‘It’s difficult’ says accused Helen House founder

by a staff reporter

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Sister Frances Dominica ASSP was told 18 months ago that abuse allegations against her were no longer under police investigation. But she remains cut off from the hospice she founded. She talks to a staff reporter

SISTER Frances Dominica ASSP fears that she will never clear her name.

The Crown Prosecution Service concluded in July 2014 that there was not enough evidence to proceed, after allegations of historic sexual abuse were made against her in 2013.

None the less, she was asked at the end of last year to resign as a trustee by the board of Helen House and Douglas House, two children’s hospices she founded more than 30 years ago.

Speaking in Oxford at the end of last month, Sister Frances, who is aged 72, described how hard it had been to let go of the hospices, which she describes as her “baby”. She also spoke of her determination to speak out on behalf of those unable to clear their names after being subject to abuse allegations.

Sister Frances was informed by the chief executive of Helen and Douglas House in July 2013 that he had been told by the county council that historic allegations had been made against her. She was asked to stay away while the matter was investigated, “which I totally accepted, because it was in the best interest of the charity. It was very hard.”
In November of that year, she was approached by the police and attended an interview voluntarily. The allegations were of historic sexual abuse suffered by two women between 1980 and 2000. They had nothing to do with Helen and Douglas House. She denies them totally.

In July 2014, she was told that the Crown Prosecution Service had decided that there was insufficient evidence to proceed. But the trustees asked her not to return, after an independent risk assessment was carried out (News, 10 July).

A statement said that the trustees were “saddened”, but emphasised the need “to comply with requirements of the Care Quality Commission and adhere to their safeguarding standards when considering the future management of the hospice”.

Sister Frances resigned at the end of last year.

“Helen and Douglas House are like my baby,” she says. “And it’s sometimes very hard to let go of your child, even though maybe it is the best thing for the child. And I think that is the spirit in which I accepted that it is best, at any rate for the time being, that I am not involved in Helen and Douglas House. It’s very difficult.”

Her mission now, she says, is to campaign on behalf of those facing allegations without a forum in which to clear their name.

“I think it’s an opportunity for me, actually, to raise my voice with a number of people in saying the whole subject of safeguarding, since Jimmy Savile, has just gone viral,” she says.

“Out of my own experience, I know that it is hard to accept that your name will never be cleared. I’m glad it didn’t have to go to trial — but there’s a penalty to pay for that, in that nothing is ever proven. And there is a culture which makes those people who have had allegations levelled against them feel that they are guilty until proved innocent, which is absolutely contrary to accepted practice in this country.”

After referring to the famous names that have appeared in the media facing allegations of historic abuse, she goes on: “What we don’t see, of course, is the countless people against whom allegations are made who aren’t known.”

On recent prison visits, she has seen “silver-haired gentlemen”, convicted of historic abuse. “The prisons are really struggling with the numbers, but also so many of these people are a lot older than the average prisoner, and there really isn’t appropriate accommodation for them,” she says.

Sister Francis believes that there should be anonymity for the accused until conviction. She also suggests that those making allegations should be called complainants rather than victims, “until anything is proven”.

She acknowledges that, “for the innocent bystander, it’s very difficult to know who is guilty and who is innocent.” She met Jimmy Savile once, at another children’s hospice. “I thought he was strange. He hid behind a persona.”

She emphasises that she would be “100 per cent behind any person who seemed genuinely to have been abused. I would, yes, encourage them to come forward. And I have known children who have been terribly abused. I have known them as adults, and when they try to say that they had been abused they often got very short shrift.

“That is just awful, because you live with it for the rest of your life. Any support to somebody making allegations is vitally important. The example I will never forget is a little girl who was being badly abused. She dared to tell her Sunday-school teacher, who slapped her face in response and told her to stop being stupid. What suffering!”

Her sisters in the order, All Saints’ Sisters of the Poor, have been a “source of tremendous strength and support”, she says. She has been “inundated” with messages of support; and during the past two-and-a-half years, she has found that the Psalms and other scriptures have “come alive like never before”.

“I haven’t had a single negative response to any of this, neither in the public arena nor in private communications. It’s been amazing. Each time anything is in the press, I get another sackful of messages of support, and people wanting to know what they can do.”

She is not so much concerned about her reputation “as about the truth”, she says.

She remains a patron of two children’s charities, React and the Sebastian’s Action Trust, both of which issued statements last year pledging full support for her, and stating that they had
found “absolutely no reason to exclude” her. She also remains patron of the International Children’s Palliative Care Network, and is a Deputy Lieutenant of Oxfordshire.

She is unable to say why the other charities arrived at a different conclusion from Helen and Douglas House, though her involvement with the latter was much more direct: she made almost daily visits, talking to staff or family members. She speaks of very strong relationships formed with families, some lasting for many years after their child’s death.

Although the staff were asked not to make contact before her resignation, they are now organising a party for her, she says. There are no prohibitions on her visiting the other properties in the grounds of the Society, including St John’s Home, a residential home for the elderly.

She has no anger towards her accusers, she says, and does not know why they made the allegations.

Her focus now, is on her work with other charities, some of them overseas. She is gratified, she says, that since the founding of Helen House in 1982, the hospice movement has spread to every continent.

But she will also invest energy in speaking out on behalf of others who lack a forum in which to clear their names.

“Without being hostile in any way, I’d really like to think that, together with other people who have gone through a similar experience, we could at least speak out of our own experience,” she says, “and speak for people who don’t have a voice.

“There is no closure. And it’s a very odd situation really — which I had not even thought about before it was my own experience.”