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Councillor John Gilligan successfully campaigned to have the names of the women who died while in the care of the Good Shepherds recorded on the gravestones in Mount Saint Lawrence Cemetery in Limerick City. Here he tells the story of his campaign and his memories of the Good Shepherd Laundry.

[Interview begins]

My own interest in the Magdalene Laundry, I suppose it all went back to the graveyard. The graveyard itself, it's a very old graveyard in Limerick city, Mount Saint Lawrence's, and my parents are buried there. Some of my other family are buried there as well. You usually take the trip in through the side gate, turn left and our graves would be down at the railway end of the graveyard. Now, I'd often wander down the central lane, but I'd rarely take a trip around the outside but I did on a number of occasions. There was this day I had been up there visiting a grave, I think it was a family grave. It was a lovely day so I went down just to look at tomb stones just the dates and things like that because it's part of the social history of Limerick and I took the left hand path and I came across the biggest grave in the entire cemetery and there wasn't a single name on it. Now I know I'd passed it before, but I don't think it impacted on me until then. It said 'Here Lie the Residents of the Good Shepherd Convent' and it struck me as being rather odd. Why on earth it should have been remembered like that. I stopped and I contemplated on it. All graveyards are full of the good, the bad and the highly indifferent – everything from mass murderers gets their name on a headstone. It's a normal human thing to commemorate people who have passed by through life, to get your name on a headstone. Everybody gets their name on a headstone, including all of the religious orders. They have two very big graves up there as well and they were commemorated and I wondered why these people should be any different. It began to bother me as to why they were being treated differently. So I took a look at the whole question of the Magdalenes and I got what information I could. I remember actually being in the Good Shepherd convent when I was very, very young – my aunt taught elocution there, Mary McMahan [pseudonym] – and I do remember at the orphanage that was attached there. She took me along to Christmas parties and I do remember vaguely, the people who worked in the Magdalene Laundry there and I recognised that these were probably the residents of the Good Shepherd Convent.

I began to wonder why on earth should this have happened. Why should these people be different to everybody else? Nobody would give me a rational explanation as to why they were any different and therefore I decided that it would be nice if they were commemorated, if their names were commemorated. They had done nothing wrong that I could see in life, and even if they had their names should still have been on some kind of marker. So I approached the convent and I did give them my word that the actual discussion itself would remain private and I will always stand over my word, but the

general drift of it is that I met two nuns. One was very very supportive and understanding of what I was looking at. The other one was completely antagonistic towards the entire thing. She told me it was none of my business, that these people didn't complain and she said there were people there when these people were buried and they didn't complain. Well I said, 'were they ever asked?' and at that stage she got kind of nasty and we had a sharp divergence of views. It went on for quite some time, writing to, and having a number of meetings with the nuns of the Good Shepherd Convent and there were some articles printed. I issued a statement. I said that I was very very upset. You know I couldn't understand why? That led to more antagonism within the discussions. There was one newspaper, an English newspaper that said that some of these people were being put in because they were people of ill-repute/ prostitutes, which simply wasn't true. In fact I do know the history of some of the people that were put in there – because the great and the good in society were sexually abusing them and decided that the handiest way to get rid of them was to stick them in a convent which is what happened and that would include members of the clergy. So these people were being victimised again and I said I wasn't going to wear that.

So I said I would continue with it and do it. In fact not only was I not going to pull back from it I said that I would intensify my efforts and that I'd get their names one way or another even if I had to go to court. And if the nuns didn't do it, I'd do it myself. I must say I came from a total attitude of 'how dare you'. We did have it up and down now and she got highly offended. I suppose we both lost it in one or two occasions but she was absolutely determined it wasn't going to happen and I was equally determined that it was.

At this stage I was really angry by the way these women had been treated. I mean it was modern day fucking slavery. I know one woman who joined me in the campaign and she was literally kidnapped in Dublin. Her mother had died and she went to Dublin and she was working in Dublin in some house or something like that, and the Legion of Mary literally kidnapped her and fucked her into an orphanage where she spent five or six years. She didn't know what she had done wrong. In fact she did nothing wrong. But you had these people who made decisions like that. That woman was literally kidnapped of the streets. And some of them had absolutely horrific stories to tell. From what I could gather subsequently they had little or no sunshine in their lives. They had nothing. Even when some of them had babies, they weren't asked were the babies to be adopted. They were taken off them. Some of them were sold to Americans. It was a monstrous crime against humanity.

I recognised then that is why some people did not want the whole thing of the Magdalene Laundry brought up. But I wasn't going to let it rest. So I ploughed away. I eventually wrote to the Bishop of

Limerick. I must say he was supportive of it. It's never been officially but when I started pushing at the bishop I do believe that he facilitated it. I wrote to him and the nuns wrote back to me but you could see...I think he told them that it was going to happen one way or another so you'd better be sure it's done properly. But I'm delighted to say that eventually when they did the job, they didn't do it half-heartedly. It is a very touching display.

It's sad to see the names of all these people who I believe that we had welcomed back into our community. These were names of people who didn't exist, who had been airbrushed out by a totally hypocritical society. At the official opening, I was looking and there was some people were actually going along looking for names, these are names that would have come from the past, relatives of theirs that may have been there. There were some of the more progressive members of the order, the nuns, there too. They were not in uniform but they told me that they were there as well. And there was a wonderful ceremony and it was a question of society recognising that what it had done in the past was absolutely horrible and welcoming them back into society.¹ So that's about it really. It was very very sad. There were people abused from all levels of society.

Like lots of things that happened, they started out with the very best of intentions and in fact at the time they would have been very progressive. I'm sure when they set up the Magdalene Laundries there were people who had nothing and it was a way of getting work in the exact same way that asylums were set up. They would take people who were incapacitated and give them asylum. Down through the years they became corrupted. They seem to have lost the idealism of the founding patrons of the places. And in the case of the Magdalene Laundries, they were simply an alternative for women's prisons, and it was also a method, of not just mass exploitation which it actually was, but it cleansed society or got rid of some of the women in the society, who society would much preferred didn't tell their story. And like I said there were documented cases where people who had been sexually abused by the great and the good in society, women who had literally been taken and thrown in there and spent a life sentence for something that they had absolutely no control over and certainly weren't guilty of. And the guilty walked free and they were locked up. It is absolutely horrible that that should happen.

And I'm also very conscious of the fact that anything that I did in no way compensates for the dreadful life and dreadful existence which these people had but I do believe that in some small way society recognised that they had a story. Their story wasn't particularly a pretty one but none the less they were part and parcel of our society. We are not quite sure if the records are correct but I do believe that a

¹ Photographs of ceremony available at: <https://www.magdalenelaundries.com/pics/limerick.htm> and further photographs and materials relating to Magdalene graves will be made available via UCD Archives in due course.

genuine effort was made by the Good Shepherd Convent to produce all the names. I don't think that that is all of them. There is no way we can check that. But even releasing the names they would be telling me that their families wouldn't want the names released. I said their families are probably buried with a headstone themselves, particularly the older ones. I said I don't accept that. There were all kinds of excuses why it shouldn't be done. The only real reason is that they were part of our society and they must be recognised as such. That's about it now.

I would have been aware they were there no more than anybody else. Like I said my aunt, Mary McMahon taught elocution down there. She was the elocution and music teacher and I do remember going there with my sisters at Christmas to a number of parties at the orphanage there. You were aware of older people working there. I think I saw it working once. It left an impression. There was lots of steam and water and all kind of things lying about but you didn't recognise why they were there. The Magdalene women were taken for walks and things around the city in the afternoons. They all walked like children behind the nuns - the nuns would be in front. Instead of being whores they became virgins...there were these processions...dress them up in veils and walk the streets. I mean like fucking freak shows. And you know people would have been aware of these people but you wouldn't be allowed speak - they wouldn't be allowed to stop and speak to you now or anything like that - like school kids, that's exactly how they were treated.

I believe that society owes them an apology to begin with and many of these people were taken away, were institutionalised, denigrated, fucking tortured, if you will. And of course society owes any of these people who are still alive. They have to get a safe protective environment to try and live the rest of their lives as best they possibly can. This must not be done as a favour. This is an obligation on society and we must recognise it as that. It's not that we are giving them anything. It is that we have taken so much from them. Many of these now would be would be old and infirm. They must be looked after properly and must as much as possible be tried to integrated back into society or as much of it as they can handle.

The campaign took about 18 months I suppose maybe two years, a couple of years anyway. The only other one and I've been looking at it and I've been meaning to do something about it. In Kilmurray graveyard there is another mass grave with no names on it. It's from the people from the blind asylum. I've been trying to get names for that. I've asked one or two places but it hasn't happened. That's been bothering me, who exactly these people were and why are they not remembered. I'm sure somewhere along the line someone will be able to do something with that.

[Interview ends]