

## Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

AGH

Support person present: Yes

1. My name is AGH. My date of birth is 1959. My contact details are known to the Inquiry. I am providing evidence of my deceased mother's experience as a resident at Smyllum and the impact on her and our family.

### Life before going into care

2. My mother, AHT was the eldest of three children. She had a younger sister AAC who was six or eight years younger and a brother about eighteen months younger. At that time they stayed in a tenement building in Dundee.
3. My mother looked after her sick mother, and her father was unemployed, as I think was usual at that time. The family were 'on the parish'. Her mother was believed to be ill from having the three children, despite doctors previously advising her against having children on medical grounds.
4. After my mother had a breakdown, she would talk incessantly about her life in Smyllum, though she just called it 'the convent' at that time. As she continually, and obsessively talked about it (and it felt like a constant assault), I blanked some of her conversations out of my mind. She did also talk about the church being a big thing in her life but I am not sure if it was before or after the convent. Attending the Catholic Church, confession and concerns about sin, belief, limbo were great concerns to her.

### **Smyllum Park, Lanark**

5. My mother, her sister and brother were all taken to Smyllum. I am not certain of the exact reasons for their admissions, but their admission occurred after their mum had died. I don't know why their dad did not continue to care for them. Her mum died when my mum was around fourteen or fifteen.

### **Routine at Smyllum**

6. I am told that when all three arrived at Smyllum they were separated. My mother's brother went to the boy's dormitory, her younger sister to a different dormitory because of her age. My mother was placed with some of the older girls.
7. My mother talked about only being able to see her siblings from a distance and I am not sure how this was. I think my mother did serve food to the younger children and would see her siblings then. I believe, she was not, however, allowed to talk to her siblings. This caused her great suffering.
8. My mum was seen as a useful person because she was put in the nursery to look after the babies.
9. Whilst at Smyllum my mum told us that she became ill and her body was covered in boils and they were expecting her to have to leave the convent. She eventually recovered and remained there.

### *Food*

10. Mum always said the food at the convent was really poor. The nuns sat at their table and would be fed the best of food including eggs, but the food fed to the children was basic and horrible to eat. They might have been given an orange or other piece of

fruit at Easter or Christmas. The nuns lived a life of luxury compared to the children. There was not attempt made to disguise this fact that there was a huge disparity in treatment between the nuns and the children.

### *Christmas and Birthdays*

11. My mum told us that at Christmas, the children would be given presents but these would then be taken off them very soon afterwards. It seemed that the Nuns wanted to be seen to be giving to the children but actually it was a lie and they were not, it was just for show.

### *Religion*

12. The staff used religion as a tool to control the children. Committing a sin was a major controlling thing with the nuns.

### *Visits/Inspections*

13. I am not sure if there was such a thing as social workers at that time but my mum never said that she had any visits from anyone from any authorities. It all sounded like they were a complete law unto themselves.
14. Her father visited occasionally at the convent but she still felt abandoned. The nuns put on a good show in front of her father.

### **Abuse at Smyllum**

15. Mum often talked about the level of violence being really bad and living under a reign of terror. All the children at the convent were terrified. She said the nuns were haters of all children and many were plainly vicious. She talked a lot about the beatings her brother ██████ received from the staff. Her whole life there, along with many others, was horrible and a violent existence.

16. Mum would talk about the nuns as many being really ugly people, especially in relation to their violence. She also remarked about some being lesbians. She did not have any issues with people and their sexuality but this was what she said. I don't know why she would talk about the sexuality of the nuns as this was not the sort of thing she discussed in any other context (apart from when she had a breakdown.) Therefore I am not sure if she was talking about them in this manner because she witnessed something or was a victim of something.

### **Leaving Smyllum**

17. When mum was about to leave the convent and as a way to try and force her to stay, one of the priests took her rosary from her and told her if she left she would be excommunicated. This had a massive impact on her for the rest of her life. Her belief was very strong. She believed she had been excommunicated and did not take communion again in a Catholic Church.
18. When mum left Smyllum she went to London where she trained as a nurse. As a nurse my mum stayed in the nurse's home. She was always tired but really enjoyed it. She was proud to have found that vocation and to be very successful in her training despite having had very little formal education previously. She had lots of friends whilst working there. Whilst nursing, she met and married my father.
19. At the time she left Smyllum her sister and brother were still residing there. She had a lot of guilt from her time at Smyllum and most of that guilt was because she was unable to look after her siblings, which she did prior to them being placed in the convent.
20. When [REDACTED] my mum's brother, left Smyllum he stayed in Scotland and eventually married. [REDACTED] AAC my mum's sister, came to England and later returned to Scotland. She tried to visit once or twice but mum did not want to see her. I only saw my aunt and uncle about once or twice a young person. I never went to Scotland with them.

### Reporting of abuse at Smyllum

21. Mum never reported any of the abuse she sustained at Smyllum, except to her psychiatrists.

### Life after being in care

22. My dad was in the RAF. He was a single child and his parents were from Ramsgate. His mother did not accept my mother into the family as she considered my mother to have come from the wrong side of the tracks. My dad fell out with his mother as he did not appreciate the way she was reacting.
23. We were living on an RAF base but mum did not want anyone visiting us at the house. She never went out anywhere or had any friends.
24. When [redacted] AAC my mum's sister, had her grandchildren, my mother was very critical of the way [redacted] AAC was sharing the care of them with her daughter. I wish my mum had been able to care for us that much or to help out with my children.
25. Recently I spoke with my mum's brother, [redacted]'s wife [redacted] and she told me he is now suffering from Alzheimer's. I know he did not want to go into a home but that is where he is now. He is a danger to himself and others. He seems to be re-living his life from his younger days. I will be going to visit him soon but will not be talking about this. It's awful, it is like he is going through all those experiences all over again. [redacted] told me that she married [redacted] not knowing anything about his time in care. She did once ask him about a very large scar on his leg and he said this was from playing football with the teachers, who wore football boots, and the children did not.

### Impact on my mother

26. Until they married, my mother had never disclosed her experiences to my father and he knew nothing of her background. I was not aware of any problems until one of her compulsory admissions into psychiatric hospital. This was when I was about 13. My dad said that in retrospect, mum had been getting ill from about three years into their marriage, and then about 8 years in, around the time my sister [REDACTED] was born, she was then becoming very ill indeed and incapable of caring for us very much.
27. When my mother was sent to hospital she was diagnosed with what is now labelled bipolar disorder. At the time this was called manic depression and she had acute psychosis. The psychiatrists were very clear that this was due to her time in Smyllum.
28. Some of the psychiatrists suggested that my mother and father attend group therapy. They would go to London once a week for those sessions. She would make comments that these people would say she was intelligent. When I was a teenager she wore a badge saying "I am a person too". As a result of my mother's psychotic issues she would spend six months in the hospital and be home for nine months. This cycle would just keep repeating. Apart from the very later years of her life when my mum was admitted to hospital after my brother killed himself, her last entry to hospital was when I was 21. After this she was very highly medicated and would only be awake for a short period of the day.
29. I am not sure if all the psychotherapy helped mum. For all the efforts and money that went into it we did not see any difference in mum. With the effect on my mother's life and my father having to live and cope with her it impacted greatly on the upbringing of my siblings and myself.

### **Impact on family**

30. My father would tell us it was all about my mother and nothing to do with us, despite us witnessing it all. Dad would tell us not to worry and that her mental illness was to do with the convent and that we were alright. My dad was very concerned about caring for our mother to the exclusion of our needs. We had no family nearby and no

social work visits ourselves. We had to spend very long periods of time witnessing our mother's distress and not express any ourselves. We had to 'not upset your mother'. I am glad my mother had this devoted care from our father, but we needed a bit too.

31. I was about twelve or thirteen when I first witnessed my mother in a psychotic state. This was totally terrifying, with my mother pinning me up against a wall and saying my sister was a lesbian, I was a drug addict and my father had run off with someone. She had been in hospital prior to this but we were told this was because she had fallen down the stairs and hurt her back. I now suspect she was ill at this time and might have thrown herself down the stairs. My father tried to protect us from knowing about this. Listening to our upset and fear might have been more helpful.
32. At an early stage of her being in hospital we were offered some family therapy but did not take the opportunity up at that time and were not offered it again.
33. My dad was probably run ragged caring for my mum and three children. I did have a lot of responsibility in terms of household chores and feeding myself and my brother. I remember my dad doing the ironing I would be sitting on the settee scared to move because he was just so angry all the time.
34. I do remember corporal punishment when I was young and my dad was very authoritarian. I did not have those boundaries with my children but later realised some boundaries are necessary.
35. My sister was 8 years younger than me and she had a terrible time with our mum. Mum was quite vicious to my sister. My mum would make dinner for dad and her and leave my sister's food raw. Dad told [REDACTED] that there was not much he could do about it and did not protect her from my mum's madness. My mum would threaten to kick [REDACTED] out. One time, my sister said mum was being so horrible to her that she walked out and sat on a bench for a while. She realised she could not look after herself and returned home.

36. I remember one time when my brother and I had been swimming and dad having gone off to work. When we returned there was no one at home. Neighbours told us they had found my mother wandering in the street and was in their house. I was a twelve year old but expected to pick mum up from those terrified adults. When she came back to the house she was angry and pinned me up against a wall. She was calling my brother a drug addict, my sister a lesbian and telling me that I was pregnant. She also said my father had run off to Ramsgate. She was psychotic.
37. One Christmas my mother asked what I would like as a present. When I asked her for a pair of glasses she was explosively angry and said that I was accusing her of causing my partial sight in one eye. This made no sense to me at the time. I later found out from a doctor that as I had squints as a young child which were not treated this caused my brain to cut out the sight in one of my eyes. I was not born with this condition, which I had been led to believe.
38. I remember being told by family that one time when my sister was really young and had used the toilet, she went to my parents to get her bottom wiped. They told her to ask her big sister (me) to clean her bottom. She left the house to find me and was found over a mile away from the house. A neighbour recognised her and took her to the police station and she was returned home.
39. My sister was sent to be looked after by our Aunt for a period. She was only there for a short time as she was unhappy and came back to the house. I was older and I don't really know how she was looked after but I do know she was very badly neglected.
40. My sister never had my mother looking after her. When she was going to school her hair was a mess and was not being brushed at all. My sister remembers it being just two clumps of hair on her head. Her clothes were unclean and she smelled. She had to walk to school through a really rough area on the outskirts of London at a very young age to get to school unaccompanied. The teachers never did anything to help her and no one did anything to address this. Our mum was too ill to notice or do anything.

41. When she was around twelve or thirteen and I was at university my sister, over a period of time, became a victim of what is now called Childhood Sexual Exploitation. This was extreme and extensive. My parents did nothing to help her. Dad only once dragged her in off the street and was angry with her but did not say why. [REDACTED] recalls that a neighbour told dad that if she did not watch out she would come home with a big belly. She was abused verbally at school. Intellectually, my sister knows that none of this is her fault as was the result of her vulnerability and being neglected. However, emotionally she feels great shame about this and that she will be judged by it. She can feel extremely disturbed thinking about this period of her life and is one of the reasons for why she has not felt able to give evidence to this Inquiry. I don't think she has felt able to tell her partner about her past and can continue to feel very isolated at times.
42. Around about his age, my sister had a boyfriend and his parents were concerned for her welfare and helped to look after her almost like a surrogate family.
43. While I was young at home I was having to look after my brother. No one showed me what I should be doing or how to cook things. I would try to feed him fish finger sandwiches but sometimes they were still frozen on the inside.
44. My brother went off the rails. He was smoking cannabis at school, on one occasion he was found in a vulnerable position at some older man's house. My brother killed himself when he was 38 years old.
45. I had a frustrated relationship with my brother. He had little or no parental involvement but I always felt protective towards him. He was very vulnerable but I tried to help him as much as I could. He got on well with my sister but I could not interact with her as well as I did my brother. When my brother died the relationship between my sister and I got better. I felt I lost a brother but gained a sister.

46. At primary school I was chattering away to a teacher and she called my parents to the school because of it. They thought I was talking too much and it showed even trying to talk to the teacher I was not able to get any comfort.
47. At secondary school, when my mother was spending long periods of time in hospital, the deputy head teacher at my school did offer me some time away from school, so that I could do the housework. Nobody talked to me about what was going on and I felt very isolated, confused, rejected and alone. I was not able to make friendships.
48. I never kept in touch with anyone from my school days. Dad offered for me to attend boarding school once, but I turned it down.
49. Although I was brought up by an essentially Catholic mother, I attended Church of England secondary school and Sunday school. I was never treated as very bright. I passed my CSE's and was told I could do secretarial studies, which I did. I then went on to do A Levels, not expecting to pass, but did and went on to University. The A levels I did included sociology and psychology as I was desperate to understand the human experience.
50. In those days you were given grants for university education. My mum and dad earned enough that they were supposed to top mine up (only by £200). They didn't and their answer to me was because they had to pay for her psychotherapy and there was no money left for my education.
51. When I left to go to university I was about nineteen. This was also about the last time my mother went into hospital. I never went back to visit during any of the holidays, preferring to stay at university. My younger son is so different as he comes home to visit and I have trouble getting him out, he is very comfortable at home.
52. I have completed three university courses but inside I still feel, unintelligent and at times worthless. How many degrees does it take to show myself that I am intelligent?

53. About 10 years before my mum died, we gave my mum a wind-up toy called 'nunzilla' It was a plastic num and when it was wound up it would walk and shot sparks out of its mouth. She loved it!
54. As a result of the abuse in Smyllum, and the priest taking her rosary, my mum began attending at Church of England services and avoided the Catholic Church. This went on for some time until she had one of her break downs after my brother died. She would then go into Catholic charges and light candles. We were raised as Church of England but mum had Catholicism in her blood.
55. The only extended family experience I had was when we visited with my great aunt [REDACTED] (on my father's side). It was great when we saw her as she would buy cakes and she always had tins with sweets. We rarely had visits from my grandparents or other family because of mum's illness. We also never had visitors to the family home. I never once remember anyone coming for a meal.
56. My mum used to scream at night. These were bloodcurdling screams and there was never any discussion with us about them. No one would come in the night to see how we were. I too occasionally scream at night and have been told that this is a result of PTSD because of my experience of my mother's mental illness.
57. I have two children, both boys, one aged twenty eight who is a nurse and my twenty four year old son just qualified as a doctor. I am fine now, but I spent very many years (until I was about 45) being confused about my sexuality and gender. Although I knew biologically I was a woman, I did not feel emotionally that I knew I was one. I very much believe this had been my way of defending myself from confusing and intrusive behaviours of my parents when I was younger. My relationship with my husband ended when I was about forty five. When he left I felt really great about myself as a woman and felt much better inside myself.
58. Growing up, my kids have always called me by my first name, not mum or anything similar. About fifteen years ago I was writing a card and tried to sign it off as "mum" but could not bring myself to do it. We had always had to relate to our mum as

though she was a mum, but to me, as a young person, she was a fake mum and it was all a sham. It was just an act and a charade that we were going through as a family. I was expected to treat her as my mum for her benefit, not mine. I felt unable to expect my children to call me mum. It has been painful to realise this.

59. I feel guilty about my children. I was a depressed mother and did not know how to play with them. I was never accessible to the children. When they were young I was glad when they went to a child minder as I did not know how to talk to them. When they were growing up and my husband was away I was scared that if they woke I could not help them. (I now realise that this was because I was scared that I would be triggered about my mum screaming in the night and would be frozen rigid and unable to attend to them).
60. My first job was working in therapeutic community for young adults with mental health problems. I later trained as a lawyer and went into mediation. Through later meeting with social workers, foster carers and children in care, I then retrained as a social worker and now work in child protection. I think my career path has been dominated by my early experiences.
61. During many periods in my life I have sought and received counselling. At university I found it hard as I could not relate to people, but there were counselling groups which I attended.
62. A couple of years ago I sought some help with my sleeping and I was diagnosed with PTSD. This actually helped me as I now had a name for the problems I was going through.
63. My partner ████████ed about his parents going ████████ out and playing badminton together and with friends when he was young. I find this quite extraordinary as I had no experience of my parents ever socialising with anyone.

64. When I worked with the Richmond Fellowship (as a residential social worker for young adults with mental health problems) I attended psychotherapy twice a week. One visit was paid for by the Fellowship and I paid for the other. This lasted for about two years. I found the counselling helped in some ways but was frustrating and unproductive in others. I felt like an alien in so many ways and in some therapies have felt that the therapists have not been able to understand my experience, this has led to further distress at times. I have done co-counselling for about twenty years and this helped with feeling listened to and being able to relate to others.
65. I function okay with my mental health problems and at this time do not require any medication, but I have used medication in the past. I would say I have been depressed since I was about eight years old and have struggled in my relationships with people.
66. I have been doing mindfulness for about eight years now. I now know how to have fun. I enjoy being part of a choir and an improvisation group. I still lack self-confidence but I am better in how I relate to other people now.
67. I am always on hypo alert. On the outside I appear calm but that is not how I feel on the inside. That is a result of what I had experienced as a child. I had to be quiet, still and look calm in order to survive.
68. My sister has not appreciated the treatments I have received for many years. I feel they have really helped me. She eventually went for treatment herself but found it deeply shocking and was retraumatized by the experience. My sister has had extreme difficulties at times and her self esteem can be very low at times. She has also been on a life time journey of how to best care for herself and make sense of the world.

## **Records**

69. I do not have and have not had access to any of mum's records. I would be interested in finding out what her records say about her, before she left and suffered from her mental health issues. It would be nice to know more of her family history. I would like to know of any wider family I may have. I feel desperate for my children as they do not have the support or any relationship with a wider family.

**Other information**

70. My mother died about twelve or thirteen years ago. I thought when mum died I would get some relief but I was wrong, nothing changed. There was no relief from what had been struggling with for years.

71. My aunt has been a member of the campaign group to get this Inquiry. My mother was very dismissive of this and was not interested in it. She was always dismissive of what her sister did, but I suspect this was defensive on her part.

72. I hope the Inquiry makes things better for the children of tomorrow. I feel quite distressed seeing the amount of money, time and resource that is being used for this Inquiry when children, in abusive situations today, continue to not be well served, due to lack of resources.

73. 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.....7/1/18.....