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HIA REF: 250

Witness Name: **HIA 250****THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF **HIA 250**

I, **HIA 250** will say as follows:-**Personal details**

1. I was born on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. My maiden name is **HIA 250**. I was a child that had been kept a secret because I was born outside marriage.

Nazareth House, Belfast, 30th May 1955 – 16th September 1972

2. I think I came from Nazareth House, Portadown to Nazareth House, Belfast when I was five years of age, although the records would suggest I was received into Nazareth House when I was aged two years. I believe I was put into care by my grandparents.
3. I remember going into this big room, the nursery in Nazareth House. I don't remember anything bad about the nursery.
4. After the nursery, I went into what was known as the children's part. In the garden there was a small wall with railings in between the nursery and the children's part, to stop the younger children from getting out or getting lost. There were four and five year olds on one side, and the seniors on the other

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side. I felt there would have been more freedom in the children's part. The front part of the convent was reserved for the nuns. There was a beautiful garden with flowers at the front of it. Children were only allowed in there on certain occasions but we weren't totally isolated from it. In the earlier days, around the 1960's, we would only have been allowed into the nuns' garden during the month of May to say prayers, but that all changed and the gardens were more open to both the old people as well as the children. Beside the nun's garden was the nursery garden and then the children's garden, which had swings and climbers. These were used constantly. The garden was used for skipping, netball and many other activities.

5. There were three groups, St Anne's, Sacred Heart and Our Lady's. In the early days, we were all dressed in the same clothes, a tweed skirt and a jumper. The nuns must have got one roll of material for each group, and made skirts with a matching jumper for each child. Our Lady's wore blue uniforms, Sacred Heart wore red, and St Anne's wore green. It was an easy way of identifying which group each child belonged to. This form of dress changed over the years.
6. I was in St Anne's group. There were thirty children in our group. I don't remember being a number at all. We each had our own hand-made cloth toiletry bag, with our names written on them in marker pen. I still have my toiletry bag. We kept our toothbrush and our gibbs toothpaste in it, which were renewed when necessary. In the 1970's the house mother of St Anne's was a lady named **NL 143** who then became **NL 143**. Our whole group were taken to her wedding. She passed away a year ago.
7. Our life in the convent was basic, which you would expect. We were fed and given a roof over our heads. Our basic needs were met, but there was no emotional side to it, there couldn't be. Who were we to get that off? In my view that was just a product of society in the fifties – who did care? My family did not. To me, it was worse on the outside than it was on the inside. Every child had a different background, circumstances, genetics. Some people who came

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in to the Convent still had families, and they came in with siblings, and their experiences were different from mine. I was an orphan, totally on my own.

8. When I was very young, it was tough. We slept in huge dormitories, on wrought iron beds and thin mattresses. It was simply a product of the time. There wasn't a lot of money, and the thin mattresses we had would have been standard everywhere. As a young child, moving from the small nursery to a large dormitory, with all those children, would have been traumatic. As time passed, the dormitories were split into three different groups. We had our own bed, a lovely comfortable bed, with our own wardrobe, cupboard and chest of drawers. This would have been around 1970. There was a living room for each dormitory as well, and we had a record player. The children who lived in Nazareth House before me, in the 1950's, would have had it much harder, but as we moved along, times changed and systems changed.
9. Because I was one of the older girls, I had a lot of responsibility. After we got up, I had to get the breakfast. I would roll the trolley up to the kitchen to get thirty pieces of bacon and thirty sausages, or whatever was on that day. In the earlier days, around 1960, we all ate in one huge dining room, and then over a space of time, the dining rooms were divided up, so each group had their own. It was a great transformation. I would have been about ten or eleven years at the time. The food was okay. We didn't have a choice in what we ate, after all it was not a hotel. We ate what was put on the table, and if we didn't eat it, we didn't get anything else. Once the dining rooms were divided, things were better and the food seemed to change. I remember us getting a lot of food from Marks & Spencer's, marzipan cakes, huge bags of crisps and meat.
10. After breakfast, we went to school, which was on site. I was taught by Mrs [REDACTED] Children from outside the home came into the school as well. We called them the highfalutin people. This is the language that was used. Their parents were doctors, whereas we were paupers. We got dinner in school, and then we got a meal when we came back. I recall on Sunday mornings I went to the massive kitchen, where I would have to make toast and a huge pot of scrambled eggs, enough to do thirty children.

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11. Everybody had chores, and I was responsible for making sure all the younger ones did their chores. This would be common practice. Somebody washed the dishes and somebody else dried them. There would have been another person setting the tables, and somebody brushing the floors. In the early days, we had to polish the floors in the huge rooms at the weekends. We turned it into a game. We put the wee ones on the cloths and ran them up and down the floors. Eventually we got a big buffer. At a certain age, I had to go and work in St Basil's the old people's home. We served them their meals and we entertained them sometimes as well.

12. We were bathed on Saturdays. I had to stoke the fire in the furnace every Saturday to make sure there was enough hot water for the baths. The furnace was out of bounds to the other girls, and most of them didn't even know we had one. The bath routine was quite intense. I hated it because we were made to wear a stupid old cloth to maintain our modesty. There were four baths and four rows of sinks in each bathroom. We all lined up to wait our turn to get into the bath. Two children held the sheet up while one person got bathed. We were in and out of the bath in no time because hot water was of the essence. The bath water would have been changed after a couple of girls had bathed in it. We were washed with carbolic soap. The nuns never washed us, although there would have been one on duty. There was a senior girl appointed to a junior girl to make sure she was washed and dried properly.

13. I was responsible for all the school uniforms because I was the oldest in the group. I had to work in the laundry every week to prepare the uniforms for all of the children, washing and pressing. It was very hard work but I had to do it. There were various laundries at different stages. The Convent changed over the years. In the 1950's there would have been one large laundry, with hot presses and other large machinery. This laundry was out of bounds to the children. In the early days, when we slept in the huge dormitories, we took our sheets off and put them onto a sheet in the middle of the floor. They were gathered up and thrown at the back door, to be taken to the large laundry. After the home was modernised, each group had their own small laundry, with

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a twin tub washing machine. Our socks weren't washed every day but we wanted to go to school clean so we would run into the bathroom and clean them with carbolic soap. We didn't have fires to dry our clothes, so we would ring out our socks and put them under our mattress for them to dry by the morning. I had to stitch the skirts, sewing the pleats, to make sure that they were perfect for the children.

14. I recall my First Holy Communion. We wore dresses which were hand me downs. There was nothing wrong with that. The nuns wanted the dresses kept good for the next year, so after the Mass, we changed into simpler clothes. We had a wee party afterwards with fruit and sweets. I still have photos of us in our dresses.

15. I went to St Monica's Secondary School. We had to go for assessment tests, and I was put into Class 1D, but I eventually worked my way up to Class 1B. We faced new dilemmas in secondary school. Even there we were outsiders because we came from the Convent and I believe we were treated differently because we were orphans. It was often seen in school that we were the children who were better off because the children from the surrounding areas, Cromac Street and Short Strand, said that we were the rich kids. When we had a roof over our head and hot running water, we were better off than some of the other children. The other girls at school called me a rich brat. Part of the school curriculum was dress-making so the nuns would have given me material, and I made my own clothes. I still have photos of the outfits I made, including a dress and a pink suit. We would be given recipes for cookery class, and I would take the list of ingredients up to the big kitchen. The nuns would send me off to school with the ingredients in a tin box, so we were generally more prepared for the cookery and dressmaking class than the girls who came from the surrounding areas. I even swopped school bags with my friend Betty. We had an abundance of some things, and lost out on others. I just tried to learn as much as I could. After I left St Monica's I went to Rupert Stanley college for two years and completed a secretarial course.

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16. I had no experience of a mother or father. As a child, I just lived each day as it came, however when I got older I started to ask questions about my identity. I didn't know where I belonged. Of course you cannot put this information into two lines. It goes a lot deeper. I would have been around eleven years at the time. I started secondary school, and would have heard the girls talking about their parents. This was my first experience of knowing that we were all born of two parents, so I started to ask questions about my own. **SR 31** brought me into a room with a huge cupboard, and was able to tell me that I was put up for adoption by my grandparents. She was also able to tell me the real date of my birthday, which I used to think was 17th March, because we always celebrated on that date every year. I don't remember celebrating birthdays. I can't remember getting a cake. Maybe we did and I cannot remember.
17. As a senior girl, I tried to look after the younger children in an emotional sense. I tried to do everything for them. I felt as if I was an older sister to them. When they prayed I would tell them to pray for something special. Even after I left, the children would come to my house to seek advice and guidance and I would help them whenever I could and go to meetings with them with the governing bodies. That role has stayed with me throughout my life. I was always a giver. I respect old people, and I always try to look out for those less fortunate than myself.
18. When I was around thirteen years of age, I decided I was going to live my life through music. I used to buy myself LPs or a music book, with pop songs, for sixpenny. The nuns would tell me to pray and I would say, "no, I'll sing my songs". I wanted to interpret life through music, and I think I got my inner strength from music. It was my survival mechanism. Religion was a large part of the culture in Nazareth House and I needed something for myself. I found religion gave me a spiritual aspect to life.
19. At Christmas time, there was an abundance of parties. Mackey's held brilliant parties for us, and we would have got a wee gift set of soaps or powder. There would have been a Christmas tree in the hall, and **NHB 102** the

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handyman, dressed up as Santa Claus. We put on performances every year. I remember performing Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. I was the voice of Snow White. Wonderful times. Times when you could be forget about finding out who you were and so on.

20. We had violin lessons and drama classes. We could also go to the scouts or the Girl Guides. A priest got us all second hand bikes and on Sundays we would have cycled to Holywood or Ballyhornan. The bikes were shared between the groups so we would have taken turns going out on them at the weekend. As we got older we were allowed a lot more freedom, an abundance of freedom. We were able to go to the Ormeau Park and the Ormeau baths. We were allowed to go out to the Starlight when we got a bit older. When we were sixteen years, we got a key and we would meet at the back door. We were given six pence for our pocket money every week, which we were able to spend in **SR 134** tuck shop. Some children would buy a Woodbine and a match, but if we got caught smoking, we were punished. The shopkeeper would sometimes tell the nuns what we were buying and the nun would ask us which one of us had been smoking but we would never tout. The punishment was very severe but it was our own fault because we broke the rules. The terminology used in those days does not suit today's language. We got walloped with a stick. We would get punished for stealing pears and for jumping over the wall in the Canon's house. To progress in life, we needed to take risks, to know where the boundaries were. I believe that the punishments that we were getting were mild compared to what was happening on the outside. I felt that the punishment in the school was as severe as the convent.

21. We would have gone out to families at holiday time. We were put in touch with pen friends and then we were often put out to the same families. When I was eleven years of age, I was put up for adoption. It was quite traumatic. Of course you cannot describe this in two lines. I had been sent out to visit the **██████████** family, who lived on a farm in **██████████**. Afterwards I was brought up to the parlour and the nun asked me how I would like to go and live with them. I cried and sobbed. I said no, they're not my mummy and daddy. I didn't fit in with them, being brought up in a Convent and put on a farm. That was the end

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of that. I remember going out to a family in [REDACTED] during the summer. I also went to a family in [REDACTED] called [REDACTED] I had a very good time there, but I was only ever put out to them for a very short space of time. It was very disorientating. This was because you were maybe getting to know someone special and you had to leave.

22. There were no Social Workers involved with me whenever I was growing up for a number of reasons and I cannot cover this. I feel quite sad about that, and it affected me when I left the Convent, the fact that I didn't have anybody. I believe that all children should have Social Workers, particularly at the age of seventeen when leaving care, because it is the most vulnerable time of their lives. Some other children seemed to be under Social Work.

Life after care

23. I was seventeen years of age when I left care. I was heartbroken at having to leave the home. I cried sore the first week, and would have done anything to be able to get back to the home. I had absolutely nobody. Fortunately I got a job in [REDACTED] I went for an interview and I understood that I needed to have a job to pay for a roof over my head, but it was a really horrendous time. I had to live in digs. I was told that I had to go to the Falls Road, and it was a huge culture shock. It was extremely traumatic. I was picked on because I spoke differently. At least the home was a form of security, although it was a false security in a sense, because it had to end at some stage. When I left the Convent, I didn't want to be going to back to the nuns to talk about the difficulties I was facing, as I wanted to make it on my own. I remember thinking that we were spoilt brats in the home, once I saw life from outside and how I was struggling to cope.

24. There was absolutely no post care support. Every child should have received after care, after living life in a bubble. I went into the world very naive so there was a lot of learning when I left the home. I couldn't get a house from the Housing Executive so I approached a man who owned a house in [REDACTED] Street. It was all boarded up. There were no windows, doors or proper floors. I

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asked him could I live in it, as long as I kept it to a certain standard. There was no bathroom, so I had to get a bus up the Ormeau Road to be able to wash my hair in the home. They welcomed me back.

25. Years later, in the 1980's, I went to [REDACTED] Tech to do my GCSE's. I recall that my teacher was fascinated by my stories when we were required to write about our family. She sat with me for hours listening to my stories. It was very therapeutic. I went to Jordanstown, and I then worked as a secretary for [REDACTED] for fifteen years.

26. I got married at the age of nineteen years. I got married to build a home. In the convent we were taught great skills on how to save and wash and put away and iron clothes, as opposed to throwing them away, and simply buying more. We were taught manners.

27. I think that being the oldest child in the home, and having to look after the younger children, probably benefitted me. I was taught in the home that I needed to be strong in life and stand tall. I carried stigmas all my life, which came from being an orphan and raised in a home. I believe that being an orphan had an impact on me all my life. Once you say you're an orphan, there is no safety net. People treat you differently. I found that very difficult because I didn't believe I was different from anyone else, but people presumed I wasn't going anywhere. I believe that I suffered more abuse outside the home than I did inside, because I was alone and vulnerable. The most important thing was to rise above your stigmas. I'm a survivor, not a victim. I still look after people less fortunate than myself.

28. I tried to find out about my mother when I was about nineteen years of age. I was quite newly married. My husband did not support me at all when I decided to go on this journey. I met my mother for twenty minutes. She was quite introverted and she thought I was quite extrovert. I sent her a card every year at Christmas. Both my mother and father have passed away now. This paragraph is made up of five lines, but I can assure you this would make a good book.

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29. I have been to several Nazareth House reunions. When we're together we are a team. There is sisterly bonding or something that makes us safe with each other, and we laugh about our experiences. My memories of Nazareth House are positive, even though it was tough. There were tough times everywhere. I believe that children who were in Nazareth House before us would have had it much worse than I did. When my mother gave birth, my chin was up and I had to keep it up. I survived life in the home. I believe I have a lot to be thankful for. I have to bring the positives alive.

30. My mother and father are responsible for the journey I have had to make from the minute I was conceived. Has anything changed? I ask myself this question. No, according to the latest news in England.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed _____

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Dated _____

13/11/14