NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Man raised in orphanages uses memoir to reach the abused, abandoned

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | May. 1, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: The publication of your memoir,*Raised by the Church*[1] (by Edward Rohs and Judith Estrine), has resulted in numerous interviews in print, radio and television. Why do you think this is?

Edward Rohs: First of all, my story is unique and, as everyone tells me, it's heart-wrenching. Second, very little has been written about orphanages and institutions in New York City. It's a book about the history of orphanages coupled with my personal upbringing in five Catholic orphanages. People are intrigued to learn what it's like to grow up without parents.

What, for me, is as heart-warming as your life story is heart-wrenching is the professional path you've forged in behalf of others. At 66, your resume reads: "Edward Rohs coordinates mental health services for the New York City Field Office of the New York State Office of Mental Health. He is a former psychotherapist and social worker for abused and abandoned children and their families." How did your life begin?

My parents, who had me out of wedlock, wanted an abortion but couldn't afford it. After I spent my first week of life at St. John's Hospital, Queens, N.Y., my mother brought me to a maternal aunt who lived in a Brooklyn rooming house. Six months later, she left me at Angel Guardian Home in Brooklyn. My parents married and had twins, but they never came for me. Neither did they sign the legal papers to free me for adoption. In addition, when I was 4, I was given a psychological test that led the psychologist to decide I wasn't foster care material.

Which agencies sheltered you?

I was raised by Sisters of Mercy from 6 months to 11 years of age. From Angel Guardian Home, I went to Brooklyn's Convent of Mercy, then to St. Mary's Home in Syosset, Long Island. The Marianist Brothers had me in St. John's Home in the Rockaways through the eighth grade. I attended John Jay High School while residing

at St. Vincent's Home in downtown Brooklyn.

What are your memories of institutional living?

My childhood with the Sisters of Mercy was fun. We had an abundance of holiday parties and outings to various amusement parks, beaches and sporting events. We had the yearly Blessed Virgin Mary procession, and one year, I was chosen to lead the procession and crown the Blessed Virgin Mary. I felt so honored and privileged. The sisters operated a volunteer family program, which gave me the opportunity to live with a local family for a week or two during the summer. When I returned from that home visit, I knew I preferred living in institution. I felt more protected there than in the community. With over 140 boys, the nuns had to maintain control and discipline. But they did this in a very caring and loving way. They very well knew that an idle mind is the devil's workshop, so we were kept busy from morning to night. By bedtime, we were exhausted. I could see that the nuns really loved what they were doing. They were non-stop in making sure we ate plenty of food and had clean clothes at all times. They always made me feel special, safe and secure. I loved going to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. The nuns had the most beautiful singing voices.

What kind of child were you?

I was considered well behaved, but longing for attention. Fortunately, when I was 4, Sr. Johanna McLoughlin's sister, Katherine McCarthy, took a personal interest in me. One day, when she was visiting Sister Johanna in our playground, I introduced myself to her. That began a lifelong friendship with the woman I called Aunt Katherine. She was the most important person in my life outside the institutions.

Who are your heroes and heroines?

Today, I'd have to claim the nuns and brothers and, of course, Aunt Katherine and Sister Johanna as my unsung heroes. They were there for my entire life. Even when I fell away from the Catholic church, they stood by me and prayed that I would someday return. God took them from me. Aunt Katherine in May 1980 and Sister Johanna in September 2010.

What kind of teenager were you?

I was a very shy and withdrawn. Part of it had to do with two sexual abuses I experienced as a teenager. But the other reason was being institutionalized for so many years. Regardless of how many times Aunt Katherine and her family invited me to their homes and tried to make me feel part of their families, I remained in a shell.

St. Vincent's Home organized monthly dances. I was ready because I'd learned how to dance at St. John's; however, though the dances helped me meet girls, I was extremely shy. Of course, now you can't shut me up! I chose to attend John Jay High School because it was co-ed, not to get a good education. I got tired of being around boys in all the institutions. So even though it was for the wrong reasons, selecting John Jay High School was real cool. The only exception was when I first registered for free lunch, the cafeteria staff embarrassed me by yelling out, "Give this kid free lunch, he's welfare from St. Vincent's Home." I was so humiliated that I didn't go back for my free lunch for two years.

Did you participate in activities?

Playing on St. Vincent's Home Pop Warner Football teams was one of the best experiences I ever had. St. Vincent's did not encourage us to play for our high school teams. In fact, they told us if we played, there would be no supper waiting back in the institution upon our return. That meant going to bed without any supper. I didn't love John Jay High School football that much.

To what do you credit your success as an adult?

I think it was having good people like Sister Johanna and her sister, Aunt Katherine. In addition, I'm determined and persevering. I know God works in mysterious ways. Even when I hit rock bottom without even a nickel in my pocket, I found a way to survive. I was constantly striving to better myself. I gave up on God and the church for more than 30 years. Although I'm sure Sister Johanna and Aunt Katherine never stopped praying for my return, they never pressured me to do so. About 10 years ago, I realized how fortunate I was, despite the tough times. Returning is my way of saying thank you to God for sticking by me through thick and thin.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

Yes, "Do unto others as you would want them to do onto you." I practice this every day of my life.

What is your image of God?

My image is that God is never that far from me whether I'm at home or at work. God's always there watching over and protecting me. In fact, I often remember that God works in mysterious ways. I now believe when things happen, there is a reason for it, and I now leave them in God's hand. I make it my business to attend Mass every Sunday to thank God for standing by me through thick and thin. I feel so fortunate to have accomplished so much. I know God had a hand in it. I see that, whether at work, in the gym or with my friends, God has my back.

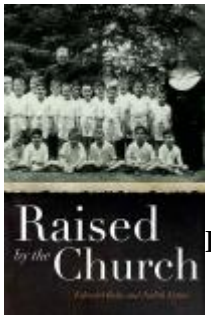
What strengthens your belief system?

Sister Johanna, Aunt Katherine and all the young people from all the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that I had the honor and privilege to work with. My renewed faith is also a big factor.

Please explain.

Simply stated, I believe that we can all learn from each other. No one person has all the answers. I believe we have to be open and nonjudgmental and respect each other regardless of what our personal beliefs are. Tolerance is very important.

Was your life, your faith, influenced by some particular experience -- devastating or delightful?



Definitely, even though I kept my upbringing a secret for close to 40 years, I realize now more than ever, it made me who I am today. I understand more than ever why I love helping people without expecting anything in return. It's gratifying to help others reach their goal and aspirations. Of course, I kept my story secret for all these years because of fear of people feeling sorry for me. I wanted them to respect me for who I am, not for from where I came.

What changed your mind?

About 10 years ago while lying in bed, I was reflecting about how during the first part of my career I worked

with abandoned, neglected and abused children, adolescents and families. Then for 17 years, I worked with young athletes who had received full athletic scholarships to attend a Division One university. Simultaneously, and to the present day, I volunteer with teen basketball for 13-19 year olds at Lake Adventure Community Association's recreational campground in Milford, Penn., a vacation getaway for 1,700 working-class families. I realized that all these very different populations had one common denominator regardless of their ethnic, culture or socioeconomic level: All have or had obstacles to overcome. And bingo, I said to myself, my personal upbringing in five Catholic orphanages could give many people hope and inspiration. I realized I had a compelling story to tell.

How do you pray?

I actually started three years ago praying every night before going to sleep. I bless myself and say the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be to the Father and ask God to help certain people reach their goal.

What advice would you give to children who are homeless or who live in abusive situations?

Pray, dream, set goals for yourself. Always believe in yourself even when nobody else does. Read my "10 beliefs to success," which are listed in front of the book. Eventually, God will answer your prayers. Also, believe that there are a lot of good people in the world. Finally, I hope you can use my personal story to give you hope and inspiration. I know my book would have never happened without my guardian angel, co-author, six years ago, through her beautiful husband, Dr. Steve Estrine. I am deeply indebted to Judith. She's a heck of a writer.

What causes you sorrow? Joy?

Seeing people with so much potential and abilities not aspire or strive to reach their goals and aspirations. Conversely, I take great joy in seeing people that have so much potential work their butts off to reach their goals and aspirations.

How has the prominence that's followed the publication of your book impacted your life? Please explain.

It hasn't. The prominence that has followed the publication of *Raised by the Church* has not gone to my head. I would like my book to become part of social justice curricula in high schools. My story might help young people in need of encouragement.

Is there something in particular you want me to know?

I want you to know that I appreciate the opportunity to tell my story. Sister Celine told me you were the Mother Superior when Sister Johanna was alive. Now I know you are the person of whom Sister Johanna always spoke very highly, and I'm not joking!

Thank you, Ed!

(*Raised by the Church: Growing up in New York City's Catholic Orphanages* [1] is published by Fordham University Press, 2012.)

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*.]

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Raised-Church-Growing-Catholic-Orphanages/dp/0823240223

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