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Mary O'Mara lives in Clare Street and for many years was a Girl Guide Leader. Through this work she came in contact with children from the Good Shepherd orphanage, one of who eventually came to live with her for a time. Here she shares her stories and impressions.

[Interview begins]

My name is Mary O'Mara and I'm a resident in Clare Street for around the last forty years. My knowledge of the Good Shepherd wouldn't be that of going back to the fifties. I only heard of it from my parents. You were told that if you were bold or stepped out of line you would be put into the Good Shepherds.

I became involved in the Irish Girl Guides in 1971/72 and I started a group in St. Patrick's and it was there I met the first twelve girls from the Good Shepherd who were resident in number 60 Clare Street. They were still under the wing of the Good Shepherd nuns. Now these girls would have ranged from nine to twelve years and you could identify them immediately as having something wrong. Things were never right for them. They were never happy – rarely would you see them happy. There was a great fear there – the fear no matter what you were doing with them, no matter how happy and contented your programme was running. These little ones if you said, 'oh that's wrong,' they would panic. Everything had to be softly spoken to them because there was this horrific fear hanging over them. So guiding was where I started to meet them. They would be dropped off to me or I would collect them in the beginning. But then they started to come on their own as time went by and over time a bond grew, very strong bond, so much so that I had one of them come live with me down through the years and her story that she told me was absolutely horrific. One night when she was here I heard this shuffling upstairs. It was quiet early, about nine and I thought there is something wrong up there because the girls were in the front room – because she had come in to my family the girls were in the front room and the boys were in the back. I thought they were messing that they were not doing their homework but it wasn't. She had actually panicked and she had verbally and physically attacked one of my sons. She was angry – very angry. So I brought her down stairs and we had a chat. And she was missing something, some little thing, a pencil or something. Whatever it was, it was very tiny. So I calmed her down and she needed that. She needed an awful lot of loving. She couldn't fit in. She was glued onto me.

One of the stories she told me was that one night she had an accident in bed. If they wet the bed the punishment was that they were taken out of the bed. They were stripped. Now this was in the 1970s.

They were given a dressing gown or a housecoat or something to cover them. Their underwear was removed and they had to pick their own mattress and leave No. 60 and go to St. Mary's and they would spend the night on the floor there on that mattress with no covering at all. The punishment would continue, well obviously it would just be for one night, but one night was sufficient for any child. This had happened prior to my having her. At this stage she was fourteen.

When I would drop them back to the house where they were living, their uniforms were examined. It was like a military school. I often cried coming over the road after leaving the girls wondering what was going to happen, where was it all going to end for them. The next girl I'm going to tell you about she had a little girl when she was seventeen or eighteen. I went to the maternity hospital to see her. The reason why these girls got pregnant was to get out from under the nuns, to get away from prison. You couldn't call it a home. They were fed and clothed but it was horrible. And again I repeat this was the 70s. This was not the 50s. She had her little baby and I was there when the nun came into the ward, and she said to her 'oh I will be taking her now'. The girl sat up in the bed and said, 'no you won't' and she asked me to help her. I told the nun that she couldn't take her baby, that it was her baby and she couldn't touch it. The nun left but she was so full of anger. She was stamping her feet. So that girl came home and she went to her aunt. And her sister was also a resident in the institute and she went to live with her aunt. Her aunt was very kind to her but she had a big family and she couldn't afford to keep her so when her baby was six months old, they left Limerick and got on in the world. She hadn't two pence. She had the train fare and a few bob I gave her. That was it. But she had to leave Limerick. She couldn't stay here because every corner she turned she didn't know when she was going to bump into these people and she was terrified of meeting them, absolutely terrified.

Now involved with these girls were people, now I don't know these people, but they used to come from Dublin. But these people saw. A child would come into a sitting room, like the girls I had. They'd be called in and they would sit straight up, rigid with a grip. They would not move for fear of what was going to happen. It was horrific just to look at their little faces. Now they weren't angels, they were kids so they got up devilment. They'd come down stairs and they'd eat the buns, the biscuits, anything like kids will do no matter where they live. Sometimes perhaps they were a little hungry. Now I couldn't say that they weren't hungry and I couldn't say they were hungry but every time they came to me they ate me out of house and home. They really would. They had good strong appetites. I had three years with them and thereafter I began to lose touch with them in that I wouldn't be on a one on one with them. I wouldn't see them every day until one of them came to the door one day and asked me would I take her in. She was sixteen and I said I had to go and get permission and I did. And I was given the permission

willy-nilly. I could have been anyone. I got permission to take the child from the nuns and to bring her to my house. No nun ever came inside that door. No priest ever came inside that door. No social welfare officer ever came in here. Nobody in authority ever showed his or her face. Nobody. She was giving problems. She was starting to back answer. She was starting to get a bit cheeky, beginning to defend herself. But because she was sixteen they no longer had a restriction over her to a certain extent. But they certainly left a very bad impression – when you are sixteen get out there – we don't care where you go. Like I said I'm just across the road, you just go out that door and you are in there. Nobody ever crossed the road to here to see if she was sick, sore or sorry. She went to school from here. She did her homework from here. They never came to see how she got on in her exams.

I still run a unit. Now I run the unit in the Good Shepherds. And in the Good Shepherds there still are the old residents from the Mary Magdalene. There would be about sixteen of them. Now you would have on occasion reason to go into the kitchen to get a glass of water if you have over thirty kids running around you. So one night I went in to get some ice cubes. The fridge in the kitchen was locked.

An incident three years ago and it got my back up big time. I lost the cool completely. This nun came along and she had her car. Now she is small and she had hurt her hand. In the boot of her car were the giant size boxes of washing powder and bleach. They were all cleaning agents. I train girls to help people so I would be looking at two eleven year olds to carry a handle each of the box. This would be part of doing a good turn. It is part of their training. This nun pulled up anyhow and coming down the path was one of the old residents and she had an orange in her hand and she was enjoying her orange. It was very cold. I said to the nun I would get helpers to empty out the boot of the car. I had over thirty helpers in the room at that particular time including leaders who would be adults. She said, 'oh no not at all there is enough of her there', referring to the lady eating the orange. The lady with the orange just threw away her orange, picked up the stuff and that nun followed her in and out until she was finished... She was like Mrs Hitler – that was the only way I could describe that.

It is all hush hush over there. They are inside in this beautiful house, brand new house. They cannot answer the doorbell during meal times. And you can hear them. You can actually hear them. They go to mass – its ritual. They go in groups. It's the old way. They kept them in groups so that they are ostracized from people. I've invited them to numerous Christmas concerts but they weren't allowed come. When you see that week in week out and you are actually seeing it, you are using your common sense. They are not whipping them anymore – they can't do that physically but mentally they are still in charge. They are absolutely in charge. I have never seen between Number 60, the Good Shepherds

and the older residents, between the younger and older ones, I have never seen them with money. I am sure they were given pocket money but I have never seen them with money. You will see them in groups. They are always in a group.

My girls are all grown up now and Number 60 is closed but the little mark is still there. When I say little I am not being disrespectful. I don't want to make them sound like they are still being punished because they are living with their punishment. They are living with it – all of them. That mark is hanging over them – that cloud is always there. And I actually encouraged them to go ahead and take legal action but money won't give them back what has happened to them. Those nuns can never give those girls back what they have taken from them. Those nuns are no angels. The day they came out of the habits, the habits should have been taken off them and burned – a shower of hypocrites that's what they are.

I got joy from teaching girls like that you know because it's a different life. It's a whole different thing that you get out there and you enjoy yourself and if you make a mess so what. You don't live in a box. You let your hair down. I would let them out from me and they would make a run into the park and they'd go behind the bushes and they'd be having a puff of a cigarette. Now this was over twenty years ago. They classed that as being freedom. How sad is that? When a child thinks that because they are having a smoke of a cigarette that they have freedom. That's not freedom. I never reprimanded them. Some would have said I should have because I felt that once they were inside that door there was a lady in charge of that house and she was the biggest rogue that was ever put into shoe leather. She could smile into my face when I'd be at the door and as sure as they were inside the hall they'd get a box. She wasn't a nun. She was a layperson but she was an old resident. So she knew no better. As far as I know, it's possible that she is still there. There is very little you can do for these people because they are actually in a rut – you could kill them by trying to change their lives now. They are buried alive so if you try to bring them back you can't do it. Their clothes, even their clothes, their clothes are horrible – big long coats down to their ankles, funny colours, just not right.

The nuns care for them now – they are taking their pensions now – they don't have their pensions. The nuns have that and that's to pay for their upkeep. You won't get past the front door of where they are living – you will not get past the front door. I guarantee you that. The conditions are good now. They have ladies that go in and out cleaning and that kind of thing and they'd be supervisors I'd say because these ladies wouldn't be able to cater for themselves to any great extent – you'd have to watch them, they could be way laid you know what I mean. They can't go out on the town on their own. They go in a group. They come over to me and they give me a hug and a kiss. They are always praying because

they know nothing else. I've never got one of them on their own but any time I am running an Easter treat or a Christmas treat or any kind of a treat I invite them. But they never come. I send the treats into the house anyway. They are just like kids really. Their smiles are so innocent, absolutely innocent. But you have to stop and think they have had horrific lives. I'd love for one of them to come out and say this happened to me but they are so afraid. Fear is written all over them. They see that nun coming and you'll see them gathering their heels. Like they are shoving on in years now and they wouldn't be running very fast but they will be walking very fast and that, I promise you, is true.

There were two sisters there that came up from Kerry – both of them are nuns. I met them in the park and when I said, 'isn't it terrible the way those girls were treated?' They took off – gone like the hammers of hell across and you know they had these runners on them, you know what the teenagers wear, and I thought, 'good job you have runners on you'. But you know it's so sad – people should investigate it more. It's still going on. It'll never stop until those ladies are gone. There are around sixteen of them.

I honestly believe where the old residents are, it's still going on, the control. I mean they have to go to mass. It's like they've never known home, they've never known freedom on their own. They've always had to be in a group. So their secrets are between themselves. They are still living in the past even though they go out in the community. Now they won't talk to everyone. They might just huddle together. Now there will be one nun in the middle and she's in charge. She will take them in there for a tea or lunch once a week but they won't lift their heads. If they know you they will say 'hello' and ask you how you are but she is there so they don't talk. It's heart breaking and you'd know they are good people. It's so sad.

The younger girls, they are coping. They are coping well. But that mark is hanging over them – the Good Shepherds. I'll tell you there was nothing good about that shepherd over there, absolutely nothing. I just know that because it was written about and because there was a film made about it but there was actually no follow up on it.

They are very childlike. If you hold a conversation with them it would have to be on a very childlike level. Because any time I've spoke to them it would be very childlike. You'd say 'well how are you? Did you have a nice time in the church?' I mean be real. 'Did you have a nice time in the church?' Ok so some people have a good time in the church. Personally speaking I couldn't care less if I never went in to one. Yeah we had a lovely time. It was lovely. It was very nice and they get all excited. I mean that

can't be natural. It's just not right. And when you do meet them you will come away with a mark in your heart. You won't forget it because every girl in there was some mother's child. She made a mistake or she stepped out of line and she wound up in there to be punished for the rest of her natural life because they die there. There has been a death there only this week.

The room I use, these ladies use during the day and it's used for a lot of activities there now but there is an odour there when you go in. I have to open the windows when I go in. I take over a deodorizer now and it's simply because they are in there for so many hours. They are in there and they are doing crafts. They are doing this. They are doing painting. I don't know exactly everything they do but they do a lot of activities in there. I've been in Dunnes Stores when they'd be there and I've never seen them pick up a little shopping basket or picking up a little girly thing or anything like that. Everything they buy is supervised. They don't have freedom of choice. You know, in 2010.

Most of those girls that I had are all in their forties now but they did have to struggle in life because you have to remember that place was an institution. They came from broken homes. It was bad enough coming from a broken home besides being put into prison for it. You are put into prison because you came from a broken home. Where is the right in that? They had to be in bed by nine. The prisoners up in Arbour Hill had more freedom than that. I wouldn't be absolutely sure of their daily routine but I remember one of the girls telling me that they rose at seven, had their breakfast and they did all their jobs before they left the house and then school, back from school and then more jobs, dinner and bed.

They did work in the church. They had to do a lot of work in the church when the church was over there. They'd be cleaning the church, cleaning floors. They were always scrubbing. I went to school in Scoil Carmel. I saw girls on their hands and knees scrubbing boards and they would have to shove to one side when we, the day girls, were coming in. They would actually have to shove over to one side. They would be there with a big galvanised bucket and that wouldn't be warm water. It couldn't have been warm water because it wouldn't have been there. And they would have a great big bar of soap. The soap would have been bigger than themselves, bigger than their hands anyway. And they had red hands - there were no gloves. They would scrub and scrub the tiles above in Scoil Carmel, the old church. They came from broken homes. One girl, Ruth [pseudonym], Ruth and I were in the same class and she would write a letter. But if the nuns saw the letter they'd take the letter. I would get the letter out and my Mam would give me the penny for the stamp. I was doing that for a long time. And then years flew by and I met her on and off and we'd say hello and what have you. She was ok, did well for herself. And then one day she said to me, 'did you never post my letters?' And I told her that I posted those

letters ritually and if I didn't my father would have, God rest him. She never got an answer to any of those letters. Never. But for years I couldn't figure out why she wouldn't converse with me. She was under the impression that I hadn't ever posted her letters. She was just the one I knew. Another girl in that class, Geraldine [pseudonym], was doing it for another girl – the 'in girls' is what they were called. They weren't called students. They weren't called residents. They were called the 'in girls'. And they had red hands. Their hands would bleed. I would tell your stories about them nuns that would put the hair standing on your head.

At lunch time we would have whatever Mammy would give you going to school. You'd have your little lunch. But those girls would have bread and butter or bread and jam. They never had the two things. They never had bread, butter and jam. They had either bread and jam or bread and butter. But I always remember big thick chunks you know real thick chunks not cut nicely and that would have to keep them going until whatever time they got their meal. I don't know what time that was. We would be gone home. And there was one nun - she was a serpent. She used to kill the 'in girls'. She used to just catch them by the back of the hair and turn them around and hit them across the back of the knuckles, right down across the back of the knuckles. You know those sticks, bamboos. You could be walking along and you'd get it across the back of the legs. Some of those nuns were deprived women. Some were put in there because unless you had a nun or priest in the family you weren't a good parent. Why didn't they get up and leave? It's not like they were stupid. They were able to keep everything they did to those girls over there hidden.

The girls I had from Number 60, one of them was here maybe three weeks before she actually said hello to my husband. She would nod her head at him like he was something from outer space. Conversation would be very limited. And she was forever sewing or using her hands. She used to make Limerick Lace. They'd all be taken down to do the lace. So don't anyone tell you that it was made by the nuns. They made the Limerick Lace not the nuns.

Two of the girls told me that they would actually be put to bed without a dinner or a supper. They would have to go to their room and stay there and they were not given food. That was it, no food if they did something wrong. Doing something wrong now consisted of saying, 'I'm tired, I don't want to wash the ware or I don't want to dry the ware.' Just something like that. And signs were on them. They were all like laths, every one of them. They were fed. I don't know what they were fed. But they didn't have little goodies and if they had it was theirs. There is no way they would share it. No way. The fear of having to share, they knew they were not going to get that a second time around. So if they got a bar of chocolate

that was theirs – very possessive of their belongings. Very possessive. Everything was done like they were in the army. I couldn't believe it. None of mine would do that for me. All of a sudden I have a little girl with her shoes, socks, underwear and what have you stacked neatly – all her stuff and you would not touch that. She would have a tantrum if you touched it. The fear that this other person would come in to the room and say they are not laid out properly. It was horrific.

There was a mass over there in the church when it was closing and all the nuns were there. I don't know where they came from but there were a lot of them there that night. We were invited to the mass and back to tea when the mass was over. I don't know if the priest was a regular priest there. But I do know they my twelve girls were with me all night. We just sat there. And then the bell rang and they were gone. Just gone. Just a little bell and they were gone. The church part closed down. I wanted to go up stairs to see the place but the girls didn't want to go up. So I went up about four or five flights and it was horrible. And I went up but I was only on the landing so I didn't see the dormitory rooms. But what I saw in the landing that was enough. I mean the floors there was like golf balls coming up in the wood. So you can imagine trying to scrub that – wood that is so old, you know, knots that are so old from all the scrubbing. Obviously you can't scrub out a knot. And those girls just visualise them scrubbing those stairs and they had to be scrubbing every step of them. They had to be kept clean.

There was a girl, I can't remember her name now but she was a wild one. She had to wash the front of the house above one morning and it was freezing. And didn't the water freeze and she didn't tell them. And two or three of them got hoppers coming down. She got killed for it. It froze. She had to wash the steps you see. Obviously it froze. There was frost you see. She came up to me that night and she was black and blue. She got belted across the arms. In The Mount convent they used to use the bamboo and a stick. It was like a drumstick and the hands were held out and those girls hands were red raw. They were like girls being crucified when they were being punished and they did not wince. You'd just see them blowing their hands together, trying to cool their hands down and putting them behind their backs. They'd be putting their hands everywhere because their hands were swollen from the cold and from the work. It was awful.

I don't really know if people knew what was going on. I'm sure the girls talked about it but who was listening? I wouldn't say they would have spoke because of fear that worse would happen if they spoke because it took a long time before women came out and spoke and they were actually women married with kids when they did start to open up and say, you know, this happened to me. Some of the stuff was totally horrible. You wouldn't hear of it in a Nazi camp. You know a little girl was there, fourteen

years of age, and she makes a mistake and she is put in there. I mean Mary she was only a young girl when she had Jesus and she wasn't punished like that. So who gave them the authority to do that? Where were the priests?

One of the things that my daughter remembers was the cruelty haircuts. One of the things they did in Number 60, if somebody did something they put a bowl on top of their heads and they got this bowl haircut. They all got the same haircut. They just cut their hair all around it. I actually remember it. They were brutal haircuts.

I suppose the nuns were frustrated because they were locked up and they were getting them back. They couldn't get back at the people that put them in so therefore they got it back on the people that were under their care. And they punished every woman and child that came in their doors. I honestly believe that there was no child that went in to that Good Shepherds that wasn't thumped or belted or put it whatever way you want, abused or neglected in some way. Physical is one thing. I believe that sexual abuse went on. These girls that I have, they have never talked about it. I have never asked them on a one on one but I honestly believe it did.

You know it's easy to talk about it with you now but it will probably have an effect later on. But you know when I saw any of the lads I knew, I would always have been looking for a mark. I suppose it's the mother instinct in me or I'd be telling them jokes trying to make them laugh. But when you'd go there and you'd be coming away, you'd be coming away devastated. You couldn't and even yet watching them women, now you know they are being fed and looked after and they have clothes on their backs, they mightn't be the nicest or clothes or be a bit trendy but your heart breaks. You can't come away and say well they are used to that. Yes they are used to that but why should they be used to that. I mean if they were fourteen or so when they went in there and they are now heading towards their eighties, you are looking at over 60 years of their lives gone. Never to be given back to them. So there is no way to undo that. You try not think of the things you've seen. You see their hands and their hands used to be so sore. One of my girls had two very bad knees from all the kneeling, cleaning and sewing. They knew nothing. They had no lives. Coming in to guiding was a little opening. It was kind of coming in to the norm, you know, the way people lived. You know like a package of Taytos [potato crisps] – I'm not saying they didn't get Taytos over there or they didn't get treats over there but just like handing them the money and saying here would you run in there and get a few bags of Taytos and trusting them with the money. Thank God they did turn out ok, that lot anyhow.

You know you said to me do people know. I think that people knew but they didn't know what to do. The families didn't want to know those girls so therefore they would be in total denial and because they were nuns and priests again they would be in total denial because nuns and priests were held so high. And people were so silly as to think, because it was drilled into them, not that they were silly, they were probably intelligent people but it was drilled into them unless you do what the priest says you will die and go the hell.

In all my time here I never saw the women that worked in the laundry. They were hidden away. You have to remember they were never visual to anybody in Clare Street or in Limerick. Those ladies were never visual until that wall came down. When that wall came down over there it was then we began to see and Pennywell Road was opened up and these little group of women, the last of the old residents over there. They then became visible. They were out in the community – not active in the community but out. In forty years I have never seen them walking up Clare Street. They go out the Pennywell side. That's the gate they are used to.

Now that's it. I do think I've talked to you from my soul. Oh boots. I do remember them wearing boots – horrible nailed boots. They were wicked out. They were black heavy hard boots. I can distinctly remember those. You'd hear them coming but the scrubbing that stands out and baking - they were forever baking bread. They were always working. It was hard labour, sheer hard labour. I remember when my girl came to live here she couldn't understand how tea ware could be left there while we relaxed after eating. She had to be up, jump, do it. We were like ones on a trapeze with her until I got her to come down. She was telling me supervisor in charge, who was fond of her, would give her a few sweets but with another girl then she was the opposite. Favouritism went on. But those girls, they are getting on with their lives. They are all doing ok. One I know has three kids. Her sister has two. The girl I was telling you about, she has only that one child that the nun wanted to take. And her sister, oh she was a little whipper snapper; I don't know what she is doing to be quiet honest with you. I've lost track of her. I know she is around. She is a good kid. But none of them turned out, none got very high up but they didn't go low down either.

The young people that are around now and rearing their families, I think nothing can be done to undo the physical damage or the mental damage that has been done but I think financial redress might not help the mummies but it would certainly make life easier for the little ones. As for the older residents, I don't know. They have a lot to account for those nuns. And they are going to continue to do it until those ladies are gone that will continue. It is not going to stop tonight, tomorrow or next week.

The nuns had to allow the girls to join the girl guides. They didn't have a choice. We had to have a certain number coming from St Patrick's. And one of the nuns at that time wanted them involved in something but the cost to her, it was like getting blood from a turnip for the price of the uniforms. It wasn't coming out of her pocket. It was the government that was paying for that and I think the uniforms at that point were only about twelve pounds. She couldn't understand then that it wasn't school. That it was teaching in a totally different way. I always went to the door with a child if her uniform was dirty because you knew that child was going to get a wallop. And she was going to get it and she knew it. If she spilt paint, they would only be water paints, but if she spilled paint, you nearly washed it before you brought her down because you were half afraid, not for yourself but you were leaving that child there and you didn't know what was going to happen to her. You had to leave that child there and walk away. They go in then and they get a biscuit and a glass of milk or something and they go up to bed that was it. They'd be home at eight but they'd be in bed by half eight. And they didn't have proper materials for young ladies of that age, the fourteen year olds, the eleven year olds you know when the little girls started to become women, they would have to wash these rags and that sounds horrible but that's the way it was and they all had their own little place to keep them. So there was no expense there. There was no money ever spent on those girls.

2010 and it's still going on. I think most of those women now over there wouldn't even know their own families. It would be lovely to find out, do they know their own families, do they know where they came from, can they remember getting their first holy communion their confirmation. Can they remember their mam's their dads their brothers and sisters. Do they know anything about their family trees? Has anyone ever thought about it? You wonder is that the only family they know now. Is that the only family they will ever remember? What stories could they tell, as children, as young adults, making mistakes, boyfriends – there had to be men in their lives. Those ladies never left from when they went in there. Where are their kids? The morning the Good Shepherd wall was being knocked I was told about it and I went over to have a look because all I wanted to see was the nuns disappearing, bones and all. Any coffin that came out was just thrown up on the back of a lorry and taken away.

The laundry was so hot – Pennywell Road at the back there is a gap – the people that used to sleep on the street would come down there because the heat of the laundry would keep them warm. Now that was solid concrete.

[Interview ends]