



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: Sisters Holly Prater and Freda Witherspoon both spent part of their childhood at Maitland's Monte Pio orphanage.

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Orphanage reunion helps heal scars of painful past

EMMA SWAIN

Holly Prater can't remember the last time she shed a tear.

In fact she doesn't think she ever has.

After spending most of her childhood behind the doors of the Monte Pio Orphanage in Maitland, Mrs Prater is a closed book when it comes to expressing her emotions.

The 67-year-old Kurri Kurri woman simply doesn't know how.

"There was no love where I grew up and there were no adults to cuddle you and to show they cared... you just had to deal with life the best way you knew how," Mrs Prater said.

On Sunday Mrs Prater and her sister Freda Witherspoon will attempt to heal their pain during a reunion of the girls of Monte Pio.

For some this will be easier than it is for others.

FINDING ANSWERS TO MUM'S CHILDHOOD

The Monte Pio Orphanage opened in 1901 to care for girls from broken families.

But only a small number of the children who lived there were true orphans - instead, many of the girls were sent to the institute as a result of widowed parents, separation, family breakdown and divorce as well as instances of alcohol abuse and negligence.

During the past couple of years Newcastle counsellor Sonia Hornery has been working on a history of life at Monte Pio after her own mother and aunt revealed they too were placed in care at the orphanage.

"A lot of the girls who were at the orphanage with us have real hang-ups about the place and others simply refuse to acknowledge that they even went there but Holly and I are trying to come to terms with it and to accept it, but it's not always easy," Mrs Witherspoon, 69, also of Kurri Kurri, said.

Mrs Witherspoon, Mrs Prater and their younger sisters Heather Chalmers and Shirley

McLean were sent to live at the orphanage in about 1942 when their mother suffered a nervous breakdown.

At the time the sisters were just eight, six, four and two years, respectively, and they stayed at the orphanage on and off for about a seven-year period.

The girls' brothers were sent to the Murray Dwyer Orphanage for boys in Mayfield.

"Mum wasn't well for most of our childhood and Dad really wasn't interested in us girls so we were sent from our home in Rutherford to the orphanage," Mrs Prater said.

"If you had friends at the orphanage then you were OK because you could have a bit of fun together but if you were a loner then it was not a good life.

"I mean, there were some good nuns and some bad ones but that's life I suppose and it probably wasn't easy for them... I suppose they were doing the best they could at the time."

Unlike her sister, Mrs Prater refused to acknowledge her past at the orphanage until she attended her first reunion several years ago.

"I didn't tell anyone I went to the orphanage, not even my children, because there was always such a stigma attached, but I'm starting to change," she said.

"I can't remember a lot of

life at Monte Pio because I've blocked a lot of it out and I still can't cry or give anyone a hug, which is hard but I just can't help it."

But for many the Monte Pio reunions are their saving grace.

"We always look forward to the reunions and you can't shut us up," Mrs Witherspoon said.

This year the women will also be celebrating their reunion with the men from the Murray Dwyer Orphanage.

Reunion organiser Nancy Champion, of Newcastle, said the reunions were an emotional time for the men and women of the orphanages but also an important part of the healing process.

"The reunions are a wonderful opportunity for us all to get together and talk about our lives at the orphanages," she said.

This year's reunion is on Sunday at the Eastern Tigers RSL, Cardiff, at 11am.