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*Trevor was employed in the Good Shepherd Laundry in the mid-1970s as a maintenance man. Through his work he got to know many of the women working in the laundry, the nuns and the building itself. Here Trevor shares memories and experiences of his time spent at the Good Shepherds.*

[Interview begins]

I've walked in here today to the building [Limerick School of Art and Design] and I have done a reconnaissance of years gone by of my time here. It would have been in the mid-seventies. There have been a few changes, obviously. It's been taken over, but a lot of stuff has been retained. There are good stories and sad stories with the Good Shepherds, things that I have observed, things that I've seen, from the time I was here in charge of maintenance in the laundry.

When I first came in I couldn't get over the fact that women in their 60s and 70s would have to genuflect to people in cloth, a nun or a priest. I couldn't believe how people could be brow beat into submission like that. It doesn't bear thinking about. I can tell you stories about different people that were here, so called *bad girls* as they were known. I didn't see anything bad about them. They never did me any wrong. They couldn't have been better to me especially the three ladies in the boiler house – Fiona, Angela and Mairéad [pseudonyms]. Those three ladies ran that boiler house for years – with two boilers in it. Back before oil came into the place they used to stoke the boilers by hand - shovel the coal, throw the blocks, all to keep the laundry going. How they persevered and got through, I just don't know.

A lot of them were never allowed outside the walls of the convent or the grounds of the convent. Their big deal was of a Sunday or maybe some summer's evening was taking the so-called bridge over the Long Can, from basically the boiler house, across in to the grounds which is now an A & R Supplies. I had the unfortunate position of having to remove that walkway because a CIE truck damaged it. I reckon that cut off an avenue for the women. That was their walkway into the gardens which were maintained over the years by Pat O'Connell. He's now passed away and John, I never even knew John's second name, the apprentice gardener, took over.

But I was amazed how the women were treated here. I couldn't get over it. They were very sheltered, very easy-going. They'd become institutionalised – It would have been very hard to let them out in the big bad world because basically they would have been lost. They never knew what an ESB bill was. They never knew what a telephone bill was. They didn't know what it was to buy a week's groceries. They didn't know what it was to go into a shop to buy a dress because basically all they seemed to

wear was pinafores and whatever clothes the nuns gave them. It wasn't a uniform. They'd wear everyday clothes but they were always dated. It would give you the impression that it was all hand-me-downs and they made the best of it by putting a sort of long apron over it or a housecoat over it and that's just the way they were. You remember the old wrap-around apron; well that's what a lot of them wore.

The laundry was a fairly big operation. It used to do all the hospitals. It used to do Camillus's, the Maternity, the Mid-West and John's [hospitals] and also for the general public and quite a few of the hotels. I think the laundry from Glin was done here too. So it was quite a big operation. And by Jesus they worked hard. They broke a lot of sweat in that laundry. The laundry was very hot. It was just basically a sweathouse just to provide Joe Public out there with nice clean sheets. Prior to me coming in a lot of the work was done in what was called the old deep Belfast sink. It was all done by hand and it was only when John Kennedy<sup>1</sup> took over that a lot of machines came back into operation again, a lot of things started to move. I was involved in the maintenance here and all of a sudden a lot of the machines that never worked right were starting to work again but by this stage a lot of the ladies were getting on in years and there were certain jobs they just were not up to but their deftness, using their hands and their eye sight was fantastic. They took the easier jobs of folding clothes, sorting people's laundry onto the racks and into the various bins where they were supposed to go. John used a lot of local employees who all worked in pretty well as a team and blended well with the ladies. And there was never any trouble between the, how do you say, the 'in' workers and the 'out' workers.

John Kennedy, he came in and took over the management of the place and he ran it and I have to say, he was a damn good boss. It was a good working relationship. When we got the plans done we straightened out and organised the place. We ended up putting a garage in down the lower yard, down behind where the old glasshouse used to be. And I don't know if anyone ever came across it, but down there we had a workshop with a pit, overhead crane and all. It was a fully equipped workshop – many a motor mechanic in this town would have been glad of it, it was that well equipped. I used to do all the servicing and maintenance on the vehicles for the convent. These were the laundry delivery vans and the nun's vehicles. And this all stemmed from a local garage not doing work that was supposed to be done and charging for it. So we ended up taking the bull by the horns and opening our own garage. It worked. It cut their costs dramatically. But then some of the local clergy got to hear about it and started to make a bit of use of it and unfortunately a couple of them tried to abuse it.

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<sup>1</sup> See MAGOHP/63 – interview with John Kennedy

So the nuns themselves most of them were okay. Sr Ignatius [pseudonym] was in the packing room. Sr Philomena [pseudonym] was over the girls in the laundry. Sr Bridget [pseudonym] was the social worker. I can't remember all the names now. There was one lovely nun in charge of the orphanage. She had time for everyone and everything. She was just unique. I can't just remember her name now. The Reverend Mother was very good and then we had Sr Alice [pseudonym] who was the bursar. And boy did she know her way about the place. I would say she knew every nut, bolt, screw and washer down the years that was put into this convent. It was unreal. She didn't have to write anything down as such. She had a fantastic memory. She was a very small lady but she had an iron will in her. If there was something to be said she said it. And if she knew you were right she backed you one hundred percent even against the clergy. But she was one of the ones that was straight as a dye. Then there was Sr Regina [pseudonym] in the lace room.

I used to go in to the lace room the odd time to have a look at some of the sewing machines. The ladies in there had very soft hands, which is understandable given the work they were doing. Some of them were up into their 80s maybe their 90s still sewing away at Limerick Lace. There would be twelve or fourteen working in there.

In the laundry there would be three or four working out in the packing room. Come in to the lower part of the laundry, there would have been three or four working there. Come round then in to the small ironing room, there were about six in there - on the big ironing machine there would be two at one end and two feeding. There was four working in the washhouse. You went then to the boiler house and there was three there. And then you had the staff down in the ladies' kitchen, kitchen staff that looked after their food and so forth. Some did work down in the nun's kitchen but they were the chosen few – they got special treatment and that is a fact.

Then when you go on down through the convent on down to 60 Clare Street, which I had occasion to go down to also to fix a leaking tap or a burst pipe, all the kids were down there. It's only as time went by that I started to realise the set-up of what was going on. When I was here it was the way that orphan kids were being brought in and then I found out that there were a few kids coming in through the social workers and so on and so forth.

But the so called 'bad girls' that were in the convent, one particular woman was put in because she was pregnant, and when I walked up through the church today it brought it all back to me, even more vivid,

the nuns sitting in their little seats high up on both sides leading up the main aisle and their were seats behind that where the kids would have been brought from 60 Clare Street up to Mass. The so-called *bad girls* were brought in from the side. In other words, the church was in the shape of a cross and the nuns were in the longest part of the cross and when you are sitting down looking straight up at the altar, off to the left was the alcove or the side of the cross where those ladies were brought in to Mass. This lady in particular didn't know that after she gave birth, her daughter was brought up in the same complex and remained there until she was sixteen years old. When she was thirty-two years old, the daughter would come back to the Good Shepherds looking for her mother. And she didn't know her for all those years. That's sick – for a mother to give birth and not know where her child went or where her child was gone for thirty odd years, still wondering until the day the daughter walks in the grounds off the Pennywell Road and meets her mother for the first time knowing that her mother was at the other end of the church and she was at the other end for 16 years. How the nuns could keep all this sheltered up and closed up I don't know. I don't know when that stopped, the kids not seeing parents. What happened after that I don't know. About four or five months after that I'd moved on.

And then you see the other side of the nuns: a good side. To me you know in ways they are like Jekyll and Hyde. Sr Philomena, for example, she decided to open the entrance at the back of the boiler house onto what we call the Long Can. She opened a unit that took in wives that were battered and their kids. And the reason why I know that is because I had the job of doing it all up – putting in the cooker, the toilet, the shower and the kitchen sink. But then it got to the stage where there were too many wanting to come and she had only room for one. So what happened to it after that I don't know. So you see a lot of conflicting things went on in the Good Shepherds – maybe as the years moved on, you are coming up now to the mid seventies, starting to go into the 80s, maybe they were starting to wake up and smell the coffee and realising that you can't treat people like this anymore. But at the same time the way it was run – it was run like a regime. In other words you don't question you just do it. Whatever needed to be fixed I did it. If I couldn't, John Kennedy and myself made arrangements for someone to come in and do it. But at the same time too there was a lot of work that was going on in the convent which outside companies would have originally been brought in to do that we ended up doing ourselves, which cut their overheads. In ways a lot of companies in Limerick took advantage of the nuns. They were fleecing them price wise. The nuns didn't pay the women but at the same time too they wanted for nothing. They had their TV. They had their breakfast, dinner, tea and supper. They had no overheads. They had no worries. They didn't know what the outside world was. That's the difference. I used to speak and chat away to them every day.

The plant used to start at half past eight in the morning and some mornings I'd be in at seven to get a particular machine fixed prior to firing up, getting the steam going because the steam was turned in at about quarter past eight to feed all the machinery and the pipes. So sometimes I was in earlier to get a bit of work done on a machine, maybe get valves or something changed out before the day's work started. The three ladies in the boiler house would have been there from about half five in the morning until eleven at night. They were the hours they kept. Now they were nicely set up. When the boiler house would close down at five or half past they were finished for the evening but they still had to be there for the boiler house because the same boiler house supplied the heating for the dormitories too. They had their own television and all in there. They had their own base. And their supper and dinner was all brought to the boiler house. They never had to go to the canteens. They had their own little kitchen, fridge and all. They were self-contained. They were the elite. On those mornings that I had to be in early the three ladies in the boiler house gave me breakfast. So you see I was spoiled. The only thing about it was the tea was like tar. It was sort of stewed because it was probably made from half past six in the morning. Those three ladies in the boiler house were fantastic. Fiona, how do I say it, was the leader of the pack. You never saw her without her makeup. Every morning the makeup had to go on and the bright red lipstick. She was a bold one, well I won't say bold, but she'd have stood up for herself and she wouldn't have bowed down to the nuns.

There was one nun that used to be outside the workshop at the laundry, where my workshop was, and when she got angry she thought nothing of pulling the strap out. She pulled the strap out and hit them to get them to speed up – physically hitting. Now she was old school. Another nun was coming past one day and told her to stop. She said you can't do that anymore. So that tells me there was more going on than what we were actually seeing. You'd see the little telltale signs. Something doesn't look right. Something doesn't feel right. You know there is something ulterior is going on but you can't quite put your finger on it but there is nothing you can do. You can't ask the questions. You'd be told to mind your own business. So in a way you had to tip toe through your day at times. It depends on where you were and which nuns you were speaking to. You had to be very careful because everything was picked up on. And everything went back to the Reverend Mother. Everything you asked or everything you said or everything you'd done or made a comment about, all went back. In was a bit like a dictatorship. And that is the way the convent was run - Reverend Mother was Lord God Almighty. Her word was final.

You know this is really stepping back talking about this – good memories, bad memories and sad memories. My wife told me stories about when she was going to school here in Limerick in St John's and the children would come out of the orphanage in the middle of winter time with their little cotton

dresses on and bare legs. She could tell you stories, what was said, the way some of them were humiliated in school, by the nuns in the school. Nobody knows the half of it – everything is bottled up.

Going back to the three in the boiler house, one of them was put in because she wouldn't sign a piece of paper. They were signing over a farm to someone else. And that came from the lady herself and I've no reason to disbelieve her. And as the years went on she eventually got in contact with one of her sisters and occasionally she'd have gone up for a weekend to see her sisters and she'd come back and she'd be in bits. It took her about three or four days to get over a visit. It got to the stage while I was here that she wouldn't go up anymore. She never told me what was said or done but it took her days to get over it every time she went to visit. That was up Galway way. Why would a girl from all the way up in Galway be sent to Limerick to the Good Shepherds?

I got on great with the ladies because I would have had a laugh with them, a joke with them but I couldn't bring everyday life in to them because they wouldn't have understood it. You know the way now you and I could have a laugh and a joke about something ...you couldn't have that with them. I'm not saying they were simple minded but they were protected. They didn't know what the outside world was like really. They were institutionalised. Like I say they would have genuflected to a nun. I'd see them walking down the corridor, a nun would be coming up and they would step aside and genuflect and the same with a priest. I couldn't believe it.

Mostly the nuns and the girls never ate together. The nuns had the best and I mean the best. Many's a day when I'd be walking down past the...I'd get the smell of roast beef or lamb. It was unreal. The women would have got their mince. I don't even know if they did turkey or anything for Christmas. I don't know, you see, Christmas would have been closed so I couldn't say.

They were very gentle, lovely people just basically, I would say, brow beat into submission. They were not allowed to have a voice for themselves until later years when they started to get out. But there were only certain ones they would let out. They let them out around the town but there was only a certain few that you would consider them street wise. A lot of the others, the lack of education was there and the lack of knowledge of the world. If you let them out, people would take advantage of them. Some you just couldn't let out because they were too long institutionalised.

There was one lady in particular, she used to work in the dry cleaning department but she'd been to England and all and come back to work in the laundry. She lived outside when she came back but she was originally a convent girl.

There were other workers here, as I mentioned earlier the gardeners, a painter that was here for donkey's years. There were the van drivers and deliverymen - delivering and collecting laundry all over County Limerick. And then you had the laundry manager. I think there was a relation or something of his in the hierarchy in the convent, a family relation but I'm not sure, the Mother Superior or something. But you see I couldn't say that for definite because I didn't know.

Then we had a certain nun. She was always in black. She worked in the packing room at the front of the laundry and at times she had to – how do you say – curb her temper. But she was cute enough and wary enough to realise that when she started to loose her temper then all of a sudden she'd realise where she was and she'd have stopped – that's if any of the outside workers were about. But I saw a few instances of the true colours coming out, like the one in the small ironing room – the one with the leather belt and she would have whacked them if a corner wasn't square or something. She's dead now. The burial ground was right out the front of the convent. They moved it then. I was at a few nuns' funerals here. It's that long ago now I can't remember them all.

What I'm saying is the signs were there. The deep washing sinks were there – the big deep tubs whether to wash sheets by hand or what I don't know. When I came here there were machines for doing that but half them weren't working right so they still washed some of them by hand.

And there were punishment cells. They were cells that were eventually turned into toilets and then I think the whole lot disappeared. I will try [to] describe where they were – you had the glasshouse onto the part of the convent. Then you had a wall and a small yard with buildings and that was the building where the punishment cells were. And the reason I know there were punishment cells was because I had to give assistance to rip half of them out to put in toilets. And that was initially toilets for the kids that were out in the playground from the orphanage in 60 Clare St Instead of having to run into the orphanage all the time they could go to the toilets there. There used to be a big tarmacadam yard there. A lot of it is probably gone now. In other words the nuns started to open things up but at the same time it was getting rid of things but they were there.

The punishment cells had a sort of a fold down bed, a frame covered with a hession cloth; you know what I mean, like woven. When you walk in though the door, straight in front of you is the bed. It was strung up against the wall. When you wanted it you pulled it down from the wall and two straps would have held it and there was chains on the wall, you know like manacles – It's like a handcuff off a chain. Off to the right then was an area for your toilet, pot or whatever the case may be. There was no toilet as such. It would have been a bucket. And then there was your lat [sic, lath of wood] and a heavy door with bars on it. I didn't think anything of it at the time. I just ripped it out and threw it away. I never heard of them being used but the point is they were there - whether they were used or not, they were there.

I've seen quite a few changes here but I can still remember the main building. You have over there at the minute a tarmacadam where the glasshouse used to be. And then you have a wall – if you look across there from the nun's canteen. Behind that wall there was an oil tank and there was a couple of old sheds and across from that again there was another row of sheds. And in one of those sheds is where our garage was. Now when you come down through there's an archway that runs through the wall that came in to that garden again. Off to the left there was a building and it was in the bottom more or less of that building that the punishment cells would have been because then you had another building and then you were into the tarmacadam going to 60 Clare Street. If I remember it right. There were four of them. But I never saw them being used. They didn't look like they'd been used in a long time. You know when you walk into a place and you say this hasn't been used for a while. You know so your mind works overtime but its not overtime completely – it's just scary. I don't know what happened prior to me coming here. I've no idea. I've heard stories... Put it this way, you start a story here today and by the time it comes back to you next week you won't recognise it. What I am telling you here today is basically what happened in my time here.

That's another thing, that chimney out there, there was 180 feet taken off that and the reason why I know that is because I was involved in it. That was for the boilers and they discovered a crack and loose masonry work up near the top. So the steeplejacks, Angela Collins Steeplejacks Company, came in and when they'd taken down whatever they had to take down I went to the top of it and stood on it and you have some view of Limerick City from it. So that was a bit of an adventure in my day – a good experience. And on the roof behind the boiler were the water tanks that fed the laundry. It's amazing how when you think about things that one thing leads to another. Then down the back were the oil tanks and the trouble we had getting the oil to flow in wintertime. In the end we had to put trace heaters in the pipes to get the oil to run to fire the boilers.

My worst memory goes back to that lady and her daughter. You know what I mean, the daughter at one end of the church and the mother at the other end of the church and neither of the two of them knowing each was there. There is something wrong with a society that permitted that sort of thing to go on. There is something wrong.

There are a couple of little stories here regarding the clergy and the nuns. Outside, where the Mid-Western Health Board is now, down at the bottom of the road, that used to be St George's, the school run by the nuns. Around about the time I was here the school had closed and the bishop had suggested to the nuns that they present that whole building to the parish of St Johns but St Johns parish didn't want it. So the bishop came along and he bought it from the nuns and a ridiculous sum was agreed. At the bottom of the road where Victory Tyres is now, that used to be part of that complex. So he sold that off. He leased the bottom part to the Mid-Western Health Board; leased it, didn't sell it, and then leased the other bit to St John's Credit Union. So who actually owns that building now I don't know. The bishop one year was presented with a painting from the nuns. It was kept in the storage area from the attic area of the Good Shepherds. It was a restored painting. It was presented to him and he came back and asked if there were any more because he had got it valued and it was worth money and he wanted to know was there any more. The artefacts that were above there in that attic space were unreal. I used to go up there to check out the water tanks. There were a lot of cells up there for nuns on the top floor, the attics – they were cells for nuns and I remember coming through it and the polishing that used to go on, on them floors down through that convent and that was all done by nuns. The polish in that must soak right down through the timbers. It was spotless. And there used to be a lift in there too and a lovely staircase. But that has been taken out - they took a beautiful piece, a lovely staircase. If those stairs could talk they would tell a few stories. They led up to the first level of the sleeping quarters. It was massive but that was the way it was – that was life.

I am delighted I came over here today. It brought back memories. I remember a few of the local boys coming in down along, especially the Long Can side and whipping the copper off the town house. It was part of my growing up years, seeing what goes on basically in an institution. I didn't see it all. I was in my late twenties. I was looking for a job and someone told me they were looking for someone here for two weeks to do maintenance cover and I ended up staying because they asked me to stay. They told me I did more work in the two weeks than the boy who'd been here did in the past previous six months.

There were a lot of good things in the convent. It was a place of refuge for a lot of people but the treatment that was received was wrong. Maybe the idea of somewhere for them to go was right but the way they were treated when they got here was wrong.

If a woman was sent in here she was minded and looked after 24/7. Right she might have been physically manhandled and beaten but she was still protected from the outside world. I'm not saying it was right but when you take it in context of what's happening out there today maybe they were better off. They were fed and watered and looked after. They weren't allowed any alcohol in the premises or drugs in the premises. So in a way, the likes of the Good Shepherd, yes they did some things wrong in my eyes but maybe in their eyes that was the regime they were set up with. So maybe their ideas were right but the way they went about them at times was wrong. But then again no one has the right to hit another person, no-one has the right to put another person down So that's it good memories and bad memories. More memories will come to me now that I have opened this can of worms no doubt.

[Interview ends]