

STATEMENT FROM THE FORMER CHILDREN OF ST. JOSEPH'S ORPHANAGE  
December 14, 2020

I would like to introduce to you Walter Coltey, and I am Brenda Hannon. We were asked to represent the "Voices of St. Joseph's Orphanage," an adult group of 30+ members who are the last surviving generations of children abused at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Burlington, Vermont.

We were the forgotten ones, the children who had to suppress and hide our trauma just to survive all those years ago. Revisiting those memories and giving voice to the sexual, physical and mental abuse perpetrated on us required a reluctant courage none of us knew we had. On behalf of the Voices of St. Joseph's, we are here today to have our voices heard and share our goals from the Restorative Justice Inquiry process and what we hope will be accomplished as a result of our difficult testimony.

Kaiser Permanente and the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a national study regarding ACE, or "[Adverse Childhood Experiences.](#)" They determined that children who endured severe trauma in their early lives will, in adulthood, likely experience substance abuse, obesity, depression, heart disease and other physical, social and behavioral ailments resulting in a shortened lifespan. That has been true for many of us.

Imagine what it must have been like to be a scared young child, removed from your only family, and sent into an institutional setting to live with other children from similarly difficult backgrounds. Shut off from contact with the outside world, you were put in the custody of intolerant strangers with little or no training in child care. Some of them were actually sadistic.

Life was unthinkable for thousands of children placed in that orphanage. We suffered physical, mental and, in some cases, sexual abuse. We were threatened and punishment was harsh, swift, and extreme. Oh the horrors! We were beaten with rods, locked in dark closets and trunks, and forced to eat our own vomited food. Some were sexually molested, this by the same people professing to be agents of God: Catholic nuns, priests, Edmundites, and other workers at the facility. Some children did not survive their time there; they simply "disappeared."

The orphanage was closed in the late 1970s without anyone ever bringing to light what really went on inside its walls. Then, in the mid-1990s, when some of our truths began to emerge, some of us brought lawsuits against the diocese. Sadly, those cases were thrown out due to technicalities or legal grounds; some former orphans were even paid hush money (a pittance, really) to keep them quiet! The effect of these failed suits in the 1990s was profound; having the hope that justice would be served only to have it dashed felt like being victimized all over again. We were suppressed and intimidated again by those in power and standing in the community.

Now, thanks to an [extensive report produced in 2018 for BuzzFeed](#), written by Christine Kenneally, the State Attorney General's Office has conducted an investigation into our claims about what happened at St. Joseph's Orphanage. The truth deserves to be aired; cover up tactics should be widely exposed.

We acknowledge no one can give us back our childhood, take away the pain and shame we endured, nor untangle the mental and physical struggles many of us have had to deal with in our adult lives. However, we CAN and WILL hold those accountable: the Burlington Catholic Diocese, Vermont Catholic Charities, the Sisters of Providence and yes, the state's child protection services agency. They are responsible for what happened to us and to those who could not speak for themselves. We are determined to be heard and find justice.

The Voices of St. Joseph's Orphanage does seek reparation through the following actions. We want:

1. Face-to-face meetings with leaders from these named institutions: the Sisters of Providence, the Catholic Diocese of Burlington, Vermont Catholic Charities and the State of Vermont child protection services. We want an acknowledgement that what we say happened to us did indeed happen, and a sincere apology.
2. The above-named Catholic entities shall demonstrate the depth of that apology by a) creating a fund to pay for the healing therapies of any former orphanage resident who requests it, b) releasing all records related to the operation and supervision of St. Joseph's Orphanage and c) providing all and complete family records, no redactions, to any former resident who requests it.
3. We request that The Vermont State Legislature, upon reading the report, a) acknowledges the harm we experienced, and b) to better protect vulnerable people of all ages who face abuse of any kind, work with us to enact laws that remove the Civil Statute of Limitations for physical and mental abuse.
4. By the release of The Criminal Investigation Report today; the public will be informed a) about the horrors that went on at St. Joseph's, b) that it was covered up by The Catholic Diocese for decades, c) what may still be hidden remains unknown, but can be further uncovered; and d) encourage any individual who worked for or lived at the orphanage that has testimony to add, to please come forward. With the release of this Criminal Investigation Report today, we are moving in the right direction. We will have further reflections on the report in the coming days.

Walter Coltey and I will help the media to contact those who want to tell their stories. To find out more about the Restorative Justice, contact Marc Wennberg, [marc@communityreentry.net](mailto:marc@communityreentry.net). If you would like to receive a copy of The Voices of St. Joseph's Orphanage statement, email me at [blhannon22@gmail.com](mailto:blhannon22@gmail.com).