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

Statement of Witness 1

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Status:	Boarded Out Person
Institution(s)/Agencies:	Sacred Heart Mother and Baby Home, Bessborough; Sacred Heart Adoption Society; Good Shepherd Industrial School, Sundays Well.
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WITNESS STATEMENT OF MARY HARNEY

I, Mary Harney, of [redacted] USA, 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 of the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004.

2. Attached to this statement is an exhibit marked MH1 which contains various copy documents. References to page numbers in this statement are to pages in MH1.

3. I make this statement as someone who was born in the Bessboro Mother and Baby Home in Cork.

Circumstances of my Birth and Early Life

4. I was born on [redacted] 1949 and am now 68 years old.

5. I do not know much about my mother's early life other than that her mother died when she was 12 at which point she was sent to St Dominic's Industrial School where she stayed until she was 16. She was then taken in by relations and went out to work. I don't know the circumstances in which my mother became pregnant and I do not know the identity of my father. My mother said that she would take this information to her grave and would only say that he was "a local man from Waterford".

6. My mother was taken to Bessboro Mother and Baby Home on [redacted] 1949, the day before she gave birth. She went in a van that must have been arranged by somebody and that somebody is likely to have been a person of influence because how other was she able to work until the day before she gave birth? My mother must have been showing her pregnancy at that stage and it would have been very unusual for an unmarried mother only to go to the Mother and Baby Home at such a late stage.

7. My mother told me that there weren't any windows in the van and it banged along over the roads of Waterford and Cork until she arrived in the late afternoon/evening. By that time she was feeling fairly sick so she was put straight into a ward because they thought she was going to give birth that night.

8. My mother told me that she gave birth sometime in the early hours of the next morning and that she had great difficulty delivering me. She was told to sit on some kind of commode and strain and then, later, she was put back into her bed and I was delivered by a nun. According to my mother, after the umbilical cord was cut, the nuns took me away and put me into a side ward telling her that I probably wouldn't live through the night. They gave her no explanation for this statement and she lay there in bloody sheets, sobbing and without any medical care. At about 7am the next morning, a nun brought me to her wrapped in a towel and said that I had been bawling all night and that's probably what had

kept me alive. The nun then gave me to my mother and that was when she first saw me and got to hold me.

9. After my mother had recovered from the birth, she was only allowed to have contact with me when she breastfed me. My mother said that once the babies had been breastfed they were put into cots where the sheets were tied tightly around them so they couldn't move around. I guess you could say it was like a swaddling because the babies were not free to shake their legs around. The babies were all kept in little metal cots lined up in a dormitory and she said they were generally left to cry without being given any attention.

10. My mother told me that in order to see me more often she begged to be put on to laundry work sluicing the nappies. The nappies were very rough and were washed by hand. The nappies made all of the babies red raw and most suffered from a rash with no cream or Vaseline type product to ease the discomfort.

11. My mother said that conditions in Bessboro were hard and everybody had to obey the rules. At times the punishments for stepping out of line included, in my mother's case, one instance of being told to cut the lawn with a pair of scissors but a more regular, and to my mind, cruel punishment was to deprive mothers of access to their children.

12. My mother and I stayed at Bessboro until I was about 2½. Not all of the children stayed that long because it was understood by all of the mothers that the nuns would be trying to arrange families to which the babies could be sent. There was definitely a pecking order with better looking babies and those of mothers with more respectable backgrounds being the ones that were offered to the "better" families.

13. A lot of the children were sent to American families and the mothers always knew when there was an American family at the Home to inspect the children. At the end of each such day everyone was upset either because their child hadn’t been chosen and thereby missed out on a good opportunity in life or because their child had been chosen and had been taken away from them.

14. I understand that I was never one of those displayed for American families because I had had two illnesses, measles and whooping cough, and that meant that at best I would only ever go to an Irish family.

Circumstances of my Departure from Bessboro

15. My mother told me that one day in November 1951, when I was about 2½, the nuns came to her and gave her half an hour to get me ready because "I was going". My mother had knitted me little jumpers and skirts and she dressed me up in the best clothes that she had. There was a long corridor in Bessboro up which the nuns took the children to hand them

over in the parlour and there was a nun there who took me from my mother and walked me up to the end of the corridor and through a door. That was the last she saw of me. By all accounts, after I had gone, the nuns took all the clothes that my mother had made for me and took them back to her saying that I won't be needing these because my "new mother" had bought me new clothes. My mother told me that this broke her heart.

Leaving Bessboro

16. In those days adoption was illegal in Ireland or at least there was no formal provision for it in Irish law so, when the nuns found homes to send the children, I guess in effect they were being fostered out. In my case there doesn't appear to have been any formal paperwork surrounding this process and the records that I have seen all refer simply to me being "taken" (page 5, 7 and 16).

17. I was fostered to what seemed to me to be a very elderly couple, probably in their 50s or 60s and I was simply handed over to them. Their names were Mr and Mrs [redacted] and they both lived in Cork. Mr [redacted] was [redacted] and had an accent. Mrs [redacted] was well educated and was a senior figure in her local church. They were fairly well off and lived in the biggest house on the street and owned a greengrocers shop. I have no idea why the [redacted] took me in.

18. The [redacted] were very strict and the house was very dark. I was 2½ and I was put in a small bedroom on my own. At the side of the bed on the wall was a picture of Michael the Archangel with a trident in his hand shoving snakes into the pit of hell. There was a little lamp in front of the picture that glowed and flickered and the combination of the light and the picture traumatised me so much that I cannot even hear the word "snake" today without being terrified. I begged and begged to be taken out of that room but, instead of helping me with my fears, Mrs [redacted] simply locked me in. I do not know why it was believed that the [redacted] were suitable "foster parents" or whether any checks on them were undertaken but they certainly had no idea how to bring up children.

19. Notwithstanding that the [redacted] were relatively wealthy, I was poorly fed and was always hungry. The [redacted] were strict and I was regularly smacked and hit on the backs of my legs. I would often sneak out of the house and go and visit the [redacted] family up the road where Mrs [redacted] always had a big fire going and she would give me sandwiches. Mrs [redacted] would also give me a hug and this was the only real affection I received.

20. I am told that I was quite a bright child and could read by the time I was 4. At that point I was taken up to a school run by nuns and this was where my lifelong love of learning began.

21. Fairly soon afterwards, Mrs [redacted] apparently reported to the ISPCC that I wasn't being fed properly and that my legs were often red at the back where I had been smacked. Mrs [redacted], who knew I was fostered, told me later that she had asked if she could have me instead of the [redacted] because she believed I was being neglected.

22. The response to this was that the "Cruelty Man" (an officer of the Irish Society) came to the house and the next thing I knew I was in the back of a big black car with Mrs [redacted] and the Cruelty Man who was dressed like a police officer. They took me to the Cork courthouse and there was some kind of hearing before the judge. The upshot of the hearing was that I was committed to the Good Shepherd's Industrial School at Sunday's Well until I was 16.

23. I now have a number of documents referring to the court hearing (pages 7, 9, 13 and 16) and in those documents it states quite clearly that the whereabouts of my mother was unknown. This was patently untrue because the nuns at Bessboro knew exactly where my mother was because they had sent her to St Winifred's Hospital in Cardiff which was run by their own order.

24. I was therefore taken away to the Good Shepherd's Industrial School, apparently with Mrs [redacted]'s approval, though, bizarrely, she continued to visit me periodically while I was at the Industrial School. I have not gone into any great detail about my time in the Good Shepherd's because that is not the subject of this statement. Suffice it to say that life was extremely hard and I only ended up there as a result of having been placed with a wholly inappropriate family by the people at Bessboro.

25. When I was about 11, I was told by the nuns in the school that my mother was dead. This came as a great upset to me and I included a prayer to my mother's soul in my daily prayers from that time until I found out that this was not true.

Information given to my Mother

26. My mother had no idea that after she left Bessboro she was free to go wherever she wanted. In fact what happened was that she was simply sent by ferry to Wales to work in a sister institution of the Bessboro nuns. Money was deducted from her weekly wages to pay back the cost of her transport to Wales. She also had no idea when she was there that she was free to leave whenever she wanted.

27. At some point, in or around 1952/53 my mother met a local man and got married. Apparently at that point she and her husband tried to get me back but the nuns in Wales told her that they had contacted Bessboro and the head nun there said no. They painted her a big picture that I was getting everything she couldn't give me and that I couldn't be

removed from the family to which I had gone because I had been adopted. This of course was not true.

Finding my Mother

28. I left the Good Shepherds when I was 16 and was discharged back into the care of Mrs [redacted], even though an inspector from the Dept. of Education stated that Mrs [redacted] had no claim on me by law (page 13) I found a job skivvying in a local hotel where I was a chambermaid. I had to give all my wages to Mrs [redacted]. We were only given scraps of food left over from people in the hotel and the occasional cup of tea and I felt as if I was being incarcerated just as much as I had been at the Industrial School, just in a different way, so I rebelled.

29. I wanted to find out more information about my family and wanted to find out more about my mother who (at that time) I still thought was dead.

30. I therefore went to a priest who had been kind to me when I was at the Good Shepherd's and asked him to help me. Mrs [redacted] had recently referred to me as illegitimate and so the first thing I did was to ask him what that meant. The priest explained that it meant that my mother had not been married when she had me and that being illegitimate was seen as a bad thing. The priest then undertook some investigation about my mother and informed me that he could find no record of my mother having died. He went on to say that this must mean she was still alive. He added that the nuns at Bessboro had told him that they believed she was living in England.

31. I then visited Bessboro myself and spoke to a little old nun who opened the door. That nun said "My, Peggie Harney". I said "no, I'm Mary Harney" and the nun said "I must be thinking of your mother because you are a spitting image of her". At that point another nun came up and told the original nun to leave this matter to her and asked me what I wanted. I said that I wanted to find out about my mother. The new nun said "we can't give you any information". I explained that my mother had been in Bessboro and that, regardless of what I'd been told, I knew she was not dead. The nun then told me that my mother "went to England and that's all I'm giving you". She then sent me away.

32. I therefore left Bessboro at least knowing my mother's name, that I looked like her and thinking that my mother was in England (as opposed to Wales where the nuns actually knew she was).

33. Following that, I went back to the Good Shepherd's and asked to see Mother Philomena who was the head nun at the time. She invited me into the parlour to talk. I confronted her telling her that she had lied to me and had told me that my mother was dead. I said that I

had prayed for her soul every night but she wasn't dead and asked why she had lied. Mother Philomena simply said "it was better for you". I then told Mother Philomena that I was going to find my mother "even if it took me 10, 20 or 40 years" to which she told me "you can't do that and don't forget Mrs [redacted] can still have you put in the Magdalenes".

34. After that I was determined to travel to England to try to find my mother even though I had no real idea of how to do this. By this time, I had a little money saved up and, together with another girl, I packed up my few meagre belongings and we caught the ferry to England. We landed in Fishguard in Wales and then got the train to London.

35. After a period during which I was effectively living on the streets, I was taken to an Irish Catholic organisation which gave me a bath and some food and helped me to get a job.

36. I then began writing letters to try to find out where my mother was. I wrote to parishes in different cities asking if they had any records. After a while, I also wrote to Bessboro and, to my surprise, a few weeks later I got a letter (pages 17 and 18) back from the nuns at Bessboro telling me my mother's name, address and the fact that she was married and had 2 children. The letter also stated they didn't know whether she had told her husband about me.

37. I was so excited that I had found my mother that all I wanted to do was to go to Cardiff and knock on her door. I called the priest who had helped me start the process of finding my mother (at that point he was in the English Midlands) and he gently explained to me that it might be that my mother didn't want me back and that just turning up might cause more problems than it would solve. He offered to help me get in touch with her and said that he would get back to me when he had done so.

38. About 2 weeks later, he called me on the phone and told me that he had spoken to the Bishop in Cardiff and had asked him to send a priest around to the address they had for my mother. He said that the priest had gotten back to the bishop and had confirmed that my mother wanted to get in touch with me. He said that my stepfather knew all about me and "they want to see you". He suggested I leave it to them to arrange this on their own terms and advised me not to go up there and simply knock on the door. He told me that until very recently my mother didn't know I was even alive and that basically she knew nothing about me.

39. A couple of days later I received a phone call from a man who said that his name was Tommy and that he was married to my mother. He told me that my mother wanted to talk to me but she was crying and so she had asked him to talk to me first and to tell me about them. So he told me about himself and my mother as well as the ages and names of my sisters and all that and he then said that my mother was ready to talk to me. I then heard a

female voice with a strong Welsh accent saying "hello love this is your mammy" and we both burst into tears. No one could have told me how just hearing my mother's voice would have such an effect on me. All of a sudden, I looked out of the phone box and everybody at the home was by the side of the phone box and they were crying too. We didn't speak for long but my mother said she and her husband would love to see me and they wanted to come to London to meet me.

40. Shortly after that, the big day arrived and my mother came to see me. All the people where I worked made sure I had new clothes because they didn't want me to show myself up in front of my mother. We met in the parlour of the institution where I was working and living and I went in and met my mother - she was short and stocky with an Irish/Welsh accent. My brain was saying this is not my mother but then I suddenly realised that I finally found my mother and had 2 sisters. We sat down at the table and her husband did all the talking. My mother didn't say much and she also never hugged me but I knew that I had a mother and that was the most important thing in my life.

41. They invited me to come back to Cardiff with them to live and I agreed. I was warned by one of the nuns at the institution that when a family has been separated and have been apart for a long time it is not easy to make it work. Children in my situation often have an image of what their mother will be like but that is often very different to the reality. Even so I was sent a ticket to travel to Wales and I went down to Cardiff to live with them.

42. I moved into their 2 bedroom house with them and the rest of the family but unfortunately I found the house extremely claustrophobic. Having lived in institutions all my life, I was used to living with other people but all of those buildings were large and with plenty of space and I found the small house suffocating. I found it difficult to get on with my sisters and my stepfather had told my mother that it was important that she didn't do anything that might appear to favour me over her younger daughters and this made me feel like an outsider.

43. In the end, I simply had to leave. I then started drinking and over a period of 15 years I became an alcoholic.

44. After a number of years I managed to sort myself out and worked for both the London and Cardiff fire brigades for over 20 years. I left the fire brigade when I got arthritis in my hands and so they made me redundant having given me a lump sum of money which I used to go the College of the Atlantic in Maine, USA, and I graduated in 1996 with a BA in Human Ecology. I achieved my MA in Irish Studies in NUI Galway in 2013. I was further honoured by College of the Atlantic with an Honorary Master's Degree in Philosophy in 2014.

45. Once I was sober, my relationship with my mother was one of friendship rather than mother/daughter. My mother lacked empathy and found it difficult to praise or be close to anyone but nonetheless she was still my hero for what she had gone through as a young woman, the fact that she had taught herself to read and write, had married and had kept it together to bring up a family.

46. My mother died in 2013 when she was 84.

The Commission of Investigation

47. When, in 1999, Bertie Aherne apologised on behalf of the State to those who suffered abuse in residential institutions in Ireland, I felt that this was a breakthrough in terms of understanding how badly women and children were treated in those institutions in the 20th century.

48. I feel that it would be appropriate for a further apology to be given to those women and children who passed through the Mother and Baby Homes and who were separated, often against the mother's will, by it being determined by the nuns who run those homes that it was better for illegitimate children to be adopted or fostered to new families. The Mother and Baby Homes were part of the Irish system even if the individual acts of cruelty and misinformation were committed by individual members of the religious orders actually running the homes.

49. I believe that it is important that there be some form of restorative justice and possibly compensation for those that need it but it is important that any compensation scheme doesn't operate to re-victimise those who find it difficult to substantiate claims simply because inadequate records were kept about them.

50. As well as the better known issues about children being adopted or fostered with their mother's uninformed consent, I think that the treatment of women when they left the Mother and Baby Homes also needs to be investigated. I do not believe that my mother was the only person who was transported from a Mother and Baby Home to another institution run by the same religious orders without any understanding or explanation that they did not have to go if they did not want to go.

Finally, I believe that the State should accumulate all records in relation to the Mother and Baby Homes and that they should be organised in such a way that they can be searchable by individuals so they can find out their personal history. There has been far too much deliberate misinformation given to mothers and children over the years and this should not be perpetuated by records being kept all over the place and with the continued involvement

of the religious orders who remain unwilling to acknowledge their role in what is a matter of national shame.

I believe that the contents of this statement are true.

Signed ……..

Mary Harney

Date ……