

'Horrors' and healing

By **Lindsay Tice, Staff Writer** - June 18, 2017

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A Grey Nun from St. Joseph's Orphanage in Lewiston reads to a group of girls in this undated photo. Women from the orphanage say they were abused as children by the nuns who ran the institution.

After decades of silence, the women of St. Joseph's Orphanage talk about their abuse and about finding peace.

Editor's note: This story contains descriptions of disturbing events.

LEWISTON — Every day for seven years, Julie Fortin Jipson’s morning started with the sounds of screaming and sobbing.

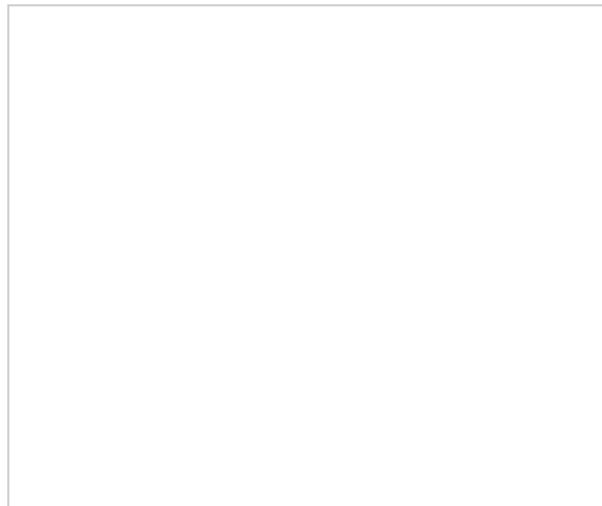
The nuns didn’t tolerate bed wetters.

“They used to put the girls who wet the bed up front, all together,” Jipson said. “Every one that she pulled up there, they’d sit there and they’d shake. I’m talking little kids. She’d take them by the head and throw their face right in the piss and hold it there while she’s hitting the hell out of them.”

As an adult, for the longest time, Jipson wondered if she imagined the horror that she endured growing up at St. Joseph’s.

Being forced to eat moldy food and oatmeal riddled with mealworms and, when other girls threw up their food, watching them being forced to eat that too.

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Being called by a number, like a prisoner.

Kneeling for hours in the corner on dried peas.

Seeing a girl with Down syndrome tied to a chair all day and another, smaller girl — the one she had loved and cared for like a little sister — shaken so forcefully that her head snapped back and forth like a rag doll until it looked like she was dead.

During her darkest times she wondered, after five decades with these memories, if maybe they were memories at all.

Then she found other girls of St. Joseph's, women now, most of them old enough to be grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Jipson had just wanted a reunion, a gathering of the girls she'd known, but her tentative query in the Sun Spots section of the Sun Journal around 2011 revealed so much more.

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The women who responded were hesitant at first, too scared to give her their names even though the orphanage had been shuttered since the 1960s, but they offered similar tales of abuse. They bore so many of the same memories.

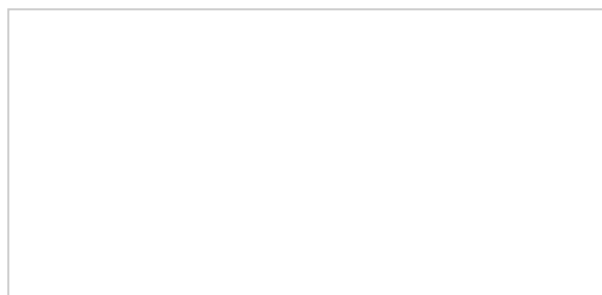
"I was thinking, 'Oh my god, those were not nightmares. It really happened,'" said Jipson, 67.

Not only did it happen, she realized, but it went back decades.

Gradually, as they talked by phone, the women grew more confident. They started sharing their names. They agreed to meet.

That first gathering in 2012 was part reunion, part catharsis. It led to the formation of two groups that still meet regularly in the Lewiston area.

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"An 80-something-year-old came and she was crying. She was saying, 'Thank you, thank you,'" Jipson said. "She says, 'I've been telling my husband and my kids what happened. I told everybody my whole life. Nobody believed me. Thank you.' She's hugging me and she's saying, 'Thank you so much for doing this. Now I can die in peace.' She died a year later."

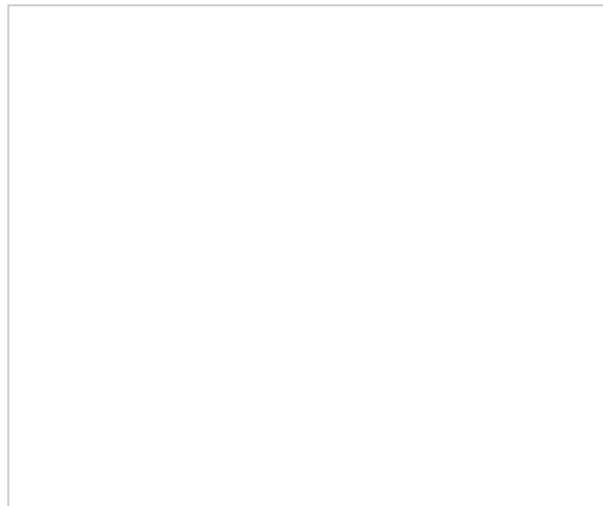
But while the gatherings proved healing for some, there was still anger, still disbelief. Talking among themselves wasn't enough.

Last year, Jipson and the women of St. Joseph's reached out to the Grey Nuns, the Canadian Catholic order that ran the orphanage.

They wanted their voices heard.

'A mini concentration camp'

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Nuns from the Sisters of Charity — also called the Grey Nuns — arrived in Lewiston from Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec in the late 1800s. The order's mission was to care for children, the elderly, the sick.

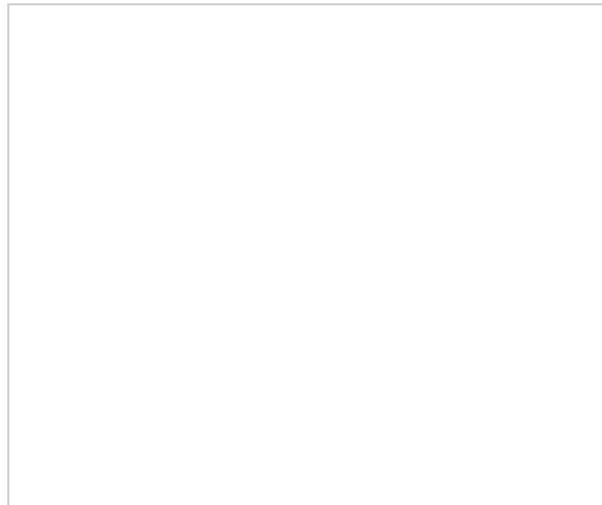
The sisters would found Lewiston's Catholic hospital, now St. Mary's Regional Medical Center, but one of their very first acts in the city was to take orphans into their Walnut Street home.

In 1888, the sisters and 40 children moved to a home on Sabattus Street, according to the book "The Franco-Americans of Lewiston-Auburn" by Bates College French professor Mary Rice-DeFosse and James Myall, who was then coordinator of the Franco American Collection at University of Southern Maine's Lewiston-Auburn College.

In 1893, the sisters began running an orphanage for boys on the corner of Ash and Bates streets. It would be known as Healy Asylum.

In the 1920s, the sisters built the Marcotte Home on Campus Avenue. One section was reserved for the elderly, another section for St. Joseph's, the girls' orphanage and school.

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St. Joseph's housed over 100 girls at a time, from toddlers through teenagers, but many weren't actually orphans.

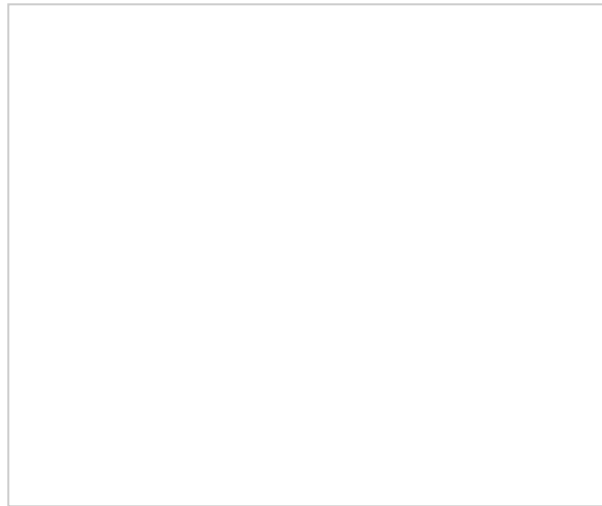
With little in the way of day care, some single parents paid to place their girls in St. Joseph's so they could work. Other parents were married but going through a rough patch or were too poor to support the whole family and chose St. Joseph's to be a safe, often temporary home for their children. Others sent their girls to St. Joseph's for the French-speaking Catholic school, boarding them there during the week and bringing them home on weekends and during summer vacation.

"Who was closer to God than the priests and the nuns? So you were in a good place. That's what they thought, anyway," said one 65-year-old woman who spent three years at St. Joseph's and asked to remain anonymous for this story.

For some girls, St. Joseph's was a haven. At home they'd been molested or had nothing to eat or their parents were alcoholics; the nuns provided a life and education away from that.

Even for the girls who disliked St. Joseph's, there were bright spots: singing in the choir, playing with the groundskeeper's family pony, always having other girls around, connecting with a special teacher or a kind nun.

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"(There) was the kindergarten teacher and she was a soft lady. Very soft," recalled Suzette Loubier, who was 4 years old when her parents placed her in St. Joseph's for a year and a half in the early 1950s so they could work. "She taught writing, penmanship, and she had beautiful penmanship. Because of her, I have nice penmanship that I enjoy. It set me off many years in the art world. It was a gift."

But for Loubier and a lot of the girls, the good never outweighed the bad.

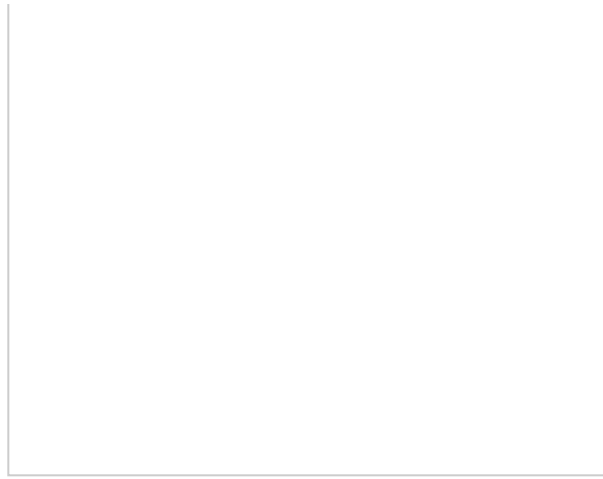
"It was a mini concentration camp. That's what I call it," said Loubier, 71.

'We lived in fear'

About a dozen women who shared their stories with Jipson agreed earlier this year to talk publicly for the first time, to tell the Sun Journal about their lives at St. Joseph's. More than half asked to remain anonymous, while a handful agreed to use their names. They ranged in age from 63 to 84 and were at the orphanage between the 1940s and 1960s.

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Although not every experience was the same — one girl was coddled and sheltered for years as the youngest in the dormitory — their stories were similar and showed a pattern across decades.

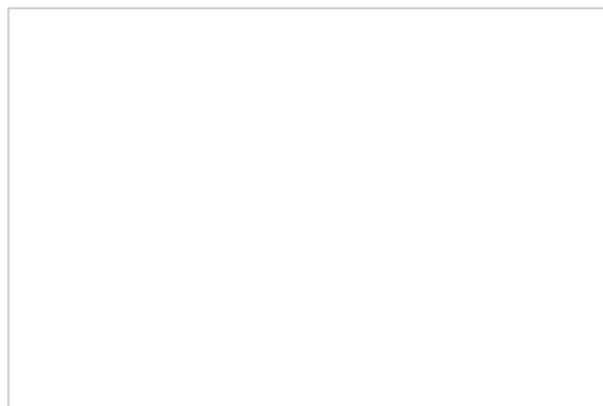
All the girls were immediately stripped of their names and assigned a number when they entered St. Joseph's.

"My number was 0 plus 73. On all your clothes you had a number. . . We were all called by our numbers. Nobody was called by their name," said Jipson, whose single father brought her and one of her sisters to St. Joseph's in 1957, where she would live from age 7 to 14. "It was demeaning. It would make you feel like you were a number, literally."

All recalled being hit by the nuns or seeing other girls hit, sometimes savagely.

"They liked to pound you on the lower neck but upper back," said 84-year-old Jacqueline Nicolas, remembering the day one of the nuns falsely accused her of writing on her new grade school desk in the 1940s. "She kept hitting me and hitting me and hitting me (with her fist). I said, 'No I didn't write on that!' And she kept hitting me."

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“So finally I said she’s going to leave me alone if I say I did put something there. So I said, ‘Yes, yes I did.’ And then she said, ‘What did you write?’ I said, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know. My name.’ And she said, ‘You’re lying again.’ So she beat me. She kept going and going. Finally she let go. She was panting. I figure that’s why she quit, she was exhausted from beating me.”

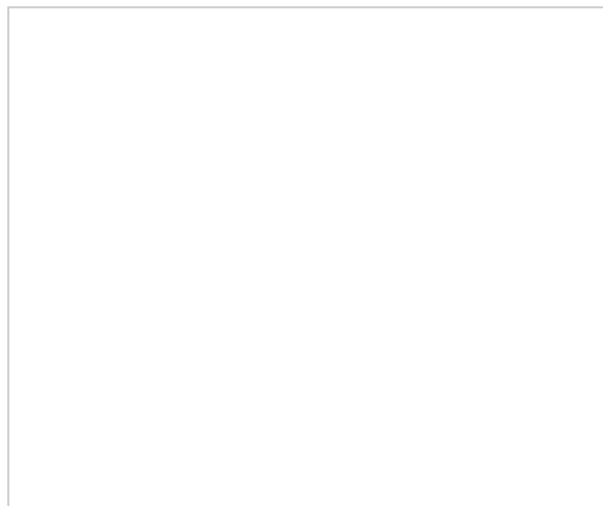
Most remembered nuns being particularly intent every morning on punishing girls who wet their beds.

“They were bare bottom and the nun would just keep hitting them until their butts were red as a beet. You could hear them screaming,” said the 65-year-old woman who asked to remain anonymous.

Many remembered other physical discipline, including being forced to kneel on dried peas for hours. Some saw nuns shake younger girls. A few saw at least one child with intellectual disabilities restrained in a chair for hours at a time.

“She used to be tied to the chair and the next thing you know the chair was bouncing everywhere as she tried to get out. Every day, that poor girl was tied. I remember her peeing on that chair,” Jipson said. “That I remember like it was yesterday. That made me sick.”

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Many recalled problems with food — there wasn’t enough, it was moldy, there were mealworms in it or it smelled rancid. Not eating wasn’t an option.

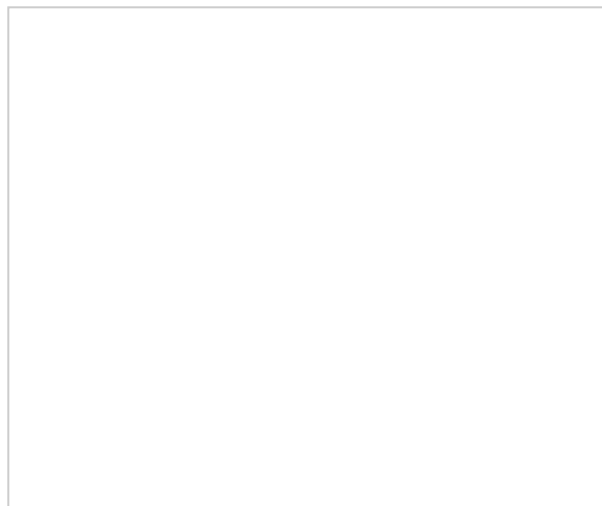
"You had to eat everything," Loubier said. "I would throw it up. I would throw up in my plate and I would have to eat my throw up. And they would keep me there until everybody else was gone. I was there until I ate it. It was every week. At least once a week."

Many remembered being humiliated and degraded by the nuns, called "ugly," "stupid" or "whore," among other things.

"Sluts wear that kind of hair," one woman said she was told when another girl teased her hair into a different style.

There were other problems too — too few blankets to keep warm at night, bath water reused for dozens of girls, an education that left some almost illiterate in English, a lack of anything resembling affection.

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Sexual abuse was about the only abuse they didn't endure there, they said.

"Fear," said one 77-year-old woman who lived at St. Joseph's in the 1940s and asked to remain anonymous. "We lived in fear."

Silence

Few members of the public knew what was happening at the orphanage, the women said. They recalled being dressed in pristine clothes for photos and special events and being given toys at Christmas, but those clothes were whisked away as soon as the event was over and the toys quickly disappeared.

Girls did sometimes complain about their treatment at St. Joseph's — to their parents, to an orphanage benefactor who happened to be in the building, to a stranger who caught them running away — but they said their complaints were largely ignored.

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"I was told that I was lying, that the nuns could not have done what we said they did," said the 65-year-old woman who asked to remain anonymous.

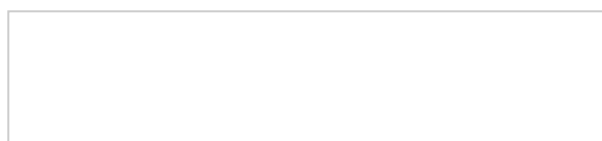
Others never told anyone about their experiences, even when they grew up, for fear they wouldn't be believed or because they didn't want their parents to feel guilty.

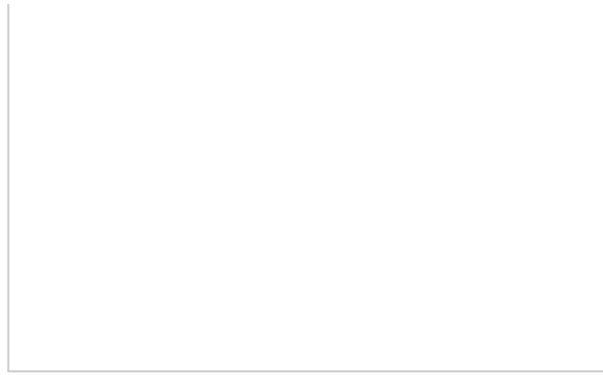
Although rumors long swirled about abuse at St. Joseph's, almost no one said anything publicly.

"People are very reticent to talk about the nuns in any kind of pejorative way," said Rice-DeFosse, who interviewed former St. Joseph's residents for a Gendron Franco Center video documentary on the Sisters of Charity several years ago. "You would ask and they would say, 'We don't talk about that.'"

Girls left St. Joseph's for different reasons. Some were pulled out by parents whose circumstances had changed. Some left on their own when they turned 18 or 19. Some left when the orphanage shut its doors in the mid-1960s.

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The women who talked to the Sun Journal said they have sought their orphanage and school records over the years to no avail. They said they were told the records were in Canada. When they later asked the Grey Nuns in Canada, they were told the records were gone.

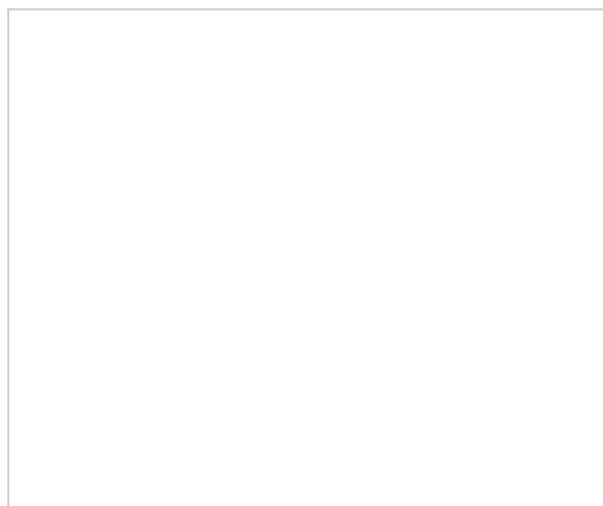
All the women went on to build new lives. But they carried with them the trauma of St. Joseph's.

"There's no movie that's more scary than what we experienced," Loubier said. "Right under everybody's noses. With a big crucifix around their necks."

Many of the women said they've had problems trusting other people and navigating relationships. Those with children found themselves stuck on one end of the parenting spectrum or another: very lenient or overly protective, extremely affectionate or very restrained.

"I wasn't a loving mom. How could I give what I didn't have?" asked Denise Godwin, who spent three years at St. Joseph's in the 1960s and later raised four children.

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As time went on, some started to wonder whether they imagined the abuse. Fifty, 60, 70 years out, some of it seemed outlandish, horror movie-esque.

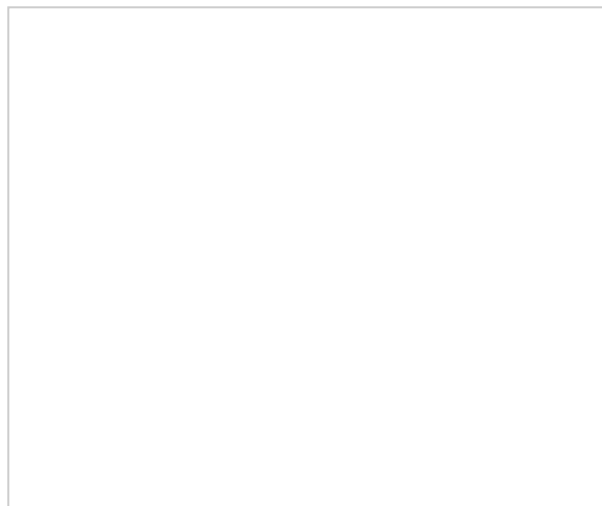
"I'm 71 and I've been dragging this along with me my whole lifetime and no one to talk about it with. No one could possibly understand the misery and the pain," Loubier said.

A reunion

Around 2011, Jipson, who lives in Greene, posted her query in the Sun Journal's Sun Spots column: Would any St. Joseph's women want to get together?

She was thinking of a reunion of her childhood friends. What she got instead were anonymous phone calls, intense conversations, tears.

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"I had memories, but I had no idea the extent (of the abuse). I didn't know how bad it was for so many women," Jipson said. "I thought it was just my group, but it went back 40 years."

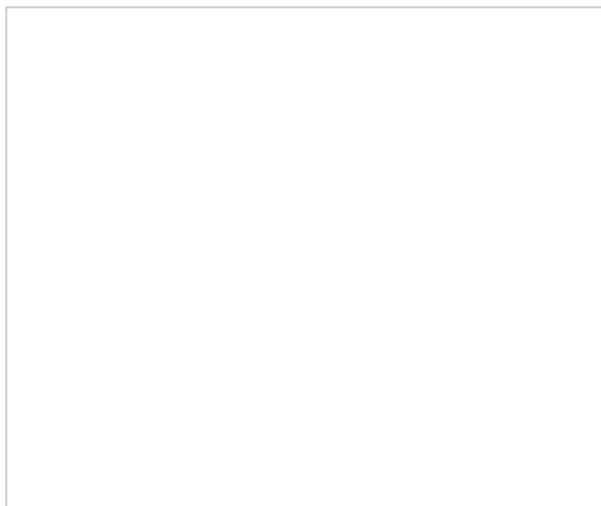
Gradually, the women agreed to meet. On March 4, 2012, they held a reunion at Davinci's Eatery in Lewiston. Ten or 12 said they'd come. More than 20 showed up, including a woman in her 80s who had just gotten out of the hospital.

"It didn't take long. At our first luncheon we started talking and everything came out," Jipson said.

That reunion led to a regular monthly luncheon, a kind of support group for women who call each other "my sister."

"We healed together," Jipson said. "As we got together we started talking about things. It was validation. It was, 'That really happened?' 'Oh, yes.'"

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A second group later split off from the first, forming their own regular get-togethers. There is also a [Facebook page](#).

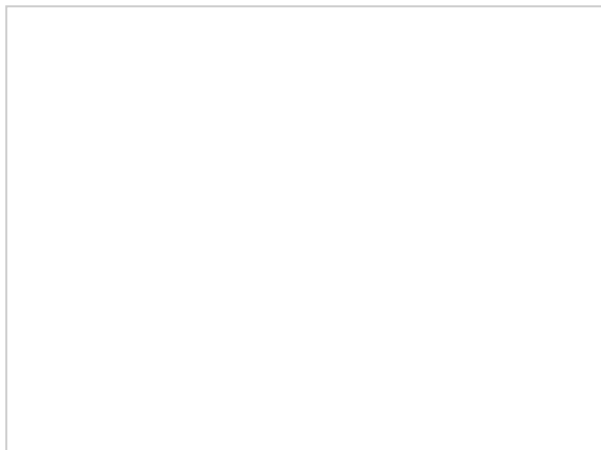
But while the gatherings were validating and, for some, healing, there was still anger. How could this have happened? Did anyone in Sisters of Charity care?

The Grey Nuns left Lewiston years ago, but the order still existed in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. A few years after that first reunion, Jipson reached out and asked for a meeting.

"It was like a calling for me. That's the only way I can put it," Jipson said.

Sister Diane Beaudoin, general superior for the Grey Nuns, agreed to come to Maine.

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The visit

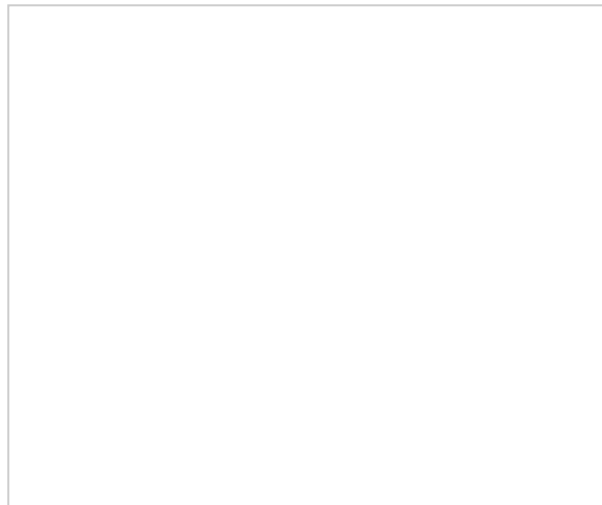
On Feb. 2, 2016, Beaudoin, another sister and about 15 women from St. Joseph's sat in a circle at St. Phillip's Church in Auburn.

"One girl started talking a little bit, then another girl started talking a little bit," Jipson said. "We were there for almost three hours."

As the stories spilled out, Jipson said Beaudoin seemed distraught.

"She said, 'We had heard there was abuse, but we had no idea the extent of the abuse,'" Jipson recalled.

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Jipson said she made it clear that the women didn't want money and were not interested in suing anyone. At the end of the meeting, Jipson said, Beaudoin asked her what she wanted, what the Grey Nuns could do.

"I said, 'I'll tell you what, what I want is validation for what went on there,'" Jipson said.

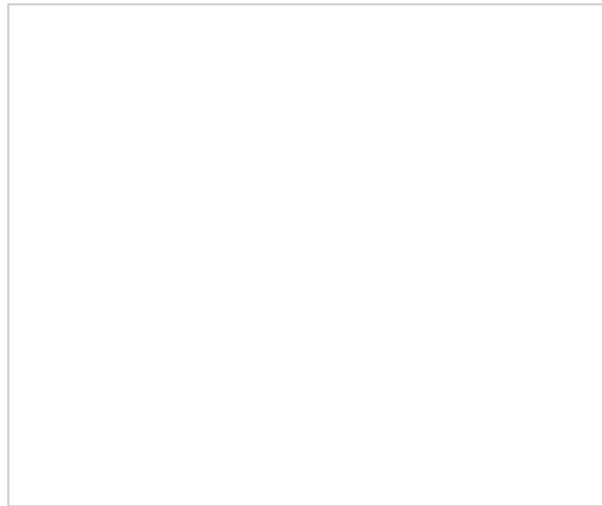
Six weeks later, a two-page letter arrived in Jipson's mailbox, addressed to her and "the women of St. Joseph." It was from Beaudoin.

"I am so sorry for all you suffered; for a childhood robbed of happy carefree days and comforting affection; for the consequences you have suffered and carried well into adulthood,

affecting and coloring your entire lives,” Beaudoin wrote. “In the name of all the Sisters of Charity, I want to express my deepest apology for all you have suffered and continue to suffer all these years since leaving the orphanage. To say we are sorry seems like so little in the face of your tremendous pain, but know that our hearts have been profoundly touched by your pain.

“Because of your courage and strength, you have brought us to a new truth that will forever change us as a community.”

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In the letter, she offered to help pay for counseling for the women and said this new knowledge of the abuse at St. Joseph’s has “spurred us on to make sure this does not ever happen again in any of our sponsored institutions involving children.”

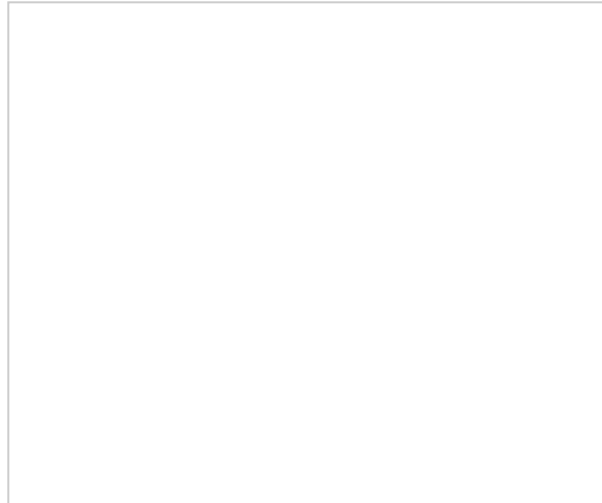
Sisters of Charity no longer maintains orphanages in the United States or Canada, but it does run 20 schools and three centers for girls in Haiti, according to Beaudoin’s letter. She said protecting children from abuse was already a topic there, and directors and teachers in Haiti were committed to making sure children weren’t hurt under their watch.

“Because of your initiative to make us aware of what you have all suffered, I commit myself to personally supervising this process closely and seeing to it that this initiative on their part is followed up, that policies are written and that they are enforced in all our schools and centers for children,” she said. “I will also see to it that all our sisters in Haiti are made aware of this dark side of our past and that they all receive the proper training and help needed to care for the children entrusted to them.”

Beaudoin ended the letter by saying she was grateful for the women’s willingness to share their pain with her.

“May it bring you some peace and healing to know that you have been instrumental in raising our awareness and leading us to change,” she wrote.

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Jipson called the letter “intense.”

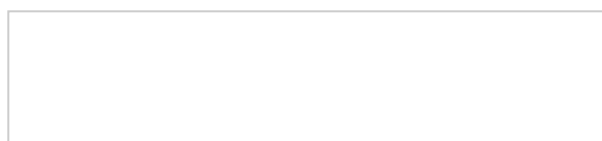
“I felt like 50 pounds off my shoulders,” she said. “I felt like my job was done at that point. I felt that, ‘Yeah, that’s what you were looking for, Julie.’”

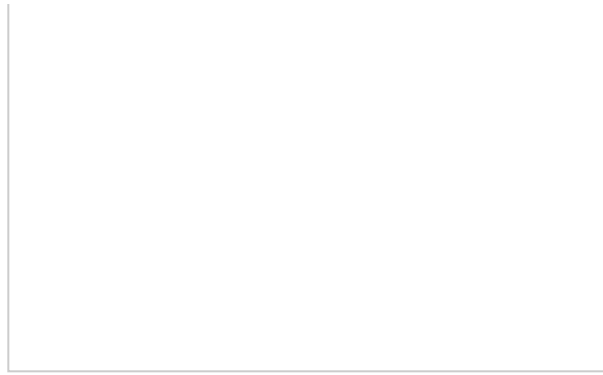
The aftermath

A year later, the women still meet for lunch regularly but, in Jipson’s group at least, conversations are more likely these days to focus on husbands, kids and grandkids than child abuse. And when St. Joseph’s does come up, the women talk about the funny stories and good times — like secretly dancing to the radio while working in the laundry room — as much as they do the bad times.

“You’ve got to let go or you’re going to have a very unhappy life if you don’t,” said the 77-year-old woman who asked to remain anonymous.

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Some of the women said they understand what might have led the nuns to be abusive. Just two sisters were in charge of more than 100 girls at a time, with no breaks, no days off, and just one short trip away each year. There was little money, even for food. Some of the nuns, they thought, only knew harsh discipline themselves as children.

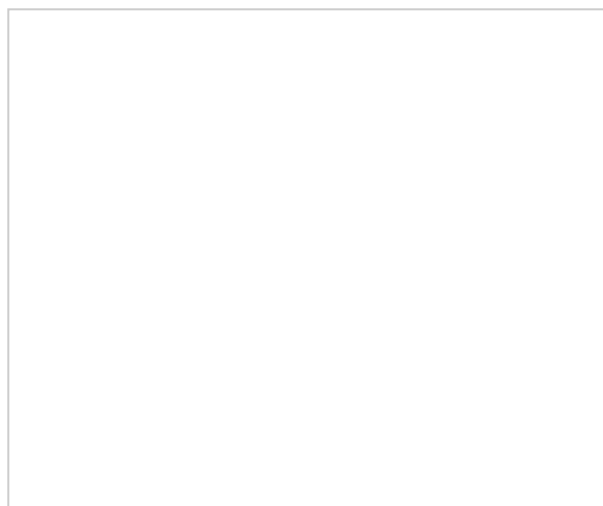
“They really didn’t give them enough help,” said one 69-year-old woman who lived at St. Joseph’s in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Others say there’s no justification.

“Absolutely, those women never should have been alone,” Jipson said. “But I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: Nothing excuses the horrors that we experienced in that place.”

The women are divided, too, on whether the story of St. Joseph’s Orphanage should be told publicly.

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Some believe the experience is done, the order has apologized and nothing good can come from opening old wounds. They believe the private trauma of the girls should remain private.

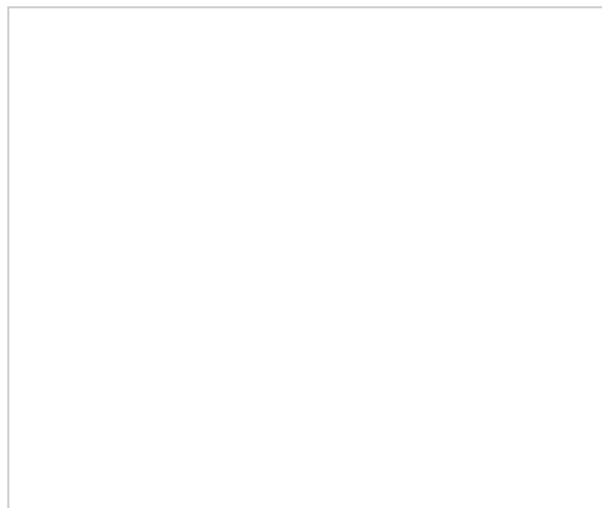
Others believe they have been silent long enough.

"I saw my mother last night. She's 96 . . . and she said it's about time this story was told," said the 69-year-old woman who asked to remain anonymous.

The Sun Journal reached out to Beaudoin over the course of four weeks without response. In a telephone interview on Friday, she said the letter she sent the women, which Jipson has forwarded to the St. Joseph's women who contact her, was supposed to be private. She also said she was uncomfortable with a story on abuses at the orphanage. However, she said she respects that some women felt the need to tell their story publicly so such abuses don't happen again.

"I cannot say anything against that," she said. "If this is a dark side of our history that needs to be put out there, then OK, so be it."

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Jipson and other women stress that the Grey Nuns did a lot for Lewiston-Auburn for many years. The order started schools, built a hospital, helped the poor, cared for the elderly. The women of St. Joseph's said they don't want to take away from that reputation.

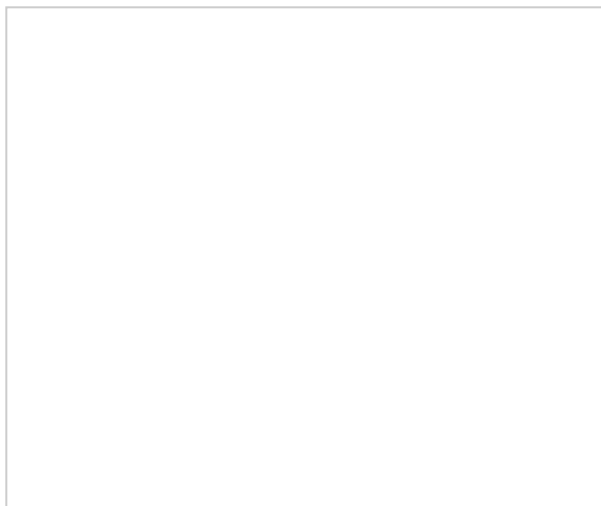
"The good they've done in the community absolutely still stands," Jipson said.

But it bothered the women when the nuns were honored and celebrated over the years. There was another side of the story to tell.

Jipson doesn't want the women of St. Joseph's to have to hide anymore.

“For this story not to be told, for me, is sacrilegious,” she said. “We’re here. It was real. We’re survivors, not victims.”

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Maison Marcotte, the former Marcotte Home on Campus Avenue in Lewiston, was the location of St. Joseph’s orphanage from the 1920s to the mid-1960s.

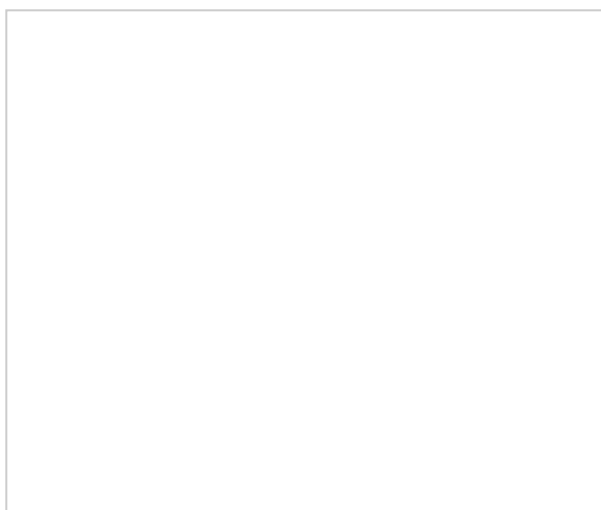
“Who was closer to God than the priests and the nuns? So you were in a good place. That’s what they thought, anyway.”

Excerpt from Sister Diane Beaudoin’s letter to the women of St. Joseph’s Orphanage

"I am so sorry for all you suffered; for a childhood robbed of happy carefree days and comforting affection; for the consequences you have suffered and carried well into adulthood, affecting and coloring your entire lives. In the name of all the Sisters of Charity, I want to express my deepest apology for all you have suffered and continue to suffer all these years since leaving the orphanage.

"To say we are sorry seems like so little in the face of your tremendous pain, but know that our hearts have been profoundly touched by your pain. Because of your courage and strength, you have brought us to a new truth that will forever change us as a community.

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"We must and do accept this truth about our past, our hurtful acts and our neglectful silence. It is a dark side of our history that you have helped us to see and accept and that we now must and will fully integrate into our history. No longer will we present ourselves solely as having accomplished great things, but also as having gravely failed in some instances in our mission to care for the most vulnerable.

"Thank you for bringing us to this truth, for your initiative in speaking out so that never again will these things happen. I hope that the awareness of the good you have done, will help you all in your healing process.