

CLANN: IRELAND'S UNMARRIED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN: GATHERING THE DATA

Statement of Witness 24

Reference Code:	CLANN/WIT24
Status:	Adopted person
Institution(s)/Agencies:	Sacred Heart Mother and Baby Home, Bessboro, Cork; St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork; Sacred Heart Adoption Society; Adoption Authority of Ireland; National Adoption Contact Preference Register.
Date:	11 th December 2016
Records/Papers included:	Yes
Access Conditions:	Anonymised statements are freely available to the public.
Conditions Governing Reproduction:	Statements can be reproduced, however the citation below must be used at all times.

To cite this statement:

O'Rourke, M., McGettrick, C., Baker, R. and Hill, R. (2018) "Statement of Witness 24." *Clann: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the Data*. Dublin: Justice for Magdalenes Research, Adoption Rights Alliance, Hogan Lovells.



WITNESS STATEMENT OF [REDACTED]

I, [REDACTED] of [REDACTED] WILL SAY:

1. I make this statement for the purpose of providing evidence to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation established by the Irish Government pursuant to Section 3 of the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004.
2. Attached to this statement is a bundle of documents marked [REDACTED]. These documents have been redacted to remove any identifying references to persons other than myself. References to page numbers in this statement are to pages in [REDACTED].
3. I make this statement as an adopted person.

Circumstances of my Birth and Early Life

4. For the reasons explained in this witness statement, I have very little information about the circumstances of my birth and early life. From the limited information that has been provided to me, I know only that I was born in St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork, on [REDACTED] 1976 and that I spent the first few days of my life in the Bessboro Mother and Baby Home, Cork, until [REDACTED] 1976. I do not have any information about the treatment that I received in Bessboro.
5. I had a very happy upbringing with my adoptive family. I have a brother and a sister, who were both adopted from different biological parents. I was told at a very early age that I was adopted, before I was old enough to understand what that meant. I later understood that I had been born in Cork and that my adoptive parents collected me from the Mother and Baby Home after I had been there for about a week. As the years went on I tended not to ask my adoptive parents much about the circumstances of my adoption as I felt that they had told me all they knew, and also as if I would somehow have been disloyal to them by doing so. However, I would like to know more about the circumstances of my birth, whether my mother consented to the adoption and how the adoption was arranged.

Information and finding out about my Birth Parents

6. In 2006, I decided that I wanted to try to find out about my birth mother. I was motivated to do so largely because I was turning 30 and realised that I probably only had a limited window of time while she was likely still to be alive. I therefore thought that if I did not look for her, I might regret it at a later stage.
7. I wanted to ensure that I went through the appropriate channels. My initial research showed that my adoption agency's files were now being looked after by [REDACTED] Health Service Executive (since transferred to Tusla). I contacted them and was assigned a social worker quite quickly.

8. I also registered with the Adoption Contact Preference Register and was notified that there had been no match.
9. Because I was living in [REDACTED] (having moved to [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] my social worker suggested that it would be difficult for us to build up the necessary relationship needed for this 'search and possible reunion'. The social worker therefore strongly suggested that I see a counsellor in [REDACTED]. Through [REDACTED] I was put in contact with a post-adoption counsellor in [REDACTED] and I met with her a number of times to explore the issues around searching for my birth parents.
10. I built up a good rapport with my counsellor and around 8-9 months later, in 2007, I received my 'non-identifying information', a two-page document produced by my social worker based on the information that had been recorded by the Adoption Agency (pages 1-2). This record is an edited version of the original file as the social worker removes any information that could identify the birth parents. In my case, the information that I was given included things I had not known before, such as the name that I was given at birth, and some information about my birth mother, including that she was from [REDACTED] and was in Bessboro Mother and Baby Home for 10 weeks prior to my birth in [REDACTED]. The document also contained some limited information about my father.
11. The non-identifying information with which I was provided also stated that I was baptised at the Church of [REDACTED] on [REDACTED] 1976 (i.e. the day when I left Bessboro and was placed with my adoptive parents). My adoptive parents later had me christened once the adoption order had been approved.
12. I was not provided with my original birth certificate, and instead have an adopted person's birth certificate.
13. Once I had had some time to absorb the non-identifying information, my counsellor asked me whether I wanted to try to contact my birth mother. I responded that I thought I did, because if I left it too long it might be too late. She told me that this was not a good enough reason on its own and encouraged me to consider further the impact that making contact could have on everyone involved before making a decision. I did, and after further reflection, decided that I had considered the implications for all parties and wanted to go ahead. My counsellor agreed that I seemed ready to take this big step. My social worker also had separate conversations with my counsellor, to which I was not a party.
14. My social worker therefore reviewed my file and tried to find an address for my birth mother. I was told to write a letter to her, in conjunction with my counsellor, which had to be in fairly generic terms because it was impossible to know where the letter would end up and who might read it. My social worker then sent the letter to what was described as [REDACTED]

the 'best known address' on my behalf. I received no response, and I found it very difficult not knowing what had happened to the letter, whether or not it had been received, read or intercepted.

15. In accordance with the procedure that the social worker had outlined to me, having had no response, I re-sent the letter about a month later. When I still received no response, I became quite crestfallen as I felt that I had exhausted the avenues open to me and discovered nothing. However, I stayed in touch with my counsellor and continued to meet her occasionally.
16. In [REDACTED] I left my job and went travelling [REDACTED] In hindsight I think that a large part of the reason why I felt that I wanted to do that was to help me deal with the unsuccessful search for my birth mother.
17. In late summer [REDACTED] my adoptive brother went home for a family event. Waiting for him was an unexpected letter from Tusla informing him that his birth mother was searching for him. Based on my experience, I encouraged him to speak to a post-adoption counsellor, but he was reluctant to do so. This development prompted me to get back in contact with my own counsellor to see whether she could offer advice to him, and led to some further email conversations with her.
18. In January 2014 I was reading the book *Philomena*, and this led me to contact my counsellor to explain the profound effect that the book was having on me, which was mostly anger with the Irish Government and the Catholic Church. This conversation resulted in me returning for some further counselling sessions, beginning in March 2014. My anger had reminded me that I had only taken the officially recommended route of looking for more information about my birth. I resolved to renew my search and look into other options.
19. My anger was compounded in May 2014, when news broke of the discovery of the bodies of the so-called 'Tuam Babies' at a Mother and Baby Home in Co. Galway. In particular, I appreciated for the first time how many of the women in the Mother and Baby Homes - potentially including my own mother - effectively had no choice but to give up their children. Previously I had considered the likes of my mother had choices open to them and that my mother had therefore chosen to give me up for adoption.
20. The first thing that I did as part of my renewed focus to find out more about my birth situation, on [REDACTED] 2014, was to email the Adoption Contact Preference Register to update my contact details (as I had moved house since I first registered with them) (page 3). In the same email, I asked whether there had been a match with my details.

21. On [REDACTED] 2014 I was at work when I picked up an email from a social worker in response to my email, asking when would be a good time to speak (page 4). She called me at around 3pm that day, and after responding to my request to update my contact details, the social worker told me that there had been match on my file, but it was not my birth mother, but my brother. Until that point I had no idea that I had a biological brother.
22. The social worker explained that, when my file was updated to reflect my new contact details, someone had spotted that there was another entry on the register for a child whose mother had the same date of birth. From that they had made the connection between me and my brother. The social worker apologised that the register was not set up to connect siblings, but only to match parents and children. Therefore the match had not been spotted earlier, even though my brother, [REDACTED] had registered before I had. It emerged that, after my mother had given birth to me in Bessboro in [REDACTED] she had had a second child in a different home, which I understood to have been in [REDACTED] I assume that she did not want to go back to the same home a second time because of the risk of being perceived as a 'fallen woman' for having a second child outside marriage.
23. After discovering that I had a brother, I was keen to move things on as quickly as possible. I therefore travelled to Ireland in July 2014 to meet with my social worker. At that meeting, the social worker gave me a letter that my brother, [REDACTED] had written to me and which had been passed from his social worker to mine. I immediately wrote a letter back, which the social worker sent to him. In that letter, I said that I would love to see him soon. As far as I was concerned, if I had a brother, I wanted to meet him as soon as possible. The social worker was against the idea because it is normal for contact to be made more gradually, but I insisted.
24. In the same month, prompted by reading *Philomena* and my impending meeting with [REDACTED] I decided to visit Bessboro. A vigil had been held there about a week before my visit and there were lots of teddy bears around a shrine to the Virgin Mary, indicating the unmarked graves of children who had died there. I found this very unsettling and felt very thankful that I had survived, unlike so many others.
25. [REDACTED] and I met for the first time on [REDACTED] 2014 in a hotel in Ireland. Both of our social workers attended the first part of the meeting, and then left us on our own. I had been coached by my social worker and counsellor to try and have as low expectations as possible of this important meeting. I thought I had done a decent job of that. However, in hindsight, I must have had very high expectations of the meeting because I had never met a biological relative before and I expected him to look extremely like me. To a large extent, he does, but I remember being very disappointed that his eye colour was not the

same as mine. Over time I learnt things that biological relatives take for granted, such as that eye colour varies within a family.

26. Although [REDACTED] lives in Ireland, whereas I live in [REDACTED] we have built up a relationship since that first meeting. He has told me that he went through the same process of trying to contact our birth mother by writing letters to her the year before I did. His social worker received a response from our birth mother asking not to be contacted again. This information helped me appreciate why I had never received a response to my letters. I also understand that, when the Adoption Contact Preference Register made the link between [REDACTED] and me, our mother would have been informed. However, neither of us has heard anything further from her.
27. [REDACTED] has also given me some more information about our birth mother, which was never officially provided to me, although some of it may be interpretation rather than fact. Based on our non-identifying information, [REDACTED] and I believe that we have the same father (although we have not done a DNA test to confirm that), and that he was the man who she was supposed to marry. [REDACTED] was told that our mother married someone else and went on to have [REDACTED] children with him. If that is correct, we have [REDACTED] half siblings. I do not know their identities and I have never tried to contact them, as I have no means of doing so without information from our birth mother. I think it is possible that my birth mother never told her husband or their children that she had given birth to two sons before her marriage, as this is apparently quite typical.

Access to Information

28. I consider myself very lucky to have met [REDACTED] because the link between us was only made by chance after I asked to update my contact details on the Adoption Contact Preference Register. In my view, the fact that the register does not ordinarily lead to matches being made between siblings is a serious deficiency. That should either be made known to people when they register, or, ideally, the system should be changed to facilitate matches between siblings. In addition, I feel that, as things currently stand, birth mothers (either knowingly or more likely unknowingly) can in many cases effectively deprive siblings from getting to know each other.
29. I also consider that more should be done to support adopted people in Ireland. I feel that, as an adopted person, I have had little control over the process of searching for information about my biological family, even though it concerns fundamental questions about my identity, whereas control has been in the hands of the Irish state. This puts adopted people like me in a worse position than other members of society.

30. I have recently moved back to Ireland from [REDACTED] in part to be closer to [REDACTED] and his family. At the same time, however, I am concerned that moving back to Ireland could bring the issues of my adoption to the fore, even through chance conversations. I am also concerned that I could meet a blood relative and form a relationship with them without knowing that we were related. As a result of my birth mother's decision not to have contact with me and not to share further information with me, it is also impossible for me to know whether there are any hereditary medical conditions in my biological family. I feel that this needs attention as a matter of urgency.

I believe that the contents of this statement are true.

Signed ...

Date

C

Redactions which have been carried out by the Clann Project are flagged at the top of each page or marked with a 'C'. All other redactions were carried out by the original data controllers.

EXHIBIT

C

It is important to note that the information hereunder is a record of what was reported to the Agency at the time and not necessarily a statement of fact. Information is subject to verification by the natural mother.

CONFIDENTIAL

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name:	[REDACTED] C
Address:	[REDACTED]
Date and time of Birth:	C [REDACTED] 1976 at [REDACTED] C
Place of Birth:	St. Finbarr's Hospital, Cork
Birth Weight:	[REDACTED] C
Delivery:	Normal, "cried well at birth".
Adoptive Parents:	[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
Birth Name:	[REDACTED] C

Natural Mother:

Your natural mother's name was [REDACTED]. She was [REDACTED] years old at the time of your birth. She was described as tall, dark with [REDACTED] eyes.

[REDACTED] parents were [REDACTED] and they were unaware of the pregnancy.

[REDACTED] came from a family of [REDACTED] brothers and [REDACTED] sisters.

The family lived in [REDACTED]

Education and Employment:

[REDACTED] completed the Group Certificate. The file states [REDACTED] but does not specify. It is recorded that [REDACTED] worked in a [REDACTED]

Natural Father:

The file states that he was [REDACTED] years old at the time of [REDACTED] pregnancy and was a [REDACTED]. His family were [REDACTED]. He was aware of the pregnancy.

Additional Information:

Your natural mother was admitted to Bessboro Mother and Baby Home also known as the Sacred Heart Adoption Society, Blackrock, Cork on [REDACTED] 1976 and was discharged on [REDACTED] 1976.

You were baptised into the Roman Catholic faith on [REDACTED] 1976 at the Church of [REDACTED] Blackrock, Cork.

You were placed by St. Mary's Adoption Society with your adoptive parents on [REDACTED] 1976.

Legally Adopted on: [REDACTED] 1977

[REDACTED]

----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED]
Date: [REDACTED]
Subject: My preference
To: adoptioninfo@aai.gov.ie

To whom it concerns,
I believe I registered with the Adoption Contact Register circa 2006/7.
I would like to update my details, as well as double-check that no match has been made.
Do I have to complete a new form or is there an easier way of updating?

If you are able to check my details, I am [REDACTED] [REDACTED] My DOB is [REDACTED] 1976.

If you wish to speak with me to confirm identity etc. please contact me here or on numbers beneath
Regards,

[REDACTED]

----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED] C
Date: 22 May 2014 at 10:04
Subject: Contact Registration.
To: [REDACTED]

Hello [REDACTED] C
I hope this finds you well.
I would like to speak to you about your 2006 registration on the National
Adoption Contact Register.
When would be a suitable time for me to phone you?

Regards,

[REDACTED] C
Senior Social Work Practitioner

[REDACTED] C
Adoption Authority of Ireland
Shelbourne House
Shelbourne Rd.
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4.

[REDACTED] C
www.aai.gov.ie

Email Disclaimer & Legal Notice: http://www.dohc.ie/mail_disclaimer/
