

Witness says time as a foster child was terrible

Terri Saunders / Standard-Freeholder

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When Andre Bissonnette was 11 years old, his life took a turn that would result in decades of anger, apathy and alcoholism. Bissonnette, now 58 years old, testified at the Cornwall Public Inquiry Thursday about the physical, emotional and sexual abuse he says he suffered during the years he was a ward of the Children's Aid Society.

Bissonnette said he was one of nine children and due to alcoholism in his own home, and the deteriorating relationship between his parents, he and three of his siblings were shipped off to a series of foster homes in the city when he was 11 years old. He eventually ended up at St. Joseph's Training School in Alfred, Ont., a reform school run by a group of Christian brothers made infamous after hundreds of former residents came forward in the 1990s with allegations of systemic physical and emotional abuse.

When he left Alfred at the age of 16, Bissonnette was already on a path that would see him drop out of high school and turn to alcohol as a way to cope with the enduring pain of the abuse.

But long before he went to Alfred, Bissonnette said he was the victim of repeated abuse at the hands of a number of foster parents and even another ward of the system.

In 1963, when Bissonnette was about to turn 15 years old, he was living with a foster family in the city who were also caring for another boy, Larry Hawn, who was 16 years old at the time.

Bissonnette said he remembers being approached by Hawn when the two boys were sharing a bedroom in the foster home.

"I was scared of him because he was a lot bigger than me," said Bissonnette, who said he didn't tell anyone about the abuse until he ran away from the home a few weeks after moving there. "I was too ashamed. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't defend myself."

Hawn has since passed away and Bissonnette said it took him some time to come to terms with the sexual abuse he says occurred on several occasions over a two-week period.

"I couldn't handle what was going on," said Bissonnette, who became emotional while testifying.

"They (foster parents) were strangers. It was a dark

secret and I didn't open up to anybody about it."

Bissonnette said he would spend time alone and question why he had ended up in such a place in his life.

"I used to go across the highway down by the river and I would sit there and cry," he said. "I blamed my mother, and I blamed the Children's Aid (Society) for everything that happened to me."

Bissonnette said he was eventually sent back to the home even though he says he told his foster mother and a social worker about the abuse.

"They placed me in a separate room from him (Hawn), and I wasn't doing too well in school," he said. "I didn't much care about anything anymore."

Bissonnette said he remembers coming home one day and encountering Hawn outside the house.

"I told him if he ever touched me again, I'd kill (him)," said Bissonnette. "It took everything I had to say that, and we had a bad fight. I got the worst of it. I was covered in blood."

The boys' foster father came out and broke up the fight and Bissonnette was eventually moved out of the home as was Hawn. Bissonnette was later sent to the reform school in Alfred where he says he was repeatedly physically and sexually abused by a number of Christian brothers. Throughout his life, Bissonnette spent time in a number of foster homes. He says he was often abused by foster parents, forced to do manual labour and treated poorly by family members.

There was one bright spot in Bissonnette's upbringing. For a period of time in the early 1960s, he lived with a family by the name of Bourgon. He said while he lived with them, he felt safe and protected but he had to leave when his foster mother became ill.

"It was the best home I ever had and I was on my way, doing well," said Bissonnette. "It broke my heart....but I understood why I had to go."

Over the years, Bissonnette has stopped drinking, is the father of three children and has entered into a relationship. He also spoke with police agencies about the abuse he suffered, but since Hawn had passed away, he was told there wasn't much that could be done. "I still feel like I was denied justice," he said.