

A Magdalene Laundry survivor speaks out

Thursday, June 6, 2013 - A Heart Without Compromise; Advocating for Children by Jerome Elam

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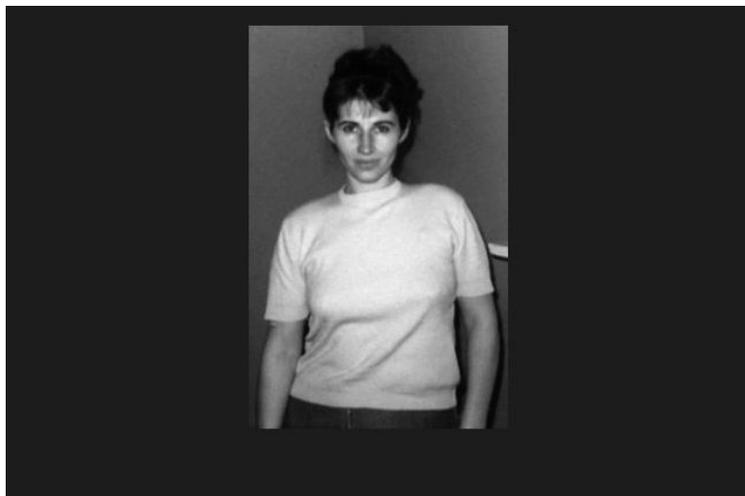


Photo: Patricia Noel

Jerome Elam



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WASHINGTON, March 23, 2013 — It was December

of 1946 as the harsh winds of a Baltimore winter howled outside of the ancient dining hall where twelve year-old Patricia Noel sat struggling to hold back the tears rising up inside her. She felt

abandoned and alone in the world as she tried to hold back the pain that life had inflicted on the fragile heart of such a young girl.

At eight years old she had lost the only person that had ever mattered in her life when her mother died. Her father, a heroin addict, had left long ago, abandoning her mother and two siblings, leaving them destitute and living on the streets. When her mother died, Patricia and her brother and sister became orphans and wards of the state. A heartbroken and innocent young girl, Patricia became swept up in a wave of Social Service placements that shuffled her through a myriad of institutions and foster homes.

One of the places Patricia Noel was placed was St. Johns Episcopal orphanage located in Washington D.C. near the White House, where she felt loved and cared for. Fears of creating “institutionalized” children led them to transfer Patricia to a foster home that only returned her to Social Services. Eventually, at the age of eleven, Patricia was sent to the Magdalene Laundry in Baltimore, Maryland, run by the Good Shepherd order.

Magdalene Covenants were set up by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages to provide a place for repentant prostitutes seeking to cleanse their sins in preparation for marriage. These institutions would take a darker turn, however, as the industrial revolution dawned and young girls who violated a strict feminine moral code became slave labor in a hell they could never have imagined.

They became known as Magdalene Laundries when these institutions began washing the linens of local hotels and businesses and the uniforms of the priests and nuns. The young girls sent to Magdalene Laundries were not paid for their long hours of labor, and the orders that ran these institutions made a significant profit from the young girls that suffered. Drawing from an obscure story of Mary Magdalene’s suffering, the four different orders of Catholic nuns who ran these facilities adopted a barbaric system of making young women do penance that included torture and starvation.

As they expanded throughout Europe, Magdalene Laundries also proliferated into Ireland, Scotland, Canada, Australia and the United States. The Baltimore Magdalene Laundry in which Patricia Noel was imprisoned was one of 62 schools Good Shepherd had operated in the United States since the early 1800s. The last Good Shepherd School in the United States closed in 2001 in Cleveland, Ohio.

As the car containing the social worker and Patricia approached the Baltimore Magdalene Laundry, their eyes fell upon enormous stone walls with jagged glass embedded at the top encircling a large medieval complex. Large wrought iron gates barred the entrance and as they opened, Patricia felt as if a cold wind had blown through the depths of her soul.

As the car came to a stop Patricia was led by the social worker through an arched stone entrance into a metal cage with a locked gate. The social worker pressed a button on a nearby wall. The Mother Superior rose and approached the locked gate. "What is your name, child?" the Mother Superior asked unlocking the gate.

Patricia Noel meekly replied, "Patricia," as her grip tightened on the social worker's hand. "As of this moment you may longer use that name. I will give you a name or you can choose one!" the nun sternly said. "I choose Teresa." Patricia Noel replied taking the name of her deceased mother. There would be many long and lonely nights. When hope was at its lowest, Patricia would always dream of her mother and the feeling of her arms encircling her, protecting her from all the evil of the world. She would smile as the memory of her mother cradled her into dreams of being together once again and escaping the pain of being an orphan, if only for a short time.

Patricia was escorted to her new accommodations. As she looked around, black curtains covered the windows, banishing the sun from the building's interior. The girls sent to a Magdalene Laundry were referred to as "inmates," and were required to work long hours sewing as their bruised and bleeding fingers made a profit for the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

The inmates were allowed to talk for only thirty minutes a day after dinner. The rest of their waking hours were spent in complete silence. Survival here could be cutthroat. Many girls became agents of the nuns, informing on other girls to curry favor and catering to the nuns' every whim to escape punishment.

Patricia Noel remembered an eleven-year-old girl named Mary who had lost control of her bladder as urine spilled across the floor. The Sisters made her crawl across the floor in her own urine. Patricia remembers the nuns saying, "You act like an animal so I am going to treat you like an animal!" The punishments meted out were severe and unrelenting, driving many of the young girls to the edge of sanity.

In the dining hall, 100 girls ate their dinner seated silently in rigid positions in groups of four per table. On a platform raised high above the dining area, a group of nuns sat in high wooden chairs resembling thrones. Clothed in the habit of the Good Shepherd order, the nuns kept a vigilant watch as the girls sat eating their final meal of the day. As Patricia Noel sat cloaked in sadness close to the raised platform, two of the girls at the table began holding their nose and pointing at a new arrival that sat among them named Estelle.

As one of the nuns shifted her attention to the disruption in the strictly enforced protocol, she began to bark orders. "Estelle, take your chair and sit over by the window!" A timid girl, Estelle slowly got up and moved her chair close to the towering arched windows. "Estelle, take your sweater off!" the nun yelled across the room, but the young girl did not move. "Estelle, I said take your sweater off or else!" the nun screamed again. The nun looked over at a group of ten girls known as the Sodality Sisters, whose role as enforcers was well known.

They had “given” themselves over to the nuns and begged to become Sodality Sisters for the rest of their lives as they were unable to become nuns due to their sins. They moved toward Estelle and suddenly she was grabbed and thrown to the ground as they tried to remove her sweater. Estelle did not budge as the girls began to violently kick and punch her.

Patricia Noel watched in horror as the scene unfolded. She began to cry and tried to leave her seat to help Estelle, but the girls at her table would not let her move. One of the girls at the table whispered to her, “Sit down or she will have them beat you too!” Patricia could not allow the abuse of the young girl to continue.

As Patricia began to rise, the three girls seated at the table got up and held her down. The white tile floor had now become coated with crimson, as the blood from the open wounds on Estelle’s face gushed forth. Her soul teetered on its breaking point. The sound of Estelle’s relentless beating and her screams of agony reverberated throughout the large hall.

“Shut her up before someone hears!” the nun shouted, pointing at Estelle. “Stuff a towel in her mouth,” the nun ordered as she threw one of the cloths from a nearby table towards the group of girls. Estelle’s screams became a muffled cry as one of the girls shoved the towel deep into her mouth. Patricia tried to close her eyes, but could not ignore her duty as a witness for these young women who had fallen victim to the darkness of a Magdalene Laundry.

The next morning, Patricia Noel sat next to Estelle during morning chapel as she surveyed her bruised and battered form. She became horrified as she noticed Estelle had bitten off not only her fingernails but also the skin all the way down to her knuckles. Patricia remembered the timid young girl she had come to know and her mind struggled with the cruelty of the scene from last night’s dinner.

In the end, the story of Estelle became one of a young girl consumed by the darkness of the prison that came to own her as her life dwindled away after being sent to a mental institution by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

Patricia Noel remembers a group of developmentally disabled women, older than the others, who were kept hidden and herded into an attic when visitors arrived. These women had spent their entire lives inside the walls of that institution and it would be their final resting place.

Escape was seldom, if ever, successful. Patricia tells a story of three Sodality Sisters whose thirst for freedom overcame their fear of punishment. The young girls used the cover of night to gain access to an outer door leading into the street. They were apprehended by the police after only a few days and escorted back to be placed at the mercy of the nuns.

They had their heads shaved, were beaten and made to kneel on concrete steps for days. As they made their way back into the general population of inmates the girls became targets as retribution for the punishment that they had doled out. Patricia Noel worked with one of the girls and remembers her name being Joan.

The two eventually became friends and sat together in the dining hall. After a time the nuns’ punishment of Joan became sufficient enough for them to reinstate her as a Sodality Sister. At dinner one evening,

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Photo:
Patrica
Noel

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