

UPDATE 64

Royal Commission – St Joseph’s Orphanage Neerkol, Rockhampton



Thursday 16 April 2015 – Day 3

The Royal Commission today heard the evidence today of the final six former residents of St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol outside of Rockhampton.

The day started with AYA, who was sent with her younger brother to live at Neerkol as a boarder in 1973 when she was 11. She lived at the orphanage until 1974. She described her experiences including physical beatings by some of the sisters and indecent touching by Durham. She gave evidence that she was also sexually abused by another female resident.

David Owen was placed at the Orphanage when he was about five months old and lived there until 1954 when he was aged 15.

Mr Owen described the physical abuse he suffered, including being beaten with instruments and flogged with a whip. He told the Royal Commission that he was repeatedly sexually abused by Anderson at the Orphanage. Mr Owen is now 76 years old.

AYD is now 82 years old. He was placed at the orphanage when he was very young along with his siblings. AYD described the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of Tom Pattle, an employee of the Orphanage. He also described sexual touching by Anderson.

AYD, along with Mary Adams, was instrumental in the establishment of the Neerkol Action Support Group (NASG) in 1997. The NASG co-ordinated a class action for former residents seeking compensation from the Diocese of Rockhampton, the Sisters of Mercy and the Queensland Government.

In 1938, at the age of one, AYE was placed at St Joseph’s where he was physically punished by the sisters for minor matters. He said he was sexually abused by Anderson and Durham from the age of 9 or 10 until he was 12 or 13. AYE also described being indecently touched by one of the sisters.

At the age of six AYK was placed in the orphanage as a ward of the State along with her sister, AYO. She lived at the Orphanage until around 1978, when she was aged 13 years old. It was at this time that the orphanage closed. AYK told the Commission about the physical violence she received from the sisters and which she saw inflicted by the sisters on other children. She also described being sexually abused many times by Durham when aged seven or eight years old.

AYO who was placed at the orphanage when she was four and lived there until it closed in 1977. AYO described physical abuse inflicted by the sisters and sexual abuse by Durham, which occurred when she was 14 or 15.

Many of the former residents who gave evidence talked about abuse by Father John Anderson. Anderson was parish priest at the Neerkol Parish from 1942 to 1964. Prior to this position, Father Anderson had also worked as a parish priest at St Patrick’s at Mackay and St Ann’s. Father Anderson died on 31 August 1986. He was never charged, or convicted of any offence.

The Royal Commission has heard that many of the former residents did not tell anyone about the sexual abuse at the time because they were fearful they might be physically punished or ostracised. Others felt they had no-one to tell, and they did not think they would be believed if they tried to disclose.

In early 1997, the Sisters of Mercy formed a Professional Standards Steering Committee to co-ordinate their response and to facilitate the provision of assistance to former residents of Neerkol. The role of the Professional Standards Steering Committee was to formulate processes and guides for the response to and prevention of child sexual abuse and present these to the Leadership Team of the Rockhampton Sisters of Mercy.

By March 1997, the Committee adopted a proactive approach and worked to actively seek out victims of abuse by publicising the existence of the Committee and the response coordinators.

From 1997, former residents of Neerkol received assistance from the sisters in addition to compensation payments. The assistance included: counselling services, payment of phone or electricity bills, payment for medication, interest free loans and assistance in making applications for the Queensland Government redress scheme.

The total operating cost of the Sisters of Mercy Professional Standards Office from 1997 until February 2015 was at least \$1.5 million, in addition to the lump sum payments of compensation made to the former residents in settlement of the class action.

The Diocese of Rockhampton has also provided some \$600,000 in compensation payments.

The hearing will continue tomorrow.

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