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The Children of the Angel Guardian Home
By Maria Elena Perez

The Angel Guardian Home in Dyker Heights, New York was known to its community as a safe haven for orphans during the 1900’s. Now that the former orphanage is being sold, the former children who lived there are finally telling their stories on what life was like in the care of the Sisters of Mercy.

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Looming over the homes of the Dyker Heights community, the architecture of the Angel Guardian Home in Brooklyn sticks out like a sore thumb.

The tall, green painted gates that surround the 140,000-square-foot home guard the 114-year-old building and, in the past, thousands of orphans and foster children who used to spend most of their time there.

For many, it was a temporary home for children until they found their permanent home.

“By 1948, there were 9,000 children adopted from the home,” said Sister Margaret Dempsey, R.S.M of MercyFirst at the Angel Guardian Home.

Formerly known as the Angel Guardian Home for Little Children, the former orphanage took in thousands of children since it first opened in 1899. The goal of the Sisters of Mercy was to care and provide a safe haven for children who could not be cared for by their biological parents.

Earlier this year, the announcement of the Sisters of Mercy selling the property came as a big surprise to the Dyker Heights community. Due to rising costs, the Sisters of Mercy and MercyFirst made the difficult decision to sell the home and move their social service offices to Industry City in Sunset Park.

Sister Dempsey, who has been involved with the Angel Guardian Home for 50 years, knows the move is bittersweet to many. While no one has placed an offer on the property, Dempsey and the rest of MercyFirst are hopeful something will come along soon.

“We’re cautiously optimistic, and hope to find a buyer soon,” said Dempsey.

Others in the community want to save the iconic home by having the buyer turn the property into something that “fits” with the Dyker Heights community. Rumors of landmarking the building to preserve the outside architecture have also surfaced discussion in the area.
Dyker Heights Civic Association president Fran Vella-Marrone, along with other concerned Dyker Heights residents, have formed the Guardians of the Angel Guardian Home group in an effort to preserve it’s history.

“We’ve been continuing to monitor the situation, but there’s nothing we can do until someone shows interest in buying the property,” said Vella-Marrone.

Whoever it may be sold to in the near future, Sister Dempsey knows MercyFirst will choose a buyer that will make the Sisters of Mercy and the rest of the community happy.

“I’m confident the Sisters of Mercy will do the right thing,” said Dempsey.

For Christina Kokonis-Viggers, the right thing is not about saving the home, but to get rid of it after being appointed to an abusive foster home by the Sisters of Mercy.

The Children:

The only word Christina Kokonis-Viggers would use to describe her first set of foster parents is “rotten.”

While she was only there from the time she was 6 months old to 3-years-old, Viggers can still remember the musty scent of her foster father, who forced Viggers to perform oral sex on him.

“To this day, if a man comes near me and he smells musty, it brings me back to that time,” said Viggers.

Viggers, who is now 31-years-old and lives in upstate New York, was placed in the foster system in 1985 with her older sister when she was six months old. Her biological mother, who suffers from severe schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder, pushed Viggers in her stroller into oncoming traffic in Queens, New York.

They were both sent to their first foster home under the Angel Guardian Home social services in 1985, and were both physically, emotionally and sexually abused. According to Viggers, her older sister told her the foster parents would leave her unattended with a dirty diaper for hours.

“My diaper was always filthy,” said Viggers.

In 1977, New York City Comptroller Harrison Goldin conducted an audit titled “The Children are Waiting: The Failure to Achieve Permanent Foster Homes in New York City.” The audit sampled different New York City’s private foster care agencies,
finding that several homes, including the Angel Guardian Home, was warehousing children, even after they were deemed legal for adoption.

In 1978, New York Magazine featured an article titled *Who Will Save The Children?*, outlined the wrongdoings of the orphanages. According to the article, Goldin states “none of the five agencies provided biological parents with the services they needed for a child’s return, nor did any promptly free abandoned children for adoption, recruit adoptive parents, or try to interest relatives in taking children permanently.”

Viggers claims that the Angel Guardian Home was very verbally abusive to her biological parents. While her mother suffered greatly from her own mental battles, her biological father, who used to visit them every weekend at the home during their time in the foster care system, was working on battling his drug addiction to gain back custody of the children.

“Despite the incident with my mother, my father was never abusive toward us. He just had his own personal struggle to work out,” said Viggers.

In 1989, Viggers and her sister were removed from the first home after her sister reported that both her and Viggers were being sexually abused by their foster father.

The former foster family was never reprimanded for the alleged abuse. Despite being taken out of the home once the allegations were made, Viggers still blames the social services at the Angel Guardian Home for not really checking to see if they were being cared for.

“You’re scaring a child for the rest of their lives,” said Viggers. “You ripped them out of their unsafe, biological home to put them in a home that was much worse.”

Viggers former foster mother was contacted for a comment but has not responded.

Viggers was not the only child that was placed into a foster family without any background checks. In 1960, a woman and her brother went through a similar experience where the Angel Guardian Home social services placed the siblings in a home in Bay Ridge.

“If I could burn this place to the ground, I would,” said the woman, who asked not to be named. "I’m glad this place is being sold.”

The former foster child claims that her and her brother were forced to sleep in the basement of their foster home with no beds. Their foster father used to physically and emotionally abuse them, calling her and her brother “retards” and “stupid,” according to the woman.

“I cried every night for the entire first year I lived with them,” she said.
"I still have the scar on my wrist from when she flung a fork into my wrist," she said.

It wasn’t until she was 12-years-old that her and her brother were able to live with their grandmother in Bushwick. She, like Viggers, also blames the social workers for not making routine checks when they should.

“No one ever came to check up on us,” she said.

Viggers does say the Angel Guardian Home’s second placement was a good one. After being removed from her first foster him, she was moved into the home of Helen Viggers, a 60-year-old woman who had cared for 23 children in her lifetime from the Angel Guardian Home.

Viggers was adopted by Helen in 1993, and took her last name. She and her older sister stayed under Helen’s care up until the time Viggers turned 15. By then, Helen was in her mid-70’s and felt that she couldn’t take care of Viggers or her sister anymore.

Viggers biological father was able to gain custody back of his daughters, and she went to go live with him. Today, Viggers still frequently visits Helen, who is now in her late 80’s and suffers from Alzheimer’s disease.

Both Viggers and her father are grateful for the care Helen gave both her sister and her. Viggers believes that without her, she could’ve ended up in an even worse home than the one she first started out in.

“Helen had a big part in raising me, and I don’t know where I would be today without her,” said Viggers.

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On November 5, 2016, the Angel Guardian Home opened their doors to visitors, including staff members, members of the community, and former orphans to say their final goodbyes to home.

Timothy Snee and his wife, Bernadette Snee, adopted many of their children from the home. During the gathering, they shared old photos and reminisced of the times they spent volunteering at the home and how they adopted their own children.

“One of our sons was our Christmas present,” said Snee. “It’s definitely a hard goodbye.”
With over 100 people in attendance, guests roamed throughout the home, and took tours through the chapel and the outside gardens. Some reminisced about the past while others took a look at where they first began in the world.

While many were ready to say their goodbyes, some were not. Many have expressed their hopes about saving the institution by landmarking the architecture on the Angel Guardian Home Brooklyn Facebook page.

“I wish an angel could be found to save this beautiful, old place and its grounds,” said Facebook user Kathleen Walker.

For Viggers, she continues to look forward and move on. As for the future of the Angel Guardian Home, she hopes that whoever buys the home will do something positive with it.

“Whatever happens to this place, I just hope some good comes out of it,” said Viggers.