

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Anne HARKINS

Support person present: No

1. My name is Anne Perpetua Harkins. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1956. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background

2. I was born and brought up in Glasgow and stayed with my mum and dad. I have two brothers and two sisters who are all younger than me. I do not want to provide any of their names.
3. I want to provide information about St Vincent's School and about abuse I witnessed by one of the nuns there.

St Vincent's School for the Deaf, Blind and Deaf-Blind

4. St Vincent's Convent was situated at 4 Easter Hill Street, Tollcross, Glasgow. The convent was run by The Daughters of Charity.
5. In 1959, when I was three years old, my family and I moved to [REDACTED] which was in the grounds of St Vincent's School for the Deaf, Blind and Deaf-Blind. This was

because my father got a post as the maintenance heating engineer at the school. My mum didn't work as she looked after us.

6. Directly opposite our house and outwith the grounds was St Joseph's Primary School. I was educated there and then went to Elmwood Convent School for girls in Bothwell, Lanarkshire, before I went to Glasgow University. Our chapel was part of the primary school and was on the upper level so growing up we were quite isolated to that one area as we didn't have neighbours per se.
7. We had the whole run of the convent grounds to play in. The grounds and gardens were beautiful and had separate buildings for the convent and the school within the grounds. The whole place was spotless. We knew the convent like it was part of our house. We played in the swing parks, the football pitches, the gardens.
8. The sleeping quarters were all upstairs in the convent. The children's dormitories were separated into boys and girls and both were separate from the staff sleeping quarters.
9. I stayed in the staff quarters once, for a fortnight, when my mum and dad went on holiday. I was about fourteen years old at the time. I had a Saturday job and was going to be working there through the summer so didn't want to go with them.
10. I was only in the children's sleeping area once when I went with my sister when she was volunteering to look after the baby girls.
11. During the summer, when the majority of the children were away home for the holidays, sometimes the Sisters would hold a big retreat at St Vincents. They would get Daughters of Charity from all over, maybe from England and Ireland all congregating. I remember seeing them all walking about the gardens in their long robes and butterfly hats.

Staff

12. Over the years, we got to know the Sisters and some of the children as well. When we moved there at first, the Sister in charge was called Sister Anthony. As children we didn't really know her very well as she either moved or died whilst we were still quite young.
13. The main Sister was the Mother Superior that we knew as Sister Monica. Sister Monica was wonderful, warm and loving like the majority of the Sisters were. I cannot really remember Sister Monica's surname as we didn't really know the Sister's surnames. I think her surname began with a 'C' and it might have been Connelly or something like that.
14. The school and the convent were staffed mainly by women. There was one male teacher Mr LXL. In fact I can only think of my dad and Charlie Malloy, a deaf man who helped my dad, as the only other men that worked there. There was one other disabled man who helped my dad for a short period of time as well.
15. There is a whole list of Sisters that I can remember, but there is only one Sister's surname I remember, Sister KUA and she is the one responsible for the abuse.
16. Sister KTA was SNR of the new school that was built in the grounds, separate to the convent.
17. In the kitchen was Sister Agnes who was fantastic. There was a staff dining room off the kitchen but that was mainly for the kitchen staff and the nuns that worked in the kitchen. There was also another staff room along the corridor for the staff that looked after the children, where they would eat their meals. There was also a big communal sitting room with a television in it.

18. There was a big laundry that was run by Sister Catherine who wasn't a very pleasant person. It dealt with everything that needed washed or laundered from sheets to the children's clothing, the nuns' habits and the cloths for the chapel.
19. Margaret Walker, who we all called Auntie Margaret, was like a second mother, and we all adored her. She was a very intelligent, lovely woman. She worked hand in glove with Sister ^{KUA} [REDACTED] who looked after the boy's side and was also in charge of the sewing room. Auntie Margaret was a wonderful seamstress and knitter and she used to knit for the children.
20. The Sister that was in charge of the girls was Sister ^{PBF} [REDACTED] and she was quite crabbit. Marie Stenson was one of the main ones that looked after the girls and Rosemary Gillan worked along with Marie, looking after the baby girls.
21. Margaret Walker, Marie Stenson and Rosemary Gillan were very close to our family, particularly my Auntie Margaret, who was like part of our family. She had been looked after by the Sisters because her father had been badly injured in the war and her mother died when she was quite young. They had about six or seven children and he couldn't cope. We would always have them to our house for Christmas and if we were going for a run on a Sunday we would take them with us. Sadly, they are all deceased now.
22. Looking back as an adult, and even at the time, I remember my mum saying these girls worked really hard. They worked long hours and probably weren't paid that well but got their board and food.
23. Later on there were one or two people that were brought in from outside to work in the convent that didn't live there, but mainly the bulk of those women were employed from either Rosewell or Smyllum homes for children. Some of the girls that came from there had very mild learning disabilities and some didn't. Rosemary had a very mild learning disability and a hearing problem. Marie Stenson and my Auntie Margaret didn't.

24. There were other staff that worked in the kitchen and cleaned the place, including the chapel which they had in the convent.
25. There were no resident priests but the priest from our parish and a number of curates would go and take 6 a.m. mass at St Vincents. I don't think the priests were down at the convent very often. There was nothing hooky going on with them. My brothers were altar boys. If there was anything untoward, my brothers would have told me and I have asked them.
26. The majority of the Sisters were lovely. They all had certain jobs they did. Sister Patrick played the organ and also played the organ in our chapel.
27. The atmosphere between the staff and the nuns was good. The staff looked up to the nuns. A lot of the staff had been brought up by the nuns and the nuns had taught them fantastic skills. They had taught them cooking, sewing, knitting and how to look after themselves.
28. The atmosphere between the children and the staff was also good. I never saw any children upset.
29. There weren't any staff that I can think of, that were cruel or anything like that. Marie Stenson could be a bit sharp with the girls, but probably rightly so. My Auntie Margaret was like putty, that woman was a saint and she would never say anything bad about anybody.

Children

30. I really don't know how many children were at St Vincent's. I have spoken to my brother and we reckon there were possibly around anything from one hundred and fifty to two hundred children. I am basing that on thinking back to the Christmas parties I went to there. There were no day pupils at this time, the boys and girls were all residential, even the wee tots, because back in these days blind and deaf children weren't integrated into mainstream education. The boys and girls were separated in the

convent, had separate playgrounds and separate dormitories. I'm not sure if it was mixed classes in the school as I never spent much time in the actual school.

31. I think the youngest children there were three years old, toddlers, primary school age right up into teenage years. I think the oldest was about fifteen years but when I was nine or ten it was hard to know what age the teenagers were.
32. There is only one girl that really stands out in my mind and her name was [REDACTED]. She was full of vim, fiery and was a lot of fun.
33. The majority of the children went home at the weekends but some of them didn't because it was almost like they were in care, because they either, didn't have parents, or their parents weren't able to look after them properly. I think a lot of the children were from Glasgow or Greater Glasgow, so if the parents were willing to take them at the weekend they would get to go home as it was a reasonable distance. The children that didn't get home would have a fuss made of them at the weekend.
34. I wasn't aware of parents coming to, or being around the school, but I presume there would have been parent's nights.
35. Some of the children had some hearing and had hearing aids but some of them were profoundly deaf. Some of the blind children had partial sight. There were also some children who were profoundly deaf-blind and could only be communicated by using sign language on their hands.
36. Communication between the children was always done by sign language and the women who worked there were very fluent in it. The children who were blind and deaf-blind were taught brail and were also taught sign language on their hands. If a child who had previously had sight or hearing but had developed either blindness or deafness, and then became a pupil at the school, they were taught sign language as well. The parents then picked it up from their own children.

37. The children wore a bottle green uniform. Boys wore shorts when young, and trousers when older. They wore a shirt and tie and they wore bottle green jumpers that my Auntie Margaret knitted them. I think the girls probably had dresses in the summer and probably a skirt and a kimono type top in the winter.
38. All the children got a primary school education, the same as a mainstream primary school but obviously they used sign language that was adapted to meet their needs.
39. I would suggest they got a good education. The school was very well run. The reason I am saying this is that there was one girl who I think was maybe called [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and she was born deaf-blind. We used to communicate with her through hands and that girl passed several 'O' Level exams and learned French.
40. They used to have activities at night. My sisters, brothers and I were invited to join in, which we did. There was PE, football and a beautiful gymnasium for the boys. We used to do Scottish country dancing and ballet. For the country dancing, the children that were deaf could feel the rhythm of the music through the floor. We would also get invited to Christmas parties, so all in all it was a good experience.
41. As well as being the heating engineer, my father was a keep fit fanatic and had been a very competent gymnast and also previously taught swimming. He used to play football with the boys at night. He taught them gymnastics in the gym on a Tuesday night and my brothers also participated in that. I remember my dad getting this ball that had a bell in it so that the boys that were blind could follow and trace the ball.
42. I don't know what happened about healthcare for the children at St Vincent's. I have nothing to suggest they weren't treated properly if they were ill or had anything wrong with them.
43. I don't think the children had to do any chores or work other than looking after their own things like you would expect any child to do. I never saw any of them working in the kitchen or elsewhere.

44. I don't know how discipline was dealt with in the school but I don't ever remember witnessing any of the staff lifting their hands to any child.

Abuse at St Vincent's School

45. Auntie Margaret worked in this big sewing room that had a big, beautiful oak table where they used to make uniforms. That was Sister KUA's domain and her and my Auntie Margaret spent a lot of time together. Having been brought up by the Sisters, Auntie Margaret was very sort of deferential to them, she thought they could do no wrong and would never in a million years challenge anything.
46. When I was about nine or ten years old, I had run down the drive to see Auntie Margaret at the sewing room and outside the room in the corridor there were a couple of boys, who were about seven or eight years old, dressed in day clothes and had cardboard notices with string holding them round their necks that had the handwritten words "I wet the bed." I didn't know the boys, as my sisters and I didn't really play with the boys, but my brothers did, and they might have known them.
47. I don't know how long they had been standing there but I remember feeling bad at the time and that it was terrible. It was awful and upsetting as a child, to see that.
48. I never said anything but within about a minute or so my father came striding down the corridor and saw them. He sent me out of the sewing room, and I could hear him laying into Sister KUA about it. I could hear my father's raised voice telling her that it was terrible and to get those notices off of these children now. He told her he better never, ever see her treating a child like that again.
49. I remember him telling my mother about it and saying that he had told Sister KUA that he would get her in court if he ever saw it again. He told her that it was no way to handle a problem like that and asked her if she thought humiliating them was going to stop them wetting the bed.

50. Sister KUA actually acknowledged to my dad that what she had done to the boys was wrong. The excuse she gave was that was the way they handled.
51. That was humiliation, and that was the only incident I ever saw.
52. When I saw the news item on STV, about St Vincent's being investigated by the Inquiry, I immediately thought about that incident.
53. My brothers both became altar boys but weren't allowed to become altar boys until they had made their first holy communion. Sister KUA taught my brothers Latin, the Latin responses to the mass so that they could become altar boys. My bother told me that if he and my other brother got any of the Latin or responses wrong when she was teaching them that she would wrap them over the knuckles with a ruler. The brother that told me this was only six or seven years old at the time.
54. Sister KUA was tall, probably about 5'9" or 10" and robustly built.
55. I wasn't aware of anything else on the level of any physical or sexual abuse ever happening at St Vincent's, however if what I saw was happening in public it begs the question about what was happening behind closed doors.
56. I left St Vincent's in 1974 or 1975. I worked in social work all my life with families and then as a manager, so if there was anything else I would tell you.
57. Sister Monica, the Mother Superior, was in charge at the time and should have known what was happening. I think but I am not sure, she died a number of years ago.

Closing of The Convent

58. When the convent closed down sometime in the late seventies, the Sisters helped my Auntie Margaret, Marie Stenson and Rosemary Gillan get a flat in Tollcross. My mum helped the Sisters to set it up.

59. Some of the Sisters opened a place called Barrowfield, which is out Bridgeton way in Glasgow. Some of the other Sisters including Sister KUA and I think Sister KTA were sent down to Mill Hill, another Daughters of Charity place in London. They were involved in The Passage, which was a charity helping homeless people.

Reporting to the Police

60. I have spoken to the police, who called me shortly after I had spoken to the Inquiry. I had a long conversation with an officer, who was based at Livingston, and he said it wasn't the first time Sister KUA's name had come up. I said I thought she was dead and he agreed she probably was. He was going to contact Mill Hill and The Passage.

Other information

61. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed.....

Dated.....

December 16th 2027.