

UPDATE 63

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Wednesday 15 April 2015 – Day 2

The Royal Commission’s examination of the St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol continued in Rockhampton today with the third of 13 former residents, Diane Carpenter, giving evidence.

Diane Carpenter was placed in the orphanage when she was three or four years old and was there for a year. She was again placed in the Orphanage when she was seven or eight after her father died, and remained there until she turned 17.

Mrs Carpenter described the physical and sexual abuse she suffered at the orphanage, including being indecently touched by Father Hayes during a visit he made to Neerkol, and seeing other children being sexually abused by orphanage worker, Kevin Baker. Mr Baker denies the allegations.

Mrs Carpenter told the Royal Commission that aboriginal children were treated differently to others at Neerkol by the nuns. She described on one occasion being scrubbed by a nun in an attempt to lighten her skin.

“Sister Francis Regis saw I was still dirty and she got the scrubbing brush and I still have scars on my back today from that ... it was really hard and it was like somebody cutting me with a knife.”

AYN was placed at the orphanage when he was about seven, along with his siblings. He told the Royal Commission about physical beatings and sexual abuse he suffered while he lived at Neerkol.

He also told the Commission he was sent from Neerkol to Westbrook, a State juvenile detention centre, and then Boggo Road jail, at the age of 17.

“The jail was like a palace compared to Neerkol and Westbrook. They fed me properly and I could sleep,” he said.

Joseph Kiernan, who is now 54 years old, was placed at the Orphanage when he was a seven week old baby.

He gave evidence that he was physically abused by the sisters and Kevin Baker, and sexually abused by Durham. He described how Durham, on more than one occasion, indecently touched him and attempted to have sexual intercourse with him.

Thomas Murnane is now 74 years of age. He was placed at the orphanage when he was ten.

He described his treatment by some of the sisters as “vicious and sadistic”. He tried to run away from the orphanage twice. Mr Murnane also gave evidence a sister touched his penis inappropriately, in the presence of other sisters.

He spoke about how he had attempted to report the physical abuse he was suffering at Neerkol to the police. He said the police responded by saying "Oh, no, the nuns wouldn't do that to you, they are nice people."

AYL is now 64 years old. In 1961, when she was ten years old, she and her siblings were placed at the orphanage as wards of the State. She lived there on and off until she was 18.

AYL told the Royal Commission that while she was living at Neerkol she was sexually abused by Kevin Baker over a long period at Neerkol. AYL also gave evidence that she saw Baker sexually abusing another boy. Baker denies these allegations.

AYL said that while she had received some compensation from the Sisters of Mercy, nothing could ever repair the damage done to her at Neerkol.

She said however that she felt like the sisters were trying to right what happened in the past.

“I do appreciate the help the sisters have provided to me. Anne Czekanski, the response coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy, has never turned her back on any ex residents if they have asked for help.

“I feel that she has gone above and beyond her call of duty and has shown a real care for the former residents of Neerkol.

“While they can't fix everything, they are trying as much as they can to make our lives easier.”

This followed from the opening statement of Counsel Assisting, Sophie David SC, who told the Royal Commission yesterday that despite the legal points open to the sisters and the diocese to take on proposed civil compensation claims, the sisters and diocese opted to work with the former residents to reach out-of-court settlements. This ultimately led to 72 claimants being paid almost \$791,000 by 1999.

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