

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

Statement of Witness 12

Reference Code: CLANN/WIT12

Status: Natural mother

Institution(s)/Agencies: Sacred Heart Mother and Baby Home, Bessboro; Health Service Executive.

Date: 31st August 2016

Records/Papers included: Yes

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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 papers marked [REDACTED]. References to page numbers in this statement are to page numbers in this bundle of papers.
3. I make this statement as a natural mother who gave birth in Bessborough Mother and Baby Home, County Cork ("Bessborough") to a child that was subsequently adopted.

Family background

4. I was born on [REDACTED] 1948 in County [REDACTED]. I had a privileged background. My father was a [REDACTED] and I had a very good relationship with him. My relationship with my mother was more difficult; not helped by the fact that I was sent to boarding school at the age of [REDACTED]. In [REDACTED] my father passed away and the following year my mother remarried a prominent [REDACTED].
5. I fell pregnant in 1967. When I told my mother and stepfather they felt that I had disgraced the family.

My experience of the institution

6. The day after I told my mother and stepfather that I was pregnant, they took me in the car to Bessborough. Initially I had no idea where I was going. During the journey they told me that I was going somewhere and that I must never speak about my pregnancy and I must never come back home again. I was three months pregnant at the time. My arrival at Bessborough is recorded in my records from Bessborough (the "Bessborough Records") which my son obtained from the HSE (page 1). The records state that I was admitted to Bessborough on [REDACTED] 1967 but I was actually admitted in [REDACTED].
7. On admission to Bessborough you were told three things. One, you were never to speak of your identity or where you came from. Two, you were not allowed to have any contact with the outside world or you would be punished. I don't know what the punishment would have been. Three, if you left Bessborough without permission from the nuns you would be brought back by the Garda.
8. While I was at Bessborough I can recall at least one woman who did try to leave without the nuns' permission and she was brought back by the Garda. Another woman tried to escape out of a very high window, but she fell and sadly died.
9. I realise now that from the moment you walked through the doors at Bessborough, you were stripped of all your human rights and dignity. For example, I wasn't allowed to tell anybody my real name and was given a fictitious name (although I can no longer remember what it was). I was never told of my rights at Bessborough nor told how long I would be there. There was a rule of silence in the institution; for example, all meals had to be eaten in silence. Also we were not allowed any visitors, or to send or receive letters. We were not allowed to listen to the radio. Large parts of the institution were out of bounds, and were kept locked.
10. I was subjected to psychological abuse from the moment I entered the institution. The nuns constantly told me I was evil, that no one would ever want to marry me and that I

would never make anything of my life. On a personal level this was very damaging and for a while I felt I was unworthy. It took a lot of strength of character to say I'm better than that. I have also suffered hearing loss and now wear two hearing aids, and I suspect the loss may be because of the abuse I suffered. I was asked by a consultant who I spoke to about the loss if I had ever suffered a severe trauma, although at the time I lied and said I had not. I also suffer panic attacks, for example if I go to the theatre I have to sit near the door so that I can get out. I have had treatment over the years for these attacks from a psychotherapist and have had to develop strategies to manage them.

Living conditions and treatment within the institution

11. In terms of the living conditions at Bessborough, we slept in a dormitory with six to eight women in one room that had very high windows. Each woman had a single bed, a bedside locker and there was a communal wardrobe.
12. There were no recreational facilities. There was no education. You would go to church every morning for mass and then you marched back to the dining room for breakfast. You would then work until lunchtime and then work again until you had to go to church for evening prayers. It was very repetitive.
13. For washing there were one or two bathrooms for each dormitory. There were baths but you could only have one when you were told. For clothing all the women had to wear a big loose cover-up. I only had one and so I wore it the entire time that I was in Bessborough without it ever being washed.
14. The food we were given was not nutritious. We were given watery porridge for breakfast, bread and cheese or jam for lunch and maybe stew for dinner. It was not nice. I doubt that the nuns ate the same food as us as there was a big farm there with all fresh produce. There was no food available in between meal times.
15. When women needed medical attention they were taken by ambulance to a hospital called St Finbar's in Cork.

Working conditions

16. I arrived at Bessborough in [REDACTED] and during the summer months my job was cutting the lawn with scissors. I did this every day in a line with a group of other women. We were not allowed to stop when we felt tired. In the winter months I had to polish and scrub the corridors. Other women were sent to work in the laundries. The work was especially difficult given that I and the other women were pregnant. I worked seven days a week every week until I went into labour.

Treatment before, during and immediately after childbirth

17. I gave birth to a baby boy on [REDACTED] 1967, although the Bessborough Records incorrectly give his date of birth as [REDACTED] (page 1). These records also suggest that a doctor was present at my son's birth (page 1). This is not true, however; during my time in Bessborough I was never once examined by a doctor. The only people present at the birth of my son were a nun and another mother who was also a resident at Bessborough.
18. I went into labour while polishing the corridor floors. Later that evening, as the pain progressed, I was locked in what I can only describe as a cell. There was a single bed in it and a commode and the door had a small window in it, like a prison cell. I was left there all night with no attention. In the morning, a nun came into the cell to check on me. My [REDACTED]

baby's head was presenting and so she made me walk across the corridor to a room where there was a table for you to lie on. I was unable to get up on to the table and so I lay across it and that's how I gave birth.

19. After I gave birth to my son, he was immediately taken from me and put in the nursery.

Care of my child in the institution

20. The door to the nursery was kept locked and so the only time I was allowed to spend time with my son was when I fed him. A bell would ring to announce the start of feeding time and I would feed him and change his nappy and then we would have to leave the nursery. You were not allowed to face another mother while you were breastfeeding, so you faced the wall. I was only allowed to feed my son during the day time. As far as I am aware, the babies were not fed at all during the night.
21. I vividly remember one day going into the nursery to pick up my son and he was screaming because he was very wet and dirty. He was clearly distressed and I believe that it was because he had been in that wet and dirty nappy for some time. As far as I am aware, the nuns did not go in between feeding times to comfort the children if they were distressed or crying.
22. So far as I know my son was not baptised at Bessborough, although he may have been without my knowledge. A summary of details in relation to my son compiled by the HSE which he obtained from them in 2013 and attached at pages 2 and 3 of the bundle of papers (the "HSE Information") states that he was baptised on [REDACTED] 1967 at Bessborough, when he would have been three days old (page 2). My son has also told me that he was baptised by his adoptive parents following his adoption.

Care of other children in the institution

23. It was evident while I was in the nursery feeding my son that some women could not breastfeed and so sometimes those babies did not get fed. They were hungry; screaming, hungry. When children were bottle fed they were given the bare minimum and if a child did not finish the feed during the allocated time the rest was given to them the next time they were due to be fed.
24. There was also a nursery for older children of between ages 1 to 4 or 5. The children were kept in large cots, with four to a cot. There were no toys in the nursery. If it was a fine day, the children would be wheeled outside in the cots but they were not allowed to get out of them.

Circumstances of my child's adoption

25. In early [REDACTED] 1968, when my baby boy was six-seven weeks old, he was wrenched from my breast by one of the nuns whilst I was breastfeeding him and taken away for adoption. The date my son was taken is recorded as [REDACTED] 1968 in the Bessborough Records (page 1) and this is repeated in the HSE Information (page 3). I think the Bessborough Records are wrong, however. I am quite certain that my son was taken from me in early [REDACTED] for the reasons explained in paragraph 27 below.
26. When my son was taken I ran after the nun down the corridor, but there were two big doors that the women weren't allowed to go through and so all I could do was bang on those doors. About an hour later, the nun came back and told me that my baby was gone and when I asked where, she said "just gone". I later found out that my son had been

adopted and had been taken away by his adoptive parents the same day. At no time did I give my consent to my son's adoption.

Leaving the institution

27. Two days after my son was taken from me a nun came and told me my parents had arrived to take me home. My parents drove me to the airport and put me on a plane to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] had been in Bessborough for eight months. The Bessborough Records and the HSE Information state that I left the institution on [REDACTED] 1968 (pages 1 and 3 respectively). I think the Bessborough Records are wrong, however. It is correct that I left the institution two days after my son was taken from me, but I in fact left the institution in early [REDACTED]. I am quite sure that I left at this time, rather than in [REDACTED] as I remember being in [REDACTED] on my birthday on [REDACTED] shortly after I left Bessborough.

Tracing and reunion experience

28. I started searching for my son in 2000 but I could not get any information from the HSE. In early 2013 I spoke to a politician friend of mine, and he wrote to Francis Fitzgerald, the Minister for Children. He in turn wrote to me and told me that the HSE in Cork definitely had my files. On 26 February 2013 I rang the HSE to ask them for information. On the phone I was told that, due to the large number of requests they were receiving, it would be eight years before they could provide me with any information. On 8 March 2013 the HSE replied by letter to my call, and repeated that they had had a large number of requests (page 4).
29. Over the following months I rang the HSE repeatedly to request information. On 26 March 2014 they finally rang me to say that they had found my son and to offer me an appointment on 31 March in their offices near Cork to discuss how to proceed (see letter from the HSE on page 5 confirming the appointment). I attended the appointment and it was agreed that my son and I could exchange letters. Initially, however, the HSE refused to give me my son's address or him my address. Instead, we had to send our letters to the HSE to be forwarded on (see letters from the HSE at pages 6 and 7, confirming receipt of letters to be forwarded on).
30. Despite the HSE's reluctance for us to meet, my son and I both repeatedly asked the HSE for us to be allowed to do so. On 15 April 2014, the HSE wrote to me to propose a reunion on 7 May 2014 at their offices in Cork (page 7). My son and I have now been reunited and it has been a very positive experience. I have also recently started a support group for women who shared my experience and this again has been very positive.
31. The length of time it takes to get any information from the HSE about your adopted child and the red tape surrounding the process is very frustrating and distressing, particularly given the fact that I had never consented to my son's adoption. It seems to me that the reason the HSE takes so long to provide any information is because they hope that you will give up and go away.

I believe that the contents of this statement are true.

Signed



Date 31. 8. 2016





All redactions have been carried out by the Clann Project

Exhibit 

RECORDS AND PARTICULARS BOOK OF MATERNITY HOME

KNOWN AS

(Insert Name (if any) and Address of Home)

Particulars of PATIENT
to be entered on reception
into the Home

No. [REDACTED]

Name [REDACTED]

Address [REDACTED]

Date of reception [REDACTED] 1967.

Condition on reception *Satisfactory*

Number of previous pregnancies (full time or otherwise)

Name of Patient's Husband

Occupation of Patient's Husband

MEDICAL ATTENDANT
(if any) of Patient while in Home

Name *Dr. [REDACTED]*

Address [REDACTED]

CONFINEMENT
AND
BIRTH
IN
HOME

CONFINEMENT

Date and hour [REDACTED] 67 - 9 AM.

Delivery, normal or abnormal *Normal*

If abnormal, give particulars

Whether Sepsis or other complication developed

If so, give particulars

BIRTH

Sex of Infant *Male*

Weight of Infant at birth *8 lbs 13 oz*

Full time or premature *Full time*

If premature, state degree of prematurity

Whether born alive or stillborn *Alive*

Miscarriage in Home

Date and hour of miscarriage

Period of pregnancy

Contributing cause (if any) of miscarriage

Death in Home

Whether Mother or Infant

Date and hour of death

Cause of death

Discharge of Mother from
Home

Date of discharge [REDACTED] 68 - Home

State of health on discharge *Satisfactory*

REMOVAL OF CHILD FROM HOME

Particulars of
Person removing
Child

Date and hour of removal [REDACTED] 68 2.30 pm

Name *Irish Adopters* - (31 [REDACTED])

Address

Relationship (if any)

Particulars of Person
to whose care
Child is removed

Name

Address

Relationship (if any)



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

It is important to point out to you that the information hereunder is a record of what was reported to the agency at the time, and not necessarily a statement of fact. This is particularly important in relation to e.g. names of putative fathers.

Regional Adoption Services
'Paire na gCrann,'
St. Stephen's Hospital,
Sarsfield Court,
Glanmire,
Co. Cork

Tel.: [REDACTED]

CONFIDENTIAL

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NAME:

[REDACTED]

ADDRESS:

[REDACTED]

DATE OF BIRTH:

[REDACTED] 1967 @ 9am – (See copy attached
of extract from the Sacred Heart Hospital
Register)

PLACE OF BIRTH:

Sacred Heart Hospital,
Bessborough,
Blackrock,
Cork

DELIVERY:

Full term, normal delivery

BIRTH WEIGHT:

8lbs. 13ozs.

DATE OF BAPTISM:

[REDACTED] 1967

PLACE OF BAPTISM:

Sacred Heart Convent,
Bessborough

Your birth mother named you [REDACTED]



- 2 -

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Birth Mother

Your birth mother's name is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was [REDACTED] years old when you were born. She was described as having brown hair and blue eyes. [REDACTED] was from [REDACTED]

Education and Employment

[REDACTED] attained a secondary education to fifth year standard. She was working as a [REDACTED] at the time of your birth.

Birth Father

The information on your birth father was provided by [REDACTED]. His name was [REDACTED] (full name on file). [REDACTED] was described as being tall and blonde. His age was not recorded. He was single and from [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was described as a college student.

Relationship

There is no information on your birth parents relationship. [REDACTED] was informed of the pregnancy.

Additional Information

[REDACTED] was admitted to the mother and baby home in Bessborough on [REDACTED] 1967. She was discharged from there on [REDACTED] 1968.

You were discharged from Bessborough on [REDACTED] 1968 which is possibly the date you were placed with your adoptive couple.

The Adoption Order was granted on [REDACTED] 1967.

Signed: [REDACTED]

Date: 25/4/13

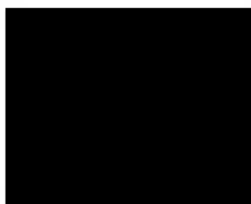


Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

**Regional Adoption Services
'Pairc na gCrann,'
St. Stephen's Hospital,
Sarsfield Court,
Glanmire,
Co. Cork.**

Tel.: 

08/03/13




Dear 

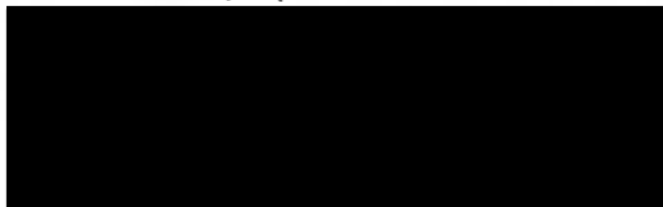
Thank you for your enquiry of 26 February, 2013.

The H.S.E. now has responsibility for the files of the Sacred Heart Order, i.e. the Sacred Heart Adoption Society, Sean Ross Abbey, Castlepollard and the Catholic Women's Aid Society.

As you can appreciate, we have received a substantive amount of requests for a service. We are presently organising these enquiries in date order. Once we have assessed the nature of each request we will be in contact with you as soon as possible.

We appreciate your patience at this time.

Yours sincerely, 





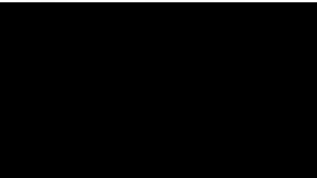
An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

**Regional Adoption Service
Child and Family Agency
Páirc na gCrann
St. Stephen's Hospital
Sarsfield Court
Glanmire
County Cork
Tel.: [REDACTED]
Fax.: [REDACTED]**

Our Ref: [REDACTED]

26th March, 2014

Private & Confidential



Dear [REDACTED]

As a follow up to my phone call with you this morning, I am happy to offer you an appointment so that we can discuss matters further.

Date: Monday 31st March 2014

Time: 11.00 a.m.

Venue: Adoption Department, St. Stephen's Hospital, Sarsfield Court, Glanmire.

[REDACTED] I am enclosing a map of the Sarsfield Court grounds that I hope may be of some assistance to you. However, if you have any difficulty in locating this Department just ring me at [REDACTED] and I will try to give you some further directions.

I look forward to meeting you soon,

Kind regards,



SOCIAL WORKER



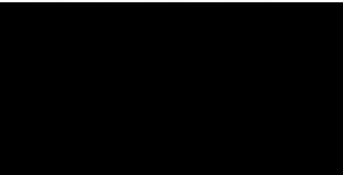
An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Regional Adoption Service
Child and Family Agency
Páirc na gCrann
St. Stephen's Hospital
Sarsfield Court
Glanmire
County Cork
Tel.: [REDACTED]
Fax.: [REDACTED]

8th April, 2014

Our Ref: [REDACTED]

Private & Confidential

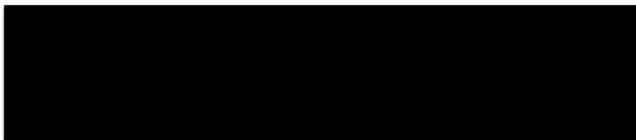


Dear [REDACTED]

I hope you are keeping well. It was lovely meeting with you last week. I am just writing a quick note to confirm that I have received today the card and the beautiful photos you sent [REDACTED]. I have informed [REDACTED] and he is really delighted about it all. [REDACTED] requested that I forward the card and photos to him.

[REDACTED] is planning to send you a card and a few photos of him and [REDACTED]. I will forward them to you as soon as I receive them. [REDACTED] we can meet up again in the near future so as to make plans for your reunion with [REDACTED].

Kind regards,



SOCIAL WORKER



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Regional Adoption Service
Child and Family Agency
Páirc na gCrann
St. Stephen's Hospital
Sarsfield Court
Glanmire
County Cork
Tel.: [REDACTED]
Fax.: [REDACTED]

15th April, 2014

Our Ref: [REDACTED]

Private & Confidential

Dear [REDACTED]

I am enclosing the card from [REDACTED] and a lovely selection of photos that he wishes you to have. I am very happy for you and [REDACTED] that you have this opportunity to have contact with each other. Having discussed the matter with you and [REDACTED] I am aware that you are both eager to proceed to a reunion in the near future. As discussed during our phone calls, I am therefore happy to set a provisional date for your reunion.

Date: Wednesday 7th May 2014

Time: 12 noon

Venue: Adoption Department, St. Stephen's Hospital, Sarsfield Court, Glanmire.

[REDACTED] I will contact you closer to this date to finalise details for your reunion with [REDACTED]

I wish you and all your family a Happy Easter.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]
SOCIAL WORKER