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HIA REF: 197

Witness Name: HIA 197

THE INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE 1922 TO 1995

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HIA 197

I, HIA 197 will say as follows:-

Personal details

1. I was born on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. My mother was not married at the time, and I understand that my father passed away after a road traffic accident. I was told that my mother's family tried to keep me, so I think I lived with them in [REDACTED] for a while before I was put into Nazareth House.

Nazareth House, Belfast 1949 - 1967

2. I was brought up in care from six months of age, until I was eighteen years of age. I think my earliest memory was being in the children's nursery and rocking on a chair. I fell backwards and hit my head on a radiator. I think I was about four or five years of age. That's my only memory of being in the nursery.
3. When I moved on from the nursery into Nazareth House, I was in SR 134 SR 134 group. There were no other staff members. Life in SR 134 group wasn't good, but she wasn't the only nun who made life hard. Sister SR 134 was a bit of a bully, but she could also be fair at times. SR 31 and SR 116 however were very hard. They tended to have their

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favourite girls, and they always seemed to favour the girls who had families outside of the home. It seemed to me that the girls who didn't have any family always got it hardest from the nuns, probably because they had no one to turn to. We were also punished more often than the children who had family come in to see them. They were very harsh on us, and slapped and picked on us for very minor things. They were always crushing us. I believe the nuns knew they had to be more careful and they couldn't be as hard on the girls with families in case they were caught out.

4. **SR 134** had a cell in our dormitory. She would get us up in the morning. We had to tell her if we wet the bed. Bed-wetters were degraded by **SR 134** **SR 134** in front of everybody else, and we were told we were dirty. We had to pull our dirty sheets off the bed and take them to be washed. I recall on one occasion when I wet the bed, **SR 134** rubbed my nose in the sheets. We were then sent down to the bathroom where we were bathed in cold water. There was Jeyes fluid in the bath water. We would be degraded again in the bathroom. I believe we were wetting the bed because we were a bundle of nerves. We were being constantly humiliated. At one stage we got rubber sheets, and there was an alarm attached. If we wet the bed, an alarm would sound to wake us up, and the nun would come out and make us go to the toilet. It was an awful way to treat a child.
5. We all wore the same gingham dress, like a uniform. We had to go to church early in the morning, before we went to school. **SR 134** had long fingernails and she would pinch us on the arm really hard if we weren't paying attention. **SR 116** and **SR 31** would nip us as well. Sometimes we got a knock to the head instead, or a nip at the back of the neck. I didn't even understand really about Church as it was just a drill we were going through.
6. There wasn't an education at all. The school was non-existent in terms of teaching. All I can remember about the school is the religious aspect of the teaching. It was an education of religion and fear. **SR 134** **SR 31** and **SR 116** were teachers in the school. There was a kind of

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hierarchy. **SR 31** had the top group for the cleverest children. Sister **SR 116** had the second group. I was in the third group with **SR 134** I'm not stupid but I was brainwashed into thinking I was stupid. A child in Sister **SR 134** group was presumed to be a dunce and it was put across that we just couldn't be taught. Children who weren't good at school lived in fear. We would be called a dunce and put in the corner, in front of the whole class, with a dunce's hat on. I remember being pulled up in front of the class, feeling so bad, and being made to feel as if I was the most stupid person, while the other children would be laughing. We were punished a lot in school. The nuns would hit us with rulers and pull us by the hair. They would make us squeeze our knuckles into a fist, and then they would hit us on our knuckles with the side of the ruler. I recall all of the nuns, **SR 134** **SR 31** and **SR 116** **SR 116** doing this to me at one stage or another.

7. I went to St Monica's Secondary School on the Ravenhill Road. That school wasn't much good either. I was put to the back of the class. I believe that the teachers at school were just as bad as the nuns because they knew our background, so they weren't interested in us or our education. We were basically non-existent. I wasn't allowed to contribute in class because it was presumed that I didn't have anything worthwhile to say, so if I put my hand up, I was just told to put it back down. I might as well not have been in the class for all the attention I got. I know a couple of girls from the Convent did well but they were generally the ones who had family, and somebody to give them encouragement. When I left school, I wasn't able to read and write properly.
8. The food was basic, but I can't say that I was hungry. I loathed some of the food, the tapioca pudding in particular. I did witness girls being made to eat food. They were told that they weren't allowed to move from the table until they finished the food in front of them and the girls would be retching trying to eat it.
9. We were all allocated chores which we had to do every day, and again it was the girls who had no families who seemed to be left with all the hard work such as scrubbing floors, whilst the favourite girls might have dusted. We

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worked in the kitchens peeling potatoes. We had to scrub the floors, and there were lots of areas and passageways, and a huge hall. The nun would stand at the far end of the hallway to inspect it and if it wasn't done right, we were hit. We were slapped or grabbed by the hair at the back of the neck which was so painful. They would lift us up by the hair and pull us up from the nape of the neck until we were standing on our tip toes. They would intentionally pinch us under our arms, where the marks wouldn't be seen. I believe that all of the nuns would have done this.

10. From about the age of eleven years, we worked hard in the laundries, mainly at the weekends. We did the washing for the entire convent, including the old people's home. If they were soiled we had to stand over the sink scrubbing them on the washer boards, before they went into a big industrial machine, and then into the huge industrial pressers. I remember I had to stand on a stool so that I could reach the sink and use the washboards. My fingers would be raw, from rubbing them on the boards, and from the carbolic soap. There were two ladies who worked in the laundry, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. They were quite elderly and I believe they may have been brought up in the convent themselves. [REDACTED] had a stick which she would hit us with if we weren't doing the washing properly. [REDACTED] was a terrifying lady, but that was all she knew. She also worked in the sewing room. She hit us as well and we would be terrified if she caught us doing anything, because she was always threatening to tell the nuns on us.

11. The whole environment of the home and the school was fear. To my mind, if we were ever caught doing something, it would only have been something minor. The punishment seemed unnecessary for some things. It was just a way of frightening us and keeping us down. [REDACTED] **SR 31** had a particular room upstairs where we were brought to if the nuns were going to cane us. If we back-chatted, tutted or showed an expression that they didn't like, they would take us upstairs, and say that they would beat the stubborn streak out of us. We never used foul language and we weren't rude children, but the nuns saw it as us standing up for ourselves so they would make an example of us. On one occasion [REDACTED] **SR 31** was hitting me across both hands with

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a large stick, but I wouldn't cry so she just continued to hit me because she saw me as being defiant. I have no idea how long the beating went on for. I was attending St Monica's at the time and I had to be kept off school because my hands were black and blue and swollen. I was constantly in fear of the nuns.

12. The Holy Rosary Church was just on the other side of the wall and there were pear trees. We would have been punished if we were caught taking the pears.

13. On one occasion, I can recall being locked in a room by a nun as punishment. The room was somewhere upstairs in Nazareth House. It was small and pitch black and there was a nun outside the door making bogey man noises. I was absolutely terrified and I was screaming to get out. By the time I got out, I was in such a state that I was in convulsions.

14. If we were trying to have fun, the nuns would immediately calm it down. Laughing, singing and fun weren't allowed. We were afraid to play games. We were always afraid of what would happen. There was no love. There was nothing other than constant fear.

15. The nuns told us that we were dirty and worthless, and that nobody would want us. They always said this to the children who had no families. They made us feel like we were nothing at all. Sometimes people would have come up to the convent to take children out for a day. I remember standing at the gates and hoping to get picked, but **SR 31** would say "who would want you, you're nothing" and tell me to get to the back of the queue. I never got chosen to go out for the day. Sometimes we put on concerts, but I would never get picked for any roles. I was never good enough. One of the nuns told me that I was ugly, and just to get to the back. The fact that she called me ugly has never left me. I will always remember the expression of disgust on her face when she said that to me, as if I was nothing. There was never any praise or encouragement in the home. On one occasion, when I was aged about sixteen years, I was told by a nun that I would be damned in hell. **SR 122** **SR 122** was threatening to punish me for something and I was standing up

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for myself. I tugged at her veil. **SR 31** and **SR 122** marched me up to the room. The told me I was going to be damned in hell.

16. At Christmas time, we used to be brought to Courtaulds Factory for a party that they put on for the homes. I couldn't say that Christmas was made a wonderful experience in the home. There were never any celebrations such as cake or cards for birthdays.

17. I don't recall the home ever being visited by any Social Workers or inspectors. I remember being seen by a dentist, , and I remember getting our inoculations in the home.

18. When I was aged approximately thirteen or fourteen years, I recall a lady coming to see me. She was the only visitor I had in all the years that I was in Nazareth House. I believe this lady must have been either my mother or my aunt. I remember being dressed in nicer clothes and being taken up to the parlour. I was a very timid person, and this was such an experience, having a visitor for the first time. I was too frightened to ask who I was meeting. I remember this lady mentioning a place called and it has always stuck with me. In all the years I was at Nazareth House, I never had any sort of connection which indicated that I belonged to anybody, such as visitors or cards. This was the first acknowledgement of any kind at all that I belonged to somebody, and then I never saw this person again.

19. I left the school when I was aged fifteen years. I was moved into the dormitory for older girls, that **SR 122** was in charge of. Some of the other girls in the Convent were let out to live in a house in Street, but it was generally the girls who had families. Girls who didn't have families generally had to stay in Nazareth House.

20. I went to work in the sewing room in Nazareth House, for maybe a couple of years. **SR 122** was in charge of the sewing room. I got a little pocket money for working there.

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Life after care

21. Eventually I moved out to [REDACTED] Street with my friends **NHB 40** and **HIA 52**. I would have been approximately eighteen years at the time. We decided to move to London and left Belfast in around 1967. The nuns sent us on the boat with suitcases and new clothes that they had bought us. We ended up in the Irish Centre in London, which was like another convent and the nuns got us jobs in the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead Heath. I fell pregnant but I didn't know that I was pregnant because we had never been given any sex education. I only realised after I collapsed and was brought to hospital. I ended up in a mother and baby home which was run by nuns. I was forced to give my daughter up even though I didn't want to. I was able to keep her for the first nine months but illegitimacy was scorned upon and it was drummed into me by the nuns that I could never look after her. It was like history repeating itself. The nuns arranged the adoption. She was taken off me, and I was just left sitting in a room by myself. I didn't know what I was doing at the time. I was very green and vulnerable. I have never attempted to make contact with her as I don't want to upset her or disrupt her life. It would give me a lot of joy to know that she is doing well.

22. I lived in England for forty years. I met my husband [REDACTED] in 1973 and I was with him for thirteen years before he passed away in 1986. I was in another relationship with a man called [REDACTED] for ten years, before he passed away. I didn't have any more children. I got a job in [REDACTED] and then moved to the City of London Corporation where I worked with old people. I found this too difficult after [REDACTED] death and I got a job with the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] which was later amalgamated with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. I think I could have done a lot better for myself if I had have the right education and upbringing. My husband had to teach me how to read and write properly.

23. About six years ago I tried to find out about my own background. It was always in my mind that I didn't know who I was or where I came from.

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Because I always remembered the name [REDACTED] from the name of the lady who visited the home, I ended up making my way to that area with three of my friends from the home, HIA 20 [REDACTED] and HIA 52 [REDACTED]. We stopped in [REDACTED] and I enquired of a local person if there were any families by the name of [REDACTED] in the area. I got directions to a house, which turned out to belong to my mother's aunt. She recognised me as soon as she saw me in the car. She told me that I was an illegitimate child, and my mother had very little support because my father had passed away, so she had to put me into care at the age of six months. My mother never told her husband or children about me, so this might have been why she didn't come to visit me. My mother had died in 1993, so I never got to meet her. She told me that I have three sisters, [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] who live in [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. I met up with my sisters and they are lovely girls. They didn't know anything about me so it was a big shock to them. I retired in 2009 and moved back to [REDACTED] in the hope that I would make a connection with the rest of my family but that has not worked out at all, after a misunderstanding between us. I felt like I was being rejected all over again. It made me feel worthless, and that there must be something wrong with me.

24. My experiences have had a very bad impact on me. I believe that growing up in an environment which was completely void of any affection has affected my development, because a human being needs love and affection when growing up. I find it difficult when people show me affection, and I don't know how to react. It is my background of not knowing love, and not knowing a family environment. I found it very difficult. I haven't got many friends because I find it very hard to make friends. I don't really know how to show love and I find myself feeling very detached.

25. Depression would just come on me. I have been to see psychiatrists and psychologists, and I have had counselling, but I feel that people never really understand what I'm saying. At one stage I ended up in a psychiatric hospital for two weeks. I ended up in [REDACTED] in or around 2009, because I found it difficult to deal with what had happened between me and my half-siblings. I went to a place called [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] after being

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referred by mental health services. I am taking anti-depressants. I have always had a bad image of myself because it was drummed into me. I thought if people knew about my background then they would judge me against that. It has taken me a long time but I try to accept what has happened and not keep punishing myself. I've been trying to get over it so that it doesn't rule my life. I have to try and make the best of my life and not let things destroy me. I can be a bit serious and I would love to be more spontaneous.

26. I am in a new relationship now. I have moved, along with my new partner, to [REDACTED] I find that the distance from Northern Ireland is beneficial for me.

27. I have never reported the abuse I suffered to police. I was too embarrassed to tell people about my background because I always feel that they will look down on me.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

HIA 197

Dated

9/7/2014