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Unique Reunion Helps Onetime Residents of Orphanage Heal

When more than 90 former wards of St. Peter's met again in Manchester, N.H., some relived memories of harsh treatment that had haunted them for decades.

October 29, 2000 | REBECCA MAHONEY | ASSOCIATED PRESS

MANCHESTER, N.H. — In 1950, little girls at St. Peter's Orphanage did not talk back to nuns.

Loreli Manning was 7, and angry because one of the Sisters of Charity was yelling at a new girl. She spoke up.

The nun threw her against a brick wall.

At that moment, Loreli began hating that nun. The orphanage became a prison. But the little girl she defended became her friend.

In December 1999, nearly half a century after she left the orphanage, Loreli Manning--now Loreli Nachin--was at peace with herself. She was living in Holiday, Fla., and, for the most part, had laid her childhood to rest.

But every day, she thought about the girls she grew up with at St. Peter's. They had considered one another sisters and forged intense bonds that eased the loneliness and uncertainty.

Loreli Nachin dreamed of finding them again.

One day, at a restaurant in nearby St. Petersburg, she started chatting with a woman at another table. The conversation turned to where they were from.

New England. New Hampshire. Manchester. St. Peter's Orphanage.

And Nachin was suddenly reunited with Patricia Beaudoin, a girl with whom she had played almost 50 years ago.

"I just started screaming," said Beaudoin, who still lives in Manchester, only a few miles from St. Peter's.

Delighted to have found each other after so long, the pair quickly hatched a plan: to reunite as many former orphans of St. Peter's as they could find.

It was a formidable task. Most of the children who grew up at the orphanage lost touch with one another after they left. Women had married and had adopted new last names. But Nachin and Beaudoin contacted as many people as they could; they begged reporters at local newspapers in Florida and New Hampshire to write about their quest, and word spread.

In late May, more than 90 former residents of St. Peter's reunited at a church hall across from the orphanage. For many it was a happy occasion, but for others it was a reminder of a time they'd rather forget.

For Jackie Mitchell, the reunion was an attempt to put closure on a time she's still trying to justify and understand. Her memories still give her nightmares.

She remembers that food wasn't to be wasted, and the nuns always made sure the children cleaned their plates.

Once, when she was 7, she was ill and vomited in her oatmeal. A nun, she says, nonetheless made sure she cleaned her plate.

Fifty years later, Mitchell cannot talk about the orphanage without weeping. The reunion was hard for her. When many residents crossed the street to tour the orphanage, she stayed behind.

"This is the last page in a book I'm hoping to sign off on forever," she said. Mitchell, once Jackie Bellemare, is now a grandmother of three and lives in Rhode Island.

She has memories of nuns who ridiculed her because she had a skin disorder. She remembers scrubbing bathroom tiles each morning before breakfast.

"I remember one time when I got a doll for Christmas and I had to share her with 40 other girls," Mitchell said.

Leona Tuttle, who is now 50 and lives in North Carolina, did not attend the reunion. She, her older brother, Douglas Shackett, and her younger brother, Leo St. Francis, all lived at St. Peter's.

Several years ago Tuttle tried to come to terms with her childhood. On the advice of a psychiatrist, she went to visit St. Peter's.

"It still smelled the same. I can't describe it," she said. "If you could put a smell on sorrow, that's what it was."

Shackett has never been back but said the idea no longer frightens him.

"I'm an adult now," he said. "I can walk in there, and this time nobody can stop me from walking out of there. History is history and I can't change that, but I can deal with it now."

Although he says the orphanage's brutality made him grow up angry at the world, St. Peter's also shaped his life.

"It's made me a stronger, better person," he said. "It made me never want to hit my kids or to tell them they couldn't be what they wanted to be."

Many former residents said they didn't recognize that what happened to them was wrong until they were older. The ones who realized it at the time said nobody believed them.

"You didn't talk against the church that way. These nuns were right in what they were doing, everyone thought," said Priscilla Davis, once Priscilla Boulanger.

The orphanage was founded in 1885 at the request of Msgr. Pierre Hevey, a Roman Catholic priest in Manchester, who petitioned the Sisters of Charity to run it.

The nuns, a French-speaking order from St. Hyacinth, Quebec, ran the orphanage independently from the diocese, said Kathleen Crane, director of development at Catholic Charities in Manchester.

In 1950, St. Peter's had no social workers to help the children, she said. "There are many, many regulations and people to oversee what happens today, but there were no such checkpoints in place for children 50 years ago," she said. "There were no real standards of care."

Catholic Charities was founded in 1945 but didn't begin to work with the orphanage until the late 1950s

Their work eased some pressure on the nuns, said Sister Florence Therrien, who was responsible for converting the orphanage into a bright, inviting day care center that she still runs.

"These were children whose parents used to scare them by saying, 'I'm going to put you in St. Peter's if you don't behave,' and then it happened to them," she said. "They were horribly frightened at first, and there was nobody to help them except the nuns, who had so, so many things to do."

Phone calls to the U.S. representative of the Sisters of Charity seeking comment were not returned. The abbey in St. Hyacinth where the Sisters of Charity are based did not have any information about St. Peter's.

Many of the women who came to St. Peter's in the early 1960s describe better experiences and have happier memories.

"I grew up really caring for the nuns," Beaudoin said. "I have to say I really loved them because they were like parents to us. I knew they cared, even if they couldn't always show it. Some girls don't have many good memories, but if I had to do it again I'd want it the same way."

Barbara Fauber Cavanaugh considered the reunion for two weeks after she read about it in the paper before deciding to attend.

"It brought back a lot of feelings of loneliness and heartache," she said.

But she's quick to add that the orphanage was, for her, a safe harbor.

"When I went there it was terrifying, but after the first few days, I realized that it was the first time I felt secure in my life," she said.

For Rose Cote, formerly Rose Boulanger, the orphanage gave her clean clothes, warm food and her own bed--things she rarely had at her own home, where cockroaches climbed the walls and she and her seven siblings were often hungry, dirty and cold.

"Some kids take discipline differently than others," she said. "To me, I had a good time. . . . They were secondhand clothes, and I slept in a room with many other girls, but I was happy."

At the reunion, she said, "when I went to the orphanage and saw the nuns, I said to them, 'Sister, I'm coming home.' "

Many of the former orphans said St. Peter's made them who they are.

"I was always taking in other people's kids," Tuttle said. "I'm always there for anybody because nobody was there for me."

Some said the nuns instilled a strong sense of faith that has stayed with them, and others said the physical discipline gave them an aversion to violence. Many said they are introverted, shy or self-conscious because of their experiences at St. Peter's.

Anna Cote Lord, who lived at the orphanage with her sister, Emela, said, "I think the nuns were good to me. But [the reunion] was good to get closure."