



NEWS FOCUS - Victor Stevenson's memorial is justice for Westbank Orphanage survivors

Why did the primary schools accept that the Westbank children all had the surname, 'Mathers'? asks Victoria White, in yesterday's Irish Examiner

Victor Stevenson is bitterly grieved today by his loving wife Beverly and his children Sam and

Emma. He will be buried this afternoon in Clandeboye Cemetery, Bangor, Co Down, after a ceremony reflecting his worth as a human beloved of the human family, though his birth was deemed, he told me, “a disaster” by his family of origin.

The contrast between the beginning and the end, at only 57, of this gentle man’s life will be stark because of the humanity of the man who adopted Victor from the notorious Westbank Orphanage in Co Wicklow 50 years ago. Victor told me how this happened and his words are burned into my brain.

Paraded as a singing munchkin on the stage of a Gospel Hall in the North by Westbank’s supremo, Adeline Mathers, he ran off the stage and clutched the trousered leg of a man standing in the congregation.

The child must have seen a special quality in the man and he was right. Victor’s future adoptive father looked down at the child and resolved not to abandon him. The child was filthy. As Victor later said, “I hadn’t been changed in weeks.” The man resolved to take him away from the hell of Adeline Mathers’s Westbank home for a holiday in relative heaven.

As the holiday drew to a close a Methodist minister came to visit and as he was leaving, asked about the extra child. By coincidence, he knew the child's birth family, a family called Kingston from Cork. So an adoption process began which lasted more than two years and ended up with Victor's adoptive father bundling a crying child into his car outside the Westbank Orphanage and driving him off to a brighter future north of the border.

Victor seems to have settled so fully into his new life in the heart of a loving family that he didn't engage with his past at all. He married and had his own family. He told me it was only when he happened upon an article on Protestant orphanages in this newspaper four years ago that he began to connect with the truth of his own past in the abusive Westbank Orphanage.

I can't be glad this connection happened through an article I wrote because I don't know whether it made him happier or more stressed. I would only be glad if it had changed anything for the surviving victims of Adeline Mathers's Westbank regime and it hasn't. Not yet.

Victor Stevenson goes to his grave today without the recognition from this State of the suffering he

endured as a child which he craved for himself and for others. Recognition was all he wanted.

That Westbank was an abusive environment first came to light in 2011 in Mike Peelo's RTÉ documentary, Auntie's Family Secrets, which chronicled children being beaten up, whipped with electric cables, being injected with unknown substances, and being made to eat dog biscuits. Stevenson recalled a boy who was beaten so badly he had to stay in bed in an outhouse. The other children were forbidden to bring him food and to this day break down remembering the fear they felt as they brought scraps to the boy.

This was abuse which hid in plain sight. Why did the doctor not ask questions about the beaten boy who visited his surgery? Why did the primary schools such as St Patrick's, Greystones, Delgany National School and St Laurences, Greystones, accept that the Westbank children all had the surname, "Mathers"?

Colm Begley only discovered that was not his surname when Newpark Comprehensive School refused to accept it; my school, St Andrews College, accepted the Mathers surname for the boys who attended, as did Rathdown School for the girls.

I went to school with Westbankers because St Andrews College, a fee-paying Protestant school, kindly waived the fees in respect of the boys. But when one of them fell — or was pushed — off a train on his way home from school one day and was left brain-damaged for life he was never mentioned in school again. He is “disremembered” by most staff and students and there was no enquiry.

“Awntie” was what a girl at my primary school used to call Adeline Mathers although she pronounced all her other words in a Dublin accent. Four decades later her tone of deep, dull dread still sends a shiver up my spine. She was the girl with the unexplained jaundice. What was going on there?

A woman trained to ask questions, I asked none regarding these erstwhile classmates in nearly two decades as a journalist. When I did, I was cut off by several of my Protestant connections and am ostentatiously snubbed by others.

We are a small, tight-knit community and like other such communities — Travellers, Irish-speakers — we usually do our dirty washing in private. Unlike other such communities, we always succeed, because neither state nor society asks any questions of Protestants.

The Ryan Commission into abuse at industrial schools and orphanages, which reported in 2002, included no Protestant homes. The Murphy Commission into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters, which is now sitting, includes the Bethany Home in its remit but not Westbank — the destination of many Bethany babies — despite then tánaiste Joan Burton’s reassurance in the Dáil in January 2015 that “cases from institutions such as Westbank will not be excluded”. I have seen Judge Yvonne Murphy’s letter of last June to Victor Stevenson and can only imagine the heartbreak it must have caused. She encloses the terms of reference for the Commission, informs him that Westbank is not one of the homes to be investigated and provides him with a list of the included homes, adding “If you think you were in one of the listed homes feel free to contact us again.”

Judge Murphy takes shelter in the terms of reference given to the Commission by Government. But the Commission has the power to ask the Government to expand the terms of reference to include Westbank and it has not done so.

The Westbank Trustees hold all documents relating to the Westbank inmates, because the

Protestant Adoption Society (PACT) handed them over when Mike Peelo began researching his programme. The Murphy Commission could compel them to hand them back if Westbank were within their remit.

Victor Stevenson knew he was born in St Finbarre's Hospital in Cork and was taken to the Braemor Rescue Home for Protestant Girls on the Old Blackrock Road but he called it "a crushing thing" that he had no documents relating to identity or early life. It was as if, he said, "I didn't exist". Beverly, Sam, and Emma Stevenson's terrible grief today testifies not only that Victor existed but that his life was a great gift. Every life is a gift, from Inishannon to Idomeni, from Raqqa to Rathmelton and every life "disremembered" destroys others. That's why Victor Stevenson's memorial must be justice for Westbank survivors.

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