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HIA REF: 85

Witness Name: HIA 85

THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 85

I, HIA 85 will say as follows:-

Personal details

1. I was born on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]
2. Due to my mother being unmarried and already having two children I was placed in care when I was one year old.
3. My brother [REDACTED] was placed in Nazareth Lodge and my older sister [REDACTED] who I knew nothing about went to live in Scotland with my grandfather who raised her as his own. I only discovered this as an adult.

Nazareth House, Ormeau Road, Belfast (21st December 1945 - 24th May 1960)

4. I do not recall much of my early years in Nazareth House, but from being a teenager in the home, the care I received and the incidents that happened to me began. The nun in charge of my group was SR 189 and she was very cruel to me. My mother visited me in the home every Thursday. She would visit [REDACTED] in the Lodge as well. I think I went to visit [REDACTED] once in the fifteen years I was in Nazareth House. There was

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no interaction encouraged between us.

5. I went to primary school onsite in Nazareth House. The nuns taught us but it was more Religion than anything else. We had to say the catechisms. There were some clever girls and the nuns picked them out and sent them to night school but they didn't bother with the rest of us. I always loved music and I used to sit under the stairs playing a mouth organ. I wish the nuns did more to encourage my passion for music. I then went to secondary school in St. Monica's on the Ravenhill Road. It was a huge school that had just opened. I felt so lost there – it was so big and different and I was used to our small class in the home. I think I only spent a year in St. Monica's.
6. I recall bath-time every Saturday night and the washing of our hair. We lined up and went into the bath one after the other. One girl would sit at the taps washing her feet while another girl was in the bath washing her body. When that girl got out, the first girl got into the bath. We were wrapped in a sheet when we got out. The water was often cold; we were afraid to ask for warm water. I remember once we asked for warm water and the nun gave it to us; it depended what kind of mood they were in. The nuns put Jeyes Fluid in the bath, which was very unpleasant and stung the skin, and would make the skin smart. Whichever nun was on duty would bathe us. When getting out of the bath our skin would be red and inflamed due to the harshness of the fluid. This continued until we reached puberty and began our period. From that time onwards we were permitted to bathe ourselves, using normal soap.
7. During bath-time our hair would be washed by the older girls in the home, as instructed by the nuns. This would consist of the girls using the same Jeyes Fluid to wash our hair. On one occasion an older girl in the home put the Jeyes Fluid directly into my ear. This resulted in my ear-drum bursting and severe pain. After the incident one of the nuns took me to the Mater Hospital in Dublin and we were told that they could not do anything for me as they were afraid of me going deaf. As a result my ear has been

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problematic for most of my life, and has continued to discharge fluid.

8. When I was experiencing problems with my ear I would visit the nun who was in charge of the sick children – **SR 145** I told her I had a bad ear and she asked me which ear it was. I pointed to it and upon telling her, she proceeded to give me a slap on the other ear saying “now you have two sore ears” and sent me on my way. I was bullied and tormented by the other girls because of my ear. I was called ‘leaky ear’ because my ear would weep and smell of discharge. This led to me isolating myself. In the home we were all very frightened of being ill, as it was not allowed in my view, and you would never be given the appropriate care and support. We did see a doctor every now and again but you were afraid to tell him anything and the nuns were always there anyway. I believe **SR 145** was removed from the home during my time there.
9. At the age of 56 years, when I lived in **SR 145** my husband and I worked in a hospital theatre and my husband told a specialist about my ear problem. They then investigated it and I had an operation on my ear to correct the problem, and it has been fine since.
10. The food in Nazareth House wasn’t great but at least we were fed. I remember being hungry all the time. We got supper at about 5 or 6pm and nothing else for the rest of the night. We got boiled eggs on a Friday but half of them were black inside. We only ever got a fried egg on a feast day – that was a treat. Before breakfast we would have to go to Mass and then we had chores to do. We were never off our knees – either praying or scrubbing floors.
11. Lots of the girls would wet the bed at night, and if we did, we were severely punished for it. It got so bad that I was too scared to go to sleep, and would pray to God and say “please God don’t let me wet the bed tonight”. When I was in my early teens the nuns made us ‘wet the beds’ walk around with nappies on. When I wet the bed, **SR 189** used to make me go down to

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the laundry with all the wet sheets and wash them by hand. There was a civilian worker in the laundry called **NHB 35** and on one occasion she hammered me with her walking stick. I was sobbing my heart out and when I came back to the dining room **SR 189** smirked and said "did you have a hard time down there?" The way I was treated that day has scarred me for life. It made me a very nervous person and even now I don't like people coming up behind me.

12. The nuns would show films, and on one occasion a nun informed us that we were going into the hall to watch a movie – Boys Town. I was very excited at the prospect of this but just as we had all settled down to watch the film, one of the nuns got up and announced that all the girls who had wet the bed the night before would not be allowed to watch the film. I was mortified by this; as were the other girls. Although this may seem petty to some people, it was very harsh and unpleasant for us. Every time Boys Town is on television now I have to watch it or record it. It feels good knowing that nobody can stop me watching what I want anymore.
13. Quite regularly, when out playing in the garden, we would be subjected to having our heads banged repeatedly by the nuns against a red-brick wall. On one particular day **SR 189** was banging my head against the wall so severely that **SR 134** announced that she thought I had had enough and **SR 189** stopped. **SR 134** saved me that day and I am grateful for that. I can't even remember why **SR 189** was banging my head against the wall – she didn't need a reason. The nuns made us feel worthless. We had no self-esteem and walked around with our heads bowed. Even later when we went out to work the nuns would always tell us not to try to get ideas above our station.
14. We were also subjected to the nuns regularly lashing out at us for no particular reason. It would involve them coming up behind us unexpectedly and hitting us on the back of the head, poking us in the back or hitting us across the legs with a cane. We could simply be walking down a corridor

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and this would happen for no apparent reason. This would also happen during mealtimes if we were caught talking. The nuns would hit us on the back of the knuckle with a spoon, which was very sore.

15. If we were caught speaking at night in the dormitory, we would be taken out of our beds and moved to sleep on the stone floor, by the back door, or on the stairs or corridors. As long as it wasn't in the dormitory and it was uncomfortable for us. One time I was sent downstairs to the kitchen to scrub the floor on my own. I was scared and for a moment I wanted to end it. There was a geyser there full of boiling water and I felt an urge to scald my hand. At the time I didn't understand my feelings but looking back, I just wanted somebody to look after me. A nun called **SR 177** came up behind me and said "I wouldn't do that if I were you **HIA 85** She must have been able to sense what I was thinking. **SR 177** taught the younger children and she was very stern but I didn't have many dealings with her.

16. On other occasions if the nuns felt like it, they would send us out into the garden with no shoes on. It didn't matter if it was snowing or raining. This would also be a punishment for wetting the bed.

17. The nuns never referred to us by our names; we were given numbers. To this day I remember I was number 16 when I was young and as I became older, I was given the number and referred to as 65. My real surname was **SR 189** and **SR 189** would tell me constantly that the name suited me, as I came from the gutter. I was told frequently by **SR 189** in particular that I was possessed by the devil and that they would get a priest to say prayers over me. The nuns used to tell me that when I was two years old I had pneumonia and all the nuns crowded round my bed saying prayers that I would live. Years later one nun said to me "we should have let you die". I can't remember which nun it was but I remember thinking I agreed with her.

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18. If you had done anything wrong in Nazareth House, you would be called into the hall with the rest of the girls, your number would be called out and you would be asked to come up to the stage. Once there, you would be told to lie down and one nun would hold both your legs in the air, whilst another nun would hit you repeatedly across the bottom with a stick, a hairbrush, or whatever implement they could get their hands on. They would also ask you to bend over a low bench or chair and again hit you repeatedly. This happened to me once and I saw it happen to other girls on numerous occasions. It was so degrading. **SR 189** usually carried out these beatings with the help of whatever nun she could get.
19. The most traumatic times for me in the home were when I was subjected to sexual abuse by the older girls. This would happen at night time or in some cases during the day, if they got the chance to get us on our own. The girls would take us to the bathroom, and make us kneel down and perform oral sex on them. They would force us to do this and push our heads towards their genital area. I was in my teens when this happened and I experienced this several times. I cannot say with certainty who these older girls were. There was one particular older girl called **NHB 41** who was a bully and physically abused me but I couldn't say if it was her who sexually abused me.
20. **NHB 41** used to pull the hair out of my head and one time I ran into the church where the nuns were praying to get away from **NHB 41**. In front of all the nuns, she grabbed me from the altar and dragged me by the hair out of there. I was screaming for help but the nuns just sat there and did nothing. I believe **NHB 41** was sent to the Good Shepherd and when you go there your name is changed. At the time I thought I was the only one this was happening to but from speaking to girls in later years I found out this was not the case. A lot of girls were sexually abused by older girls in the home. We just couldn't talk about it at the time. I don't know if the nuns were aware of the sexual abuse going on but I later heard that an older girl was caught sexually abusing a younger girl and she was sent to the Good

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Shepherd so they must have found out eventually.

21. I left Nazareth House on 24th May 1960 when I was fifteen. I was placed in a house on the [REDACTED] with a woman who was a friend of my mothers, and a boy, who I discovered was my brother. I found it very difficult to settle as I was basically institutionalised from living in Nazareth House. I was in no way prepared for life outside, and had no idea of the value of money, how to cook and I didn't know anything about the facts of life. We should have got help leaving the home but you couldn't say anything bad about the nuns in those days – it was sacrilege. I did not know how to converse or relate to other people outside the home. This was a very difficult period for me and adjusting to the outside world was a great challenge. Although I hated my time in Nazareth House, my confidence was so low, that all I wanted to do was return there.

Life after care

22. I then got employment in the [REDACTED] in Belfast as a cleaner. I worked very hard, but again my self-esteem and confidence was always very low, and I never mixed well with other employees in the hospital because of this. I worked in the [REDACTED] for a period of time and had real problems controlling my anger if anyone said anything adverse to me. On one occasion when a [REDACTED] referred to me as a 'bastard' and I knew what it meant, I retaliated and pulled her around [REDACTED] by her hair. Again, looking back, I was very angry for a long time, due to the fact that we had been subjected to so much anguish over the years and had no idea how to deal with our emotions and feelings.

23. After leaving the [REDACTED] I got employment at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] in Belfast. I left cleaning then and returned to Nazareth House to work with the elderly. However, whilst there I told a nun to "fuck off" so I was sent to the Good Shepherd. I think I stayed in the Good Shepherd for a year or so and then I ran away because I didn't like it. I ran back to

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Nazareth House which was only across the road. The head of Nazareth House called the Good Shepherd and they said they could keep me.

24. I was working with the elderly again in Nazareth House alongside a lovely nun. While I was there I had a fall out with this nun and I even took an overdose as I wanted to scare her. I am still in contact with this nun and she has turned out to be one of my best friends but I do not want to name her. I asked the Reverend Mother to get me as far away from Nazareth House as possible.

25. I was then sent to [REDACTED] County Meath where [REDACTED] This was also run by nuns. It was a very demanding job and was tantamount to slavery. The priests never did anything to me but it was out in the wilderness and I hated it so much that I ran away, back to Nazareth House in Belfast.

26. Growing up in the home, I was told regularly that no man would ever want me because I was useless and stupid, and that I would never amount to anything. As a result of this, the first man that came along and proposed to me, I said 'yes', because I felt grateful that anybody would want to marry me. At the last minute I realised that I was doing this for the wrong reason, and I left [REDACTED] and returned to Belfast.

27. On returning, I met two girls who had been good friends of mine growing up in Nazareth House. They had moved to [REDACTED] in England and were back visiting. It turned out that they worked in Nazareth House in [REDACTED] The girls told me they loved it there, and I asked them if I could go back with them. I asked the Reverend Mother to call Nazareth House in [REDACTED] on my behalf but she said no, I would have to do it myself. I eventually wrote a letter of application to [REDACTED] and was given a job in Nazareth House. I moved there in February 1966.

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28. I was working in Nazareth House in [REDACTED] when a priest called my friend and I in to his office and asked us if we wanted to end up like the old ladies who had worked there all their lives. We said no and he told us to leave or else the nuns would make us work until we dropped. That really hit home with me because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in the home.
29. I was so unprepared for life on the outside when I left Nazareth House. I felt so stupid but we were never told about things so how were we meant to know. I didn't even know what a non-Catholic was when I left the home, let alone know anything about the Troubles between Catholics and Protestants. I was so naive that when I got free herbal teabags through the door I thought they were air fresheners and hung them up around my house!
30. I married my husband [REDACTED] on 5th October 1968. He was a good man but he died six years ago. Because of the sexual abuse I suffered in the home I was unable to be intimate with my late husband. This affected my marriage deeply. Although I have two children I did not enjoy receiving them. Even though I told [REDACTED] I loved him, they were always only words to me. I didn't know what love was. It was only after he passed away I realised how much I did love him and I still feel guilty that I was unable to show him love while he was alive. I have two daughters [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. I feel like I have something to live for now.
31. I had a strained relationship with my mother after I left the home. She was a very cruel person which I only realised in later years. I was always trying to get her approval and whenever she came to visit me in [REDACTED] I was a nervous wreck. I would be running around cleaning for days and she would still find something to complain about. My mother told me lies about my father – she said he was from Scotland but I don't know if that is true. A woman my mother lived with in sheltered accommodation told me my father

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was a rich farmer who deserted her when he found out she was pregnant with me. This woman said to me "that's why she loved her son but she hated you". I had gone to stay with my mother for a month when she was ill and she died the next day before I got the chance to ask her if this was true.

32. After my mother died, I developed a close relationship with my uncle [REDACTED] who lives in [REDACTED]. He never knew my brother and I were brought up in care. He and my mum had a falling out and as far as he knew she took us back to Belfast and raised us there. My uncle [REDACTED] took me under his wing when he found out what I had been through. He put his arms around me at my mother's funeral and I pulled away because I had never had that before. When I came over to visit him, we hugged at the train station and I felt honoured because I had never trusted anyone enough to put their arms around me before. When I was in Nazareth House I knew I had family in the countryside and I asked my mother once if I could go visit them but she slapped me round the face. I later found out that when [REDACTED] was in Kircubbin he used to spend weekends with our relatives in the country.

33. In recent years I found out that I have a sister called [REDACTED] who was placed in St. Joseph's Baby Home as an infant. My grandfather took her out as a baby and brought her to Scotland where he got married raised her as his own. I have only met her once and we speak on the phone but I have never really been able to form a bond with her. I would rather talk to the girls I call my sisters who I grew up with in Nazareth House.

34. The abuse I suffered has greatly affected my personality. The fact that I had been subjected to this physical, sexual and verbal abuse for all of my childhood has had a massive effect on my life. I am only now coming to terms with what happened to me, as I have faced up to my demons, whereas before now, I was too embarrassed and ashamed to admit what I had experienced.

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35. As a result of the horrendous times I experienced in Nazareth House, I believe that it has affected me throughout the whole of my life and has had a marked effect on how I behave and how I feel.

36. Throughout my life after Nazareth House, I have suffered from low-confidence, anger management, depression, panic attacks and ill-health. I am sure that all of this is due to my terrible time at Nazareth House and I am still haunted to this day of my childhood there. It has turned me against the Catholic Church but I still say a few prayers for my grandchildren. I pray every night but I don't go to Mass. I swore once I left Nazareth House nobody would ever tell me when to go to church or pray or tell me what to do.

37. I have spoken to a policeman from the PSNI over the phone about my time in Nazareth House.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

HIA 85

Dated

24-7-14