. I had got on well with my sister [REDACTED] that year but after my mother died she wrote to me and said she did not need to have me in her life any more.

36. I can show love to my family in certain ways but I am not really a very demonstrative person. I struggle to show affection as I never knew what affection was and it was never shown to me.

37. I have kept in touch with a lot of the girls from the orphanage but we have all closed off our memories from the home. It is our only way of coping with our past. We are very close friends.

#### Statement of Truth

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

Signed

**HIA 326**

Dated

19-6-2014