

## Chapter 10

# Positive memories and experiences – male and female witnesses

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- 10.01** In addition to reporting abuse many witnesses wished to emphasise positive aspects of the care they received in Industrial and Reformatory Schools. They commented that memories of kindness remained with them for many years.

### Details of good memories

- 10.02** Accounts of care, kindness, attention and support provided by individual religious and lay staff were given in evidence by both male and female witnesses. Such experiences included incidents and encounters both within the School and in the wider community.

#### *Kind staff*

- 10.03** Two hundred and eighty four (284) witnesses, 168 male and 116 female, recounted the kindness of individual religious and lay staff. The witness description most often reported was the absence of physical abuse, ‘*He did not hit*’ and ‘*she didn’t hit girls or scream at them*’ were typical of remarks by witnesses regarding kind members of the religious staff. Other acts of kindness by religious and lay staff reported to the Committee included being given extra food, spoken to kindly, shown affection, having a blind eye turned to behaviour others would report, creating a positive environment and being called by one’s first name rather than by a number or surname. Another kindness was being allowed to have pets particularly cats and dogs as occasionally reported. Other witnesses commented on the special attention they received from individual staff that continued over a number of years and was of lasting benefit.

*Br ...X... he seemed to have an understanding of us, he was the best one I met in my life. I felt safe with him, he didn’t wear the strap like a 6 gun, ready to shoot everyone, compared to the others he was kind. He was able to help with my reading and he would put a mark saying “well done!”*

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*One very, very kind person, she was Sr ...X... she was old, a lovely person. I have great memories of her. She would come in to call us, open up the curtains and she would be singing in the morning. She was lovely to us, she wasn’t long there.*

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*The kindest thing that ever happened to me was a nurse, she was called ...Ms X... we were all around saying the Rosary and she put a sweet in my hand, one sweet. I didn’t want to eat the sweet I wanted to hold on to it, somebody gave me something, somebody was kind. It became a regular thing about once a week, one sweet. I began to look forward to it...*

- 10.04** Witnesses also reported that kind religious staff offered protection by assigning them chores in areas where they were less likely to be hit and rescuing them from beatings by other staff. Other

positive memories described by witnesses were of religious staff interacting with residents in a friendly manner and demonstrating concern about their distress and injuries.

- 10.05** There were several religious Sisters and Brothers mentioned with affection by witnesses from different Schools. One Brother who was named by eight witnesses was reported to have supervised the residents on Sundays and encouraged them to talk to him. He was described as often giving sweets to those who were crying or upset and speaking kindly to them. Six (6) female witnesses from one School recalled a Sister who had been caring and kind throughout their time spent in the institution. It was remarked that acts of kindness were generally demonstrated in private. Words of encouragement and praise were remembered warmly by witnesses as rare experiences and were usually reported to have been associated with particular named staff members.

*One Brother was kind and used to give me a bit of a boost, when playing football he'd say "you're good".*

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*Sr ...X... who worked in the laundry was kind, if I got coal for her she would say "you're a good girl" and "thank you", such was the level of deprivation that one word of kindness was remarkable. Sr ...Y... who worked in the kitchen was also kind, she gave bread dipped in gravy.*

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*One nun she was absolutely lovely, I am a nurse today because of her, she was the nun in the infirmary, she would get you something and say "don't say a word".*

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*They were not all bad – there was one Brother he was an old man, he was. When he got his food he would take it out of his pocket and give it to us, bread and butter it was lovely it was. He was a lovely old man.*

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*It was kinda safe around him, I used to like going for walks with him; no one else could touch you when you were out with him.*

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*A nun would call girls over and give them food out of her pocket and say "there creatureen, run".*

- 10.06** Sixteen (16) witnesses reported enjoying kind treatment from lay and religious staff when they were ill. Being treated gently and with consideration was noted by witnesses in contrast to the more familiar experience of staff as critical, unfriendly and frequently abusive. Witnesses from a number of Schools recalled the kindness and attention they received from lay female nurses. One nurse was mentioned by several male witnesses as a trusted confidant to whom residents could talk without fear and who, at times, acted as an advocate on their behalf.

- 10.07** Witnesses identified 98 lay staff as kind, attentive and helpful including teachers, nurses, care staff and ancillary workers. Witnesses particularly commented on the positive influence of those lay care staff and ancillary workers who lived outside the confines of the School. There were numerous reports of these staff members inviting residents to their homes and introducing a lighter atmosphere to the everyday routine and work environment. Witnesses also commented on a sense of safety that existed when these lay staff were around. Four (4) male witnesses said that the spouses of lay staff provided extra food and were kind to residents when the opportunity arose. One female witness stated that contact with these lay staff 'Let you believe life could be different'.

**10.08** The encouragement and kindness of some lay classroom teachers was recalled with appreciation by 41 male and 17 female witnesses. These reports referred both to teachers within the Schools and others who taught residents attending local primary, secondary and technical schools in the community. *'Teachers who treated us without prejudice were a joy'.*

*The lay teachers encouraged you to do homework, they had hope in you, they wanted you to do well.*

**10.09** Particular lay care staff, including some who were former residents of the School, were described by 25 female witnesses as kind and protective: *'she understood, she would not report you'.* However, witnesses also remarked that kind staff did not stay long or that they changed their behaviour and attitude as they were assimilated into the culture of the institution. Witnesses discharged from the mid-1970s increasingly described lay staff as promoting changes in the conditions in the Schools and attempting to offer protection from abuse.

*Some lay staff were a good team, they used to fight ...(for residents).... I heard them fighting on the phone with Sr ...X (Resident Manager)... for better things for the kids.*

**10.10** Fifteen (15) male and 16 female witnesses from different Schools reported that a change of Resident Manager or other person regarded as being in a position of special authority led to a decrease in abuse and an improvement in the general routine and care. Witnesses remarked on the relief experienced when new Resident Managers changed practices of communal bathing and showering and made provision for residents to have more privacy. Six (6) of those reports related to the period prior to 1960. Improvements reported in the 1970s included increased contact between siblings and family members, less physical punishment, a change from dormitories to small cubicles with more privacy, better hygiene practices, attending schools in the local town and being part of activities in the local area. All of these changes were described as having positive benefit.

*They took down our names and date of birth. My older sister told them my birth date, she knew as older sisters would. My birth date was written "unknown". "Anything about this child known?" It was written down "unknown". I was being treated for a heart problem before I went ... it was written down "unknown". I was given a number ... and there I was given a name I didn't know. The head nun changed after a year and a half and she looked through the records and noticed I didn't have a name or anything and got my birth date and my name, I had had no name for a year.*

### **Community contact**

**10.11** Eighty five (85) witnesses described their involvement in local activities such as attending school in the local town, Feis Cheoil and sporting competitions, Irish dancing, choir practice, music, outings and seaside holidays. The benefit of seeing the world outside the institution and having the opportunity to make friends with peers who were not part of the institutional system was emphasised by many witnesses.

**10.12** Film shows were reported as a regular and popular pastime in the boys Schools with 109 witness accounts of either watching films in the School or attending local cinemas. Films were described by witnesses as providing a welcome escape from the daily reality of institutional life and respite from being hit, especially in Schools where the film shows were also attended by local townspeople. Both male and female witnesses also commented on the positive experience of holidays and day trips to the beach from the Schools.

**10.13** Nineteen (19) male witnesses reported positive memories of playing in the School band and/or singing in School choirs. They stated that, in addition to developing valuable skills, this involvement contributed towards a more positive self-image. Witnesses reported opportunities to

travel for performances, at times meeting families who treated them kindly and exposed them to different ways of life.

**10.14** Christmas activities were described by a number of witnesses as memorable. The provision of better food, presents and the experience of a more relaxed atmosphere were all remarked on as good memories of Christmas by both male and female witnesses. Witnesses from a small number of Schools reported that considerable effort was put into arranging festivities and entertainment, usually in conjunction with organisations from the locality. Occasions when there were inspections or special visitors were also mentioned as enjoyable and memorable because of the availability of extra food and a festive atmosphere.

**10.15** The kindness of local people was remembered by 20 witnesses. Some local shopkeepers were mentioned for giving residents sweets or ice cream. One witness stated that when one of the Sisters sent her to the local shop to get a dozen new canes the shopkeeper broke the canes on his knee in front of her and told her to tell the Sisters he had none left.

**10.16** The kindness of external clergy from the local community was remembered by a small number of witnesses and left a lasting impression. One member of the clergy was reported by several witnesses to use his influence to modify conditions for residents within the School and attempted to ensure their protection.

*The priest, who used to come in ...(to the School)... he came up and gave me 10 shillings, and a word of kindness. I don't know how he knew I was going ...(being discharged)... and he didn't want anything for it. It was such an act of kindness, the nuns gave me 2/6 pence and no word of anything. The bus fare was 4/6 pence, had it not been for him, he probably changed a lot of lives by his act of kindness. I knew there was someone in the world who had been kind, just ...(that)... one act of kindness.*

### ***Weekend and holiday families***

**10.17** Seventy five (75) witnesses, 28 male and 47 female, reported on the positive experience of regular visits to weekend and 'holiday' families, also known as 'foster' families and 'godparents', which were facilitated by those in charge of the Schools. Witnesses reported that visits to these families provided an experience of family life, with appropriate care and attention that in many instances has lasted to the present day. Contact with 'godparents' and 'foster' and 'holiday' families were regarded by some witnesses as protective as they had access to someone outside the School.

**10.18** The positive experience of becoming involved in family life, forming attachments and having relationships outside the School in a non-abusive environment was commented on by many witnesses. Further positive memories of 'holiday' family contact included the experience of respect for privacy in matters of self-care, being given new and fashionable clothes, receiving Christmas and birthday presents, and having better and more plentiful food. 'Godparents', 'holiday', work placement and foster families were also reported by a number of witnesses as acting as advocates for them and as challenging punitive decisions made by the religious staff concerning witnesses. Twenty eight (28) witnesses described being treated as a member of the family and reported being given assistance to pursue further education and training.

*My first job, the people ...(work placement family)... were very nice, they were very good to me. Br ...X... fixed up all that, they took me everywhere. They took me out for meals. They were like a mother and father...*

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*Going out to “godmother’s” family opened my eyes to how life could be, they were very kind and fought to keep the contact when the nuns stopped it because they thought I was spoilt ... they saved my sanity.*

### **Family contact**

- 10.19** Seventy one (71) witnesses, 32 male and 39 female, reported that contact with their own parents, siblings and relatives was a positive experience that was greatly valued. Annual holidays spent with family at Christmas or summer as well as visits from parents, grandparents and other family members were regarded as something to look forward to and were reported by witnesses to be a protective factor against beatings. Further, ongoing family contact after admission was consistently emphasised by witnesses as having a positive influence on reintegration with their families after discharge. The positive value of letters, parcels and other chance contacts such as meeting and seeing brothers and sisters while out walking or in the church were also recalled as positive memories by witnesses.

*The family was supportive and kept in contact, visits, parcels, and summer holidays home. I went back home.*

- 10.20** Efforts made by parents and relatives to visit and stay in contact with witnesses, following admission to the Schools, were also retained as good memories. A number of witnesses were aware during their stay in the Schools that their parents and/or relatives made considerable efforts to maintain contact with them and support them while they were there. Others became fully aware in recent years of the efforts made in this regard.

*Mam always came to visit us during school holiday, Christmas and Easter and that. She was working in London.*

### **Response to disclosure**

- 10.21** Eighty (80) witnesses, 46 male and 34 female, reported that when they disclosed abuse, their complaints were dealt with in a positive manner and generally the abuse ceased. Disclosures of abuse were made to parents, relatives, siblings, external professionals, gardaí, religious and lay staff including Resident Managers and others in positions of authority. The relief of being listened to and believed was described by witnesses as a turning point in their experience of being in the Schools. Positive responses to disclosures of abuse included being moved from the situation where the abuse occurred, having reports of abuse taken up formally by parents and relatives through written representations to the Department of Education and confronting religious staff in charge of the Schools regarding the reported abuse. Further positive responses to these interventions included early discharge from the Schools, the dismissal or admonishment of abusive staff and the cessation of further abuse.

*I told my mother about a lot of the abuse. She wrote in to the Minister and she conveyed my complaints and she got a letter back to say “in view of the circumstances I am releasing ...witness... to the custody of his mother”.*

- 10.22** At times positive outcomes were reported to have occurred as a direct response to the disclosure and in other instances witnesses reported that they were initially punished but that subsequently the abuse ceased, their abuser left or they were granted an early discharge. One witness reported that she was regularly beaten by the lay teacher in the outside school she attended. She reported that the Resident Manager visited her classroom and successfully confronted the teacher, following which the abuse stopped.

### **Friendship**

- 10.23** Forty nine (49) witnesses, 18 male and 31 female, reported that friendships with co-residents were an important and positive experience for them during their time in the Schools. Many

described establishing strong friendship bonds with co-residents that are maintained to the present day. Some witnesses who had no known family contact described these friends and former co-residents as their 'real family'. Twenty three (23) witnesses also described the importance of friendships with boys and girls from the local towns who were in class with them or who they met through sport or other activities. They recounted positive memories of classmates who were friendly towards them in the playground, invited them to their homes, to attend birthday parties and who gave them comics, sweets and small gifts.

- 10.24** Thirty one (31) female witnesses from eight Schools gave varying accounts of ongoing friendship networks including some who meet regularly and support each other through life crises. A number of witnesses were accompanied to the Committee by women who had been their childhood friends and others who provided support to them when they were first discharged from the Schools many years ago. Witnesses described the importance of their friendships with men and women who '*really understand what it was like to have been there*'. Other witnesses described the enormous sense of loss they experienced when discharges precluded the opportunity to say goodbye to their friends.

*Never being able to say goodbye to your friends, that is my real tragedy, it haunts me to this day. All these years wondering what has happened to them are they alive, are they dead? We were so close, we were as close as sisters.*

### **Work**

- 10.25** A number of witnesses described the experience of working on the farms and in the kitchens as a positive memory. Twenty (20) male witnesses reported that farm work was a sanctuary for them as they were left alone and enjoyed the work. A number of the witnesses described the farmyards and fields as places of safety '*away from the battering*' that also provided access to extra food.

*Potato picking was not too bad because there was a big fire at the end and you could cook the potatoes, we did it for local farmers and got half a crown at the end of it.*

- 10.26** Other aspects of work were reported by witnesses as positive experiences. For example, one witness enjoyed ploughing with workhorses kept on the School's farm and another had a particular talent for handling animals. Witnesses commented on the pleasure they got from working alongside kind staff in these areas. One witness described looking forward to the days when she worked on the School's farm:

*She ...(Sr X)... gave me extra eggs and potatoes and I always remember the good feeling I had ...(working with her)....*

- 10.27** A number of female witnesses mentioned caring for young children as a valued opportunity to relate affectionately to another person. In this context 14 female witnesses recalled with fondness older girls who cared for and protected them when they were young and in a small number of instances reported maintaining contact with them in the years since.

### **Post-discharge**

- 10.28** In addition to routine assistance received from staff when they were being discharged, seven male and 29 female witnesses reported receiving further assistance from religious and lay staff when they got into personal or employment difficulties after leaving the School. The witnesses emphasised how important this help was to them and remember with gratitude the assistance they received. A number of witnesses reported being rescued from homelessness and were offered temporary accommodation in the School. There were a number of reports of alternative employment being found for witnesses by the staff in such circumstances where their first job was not satisfactory.

Following discharge... *We had to write back to them, report back to them, and if we were in need of a job we had to report back to them again. We had no other place to turn, the only place we could turn was back there. I finally wrote back to Mother ...X... and told her the situation. "Come back" she said "you could probably do with a couple of days, come back. You can stay here and we'll have a chat about a job" she said. I gave in my notice and went back, for 6 months I think. They were very nice to me when I got back and she said "what kind of a job would you like?" ... (Placed by religious staff in satisfactory alternative employment)*



*This man...(named priest)... approached me, he said "have you got a job?"...he said "I run a boys' hostel", he took us to the boys' home and he made a phone call. Then he called us and put us on the bus and the first stop was the General Post Office in London. He took us in to the post office and he had a word with the manager, he... (manager)... called us in one by one and said "you just have been released from the Free State Army... what time would you like to start?" I said "what shifts have you? I'll take the one at night time. I'll start tonight. He said "you're not in the country a day yet"...The priest got all 12 of us jobs...5 bob a week in the hostel, all meals threw in. I stayed 2 and a half years.*

- 10.29** Three (3) witnesses who had early unplanned pregnancies reported being given shelter and support by the Schools while their babies were young. One witness reported that, shortly after her discharge, she and her family were given financial assistance to return to Ireland from poor circumstances in the UK. Others reported being assisted to find employment in the local area when they could not settle further away. A small number of female witnesses reported having maintained contact with individual religious Sisters over many years, receiving gifts when they got married and being assisted to finish their education and pursue careers. *'The staff were kind to me on the whole. They sent me a cheque when I married.'*

### **Care and education provided**

- 10.30** A small number of witnesses were appreciative of the staff that cared for them even though they wished to make clear that they also experienced abuse in the Schools. *'They gave children a great life, they did not mean what they did, no matter how cruel they were, where would I have been without them?' Some witnesses expressed the view that the religious and lay staff in charge of them probably did the best they could under difficult circumstances and four witnesses said that in retrospect, they appreciated the sense of security provided by being contained in an institutional environment when they were young.*
- 10.31** Witnesses discharged since the mid-1970s more frequently commented on having positive experiences during their stay in Schools. Some witnesses reported on general improvements in the standards of care and assistance received from staff. Examples of improvements in the standards of care included the establishment of group homes on the grounds of some Schools and the increased likelihood of siblings being admitted and remaining together. There were nine witness reports of the positive experience of living in a small mixed group in the care of trained lay care staff. Witnesses from some Schools reported other positive changes in the way they were prepared for discharge, including access to 'pre-leaving' care groups, which were designed to train residents for independent living, for example learning how to budget, cook or pay bills.
- 10.32** Twenty male (20) and 32 female witnesses commented on the positive value of the education and training they received in the classrooms and trade workshops from lay and religious teachers. In later years there were more frequent reports of support for regular school attendance and further education that was also appreciated.

*The education was good there, I've got to be honest. It depends on how you are yourself. What I mean by education ... you had the opportunities there, you had day school and night school.... You had the carpenters shop there, you had the shoemakers shop there, the garden and the farmers, there was a tailors shop there too.*