

## **Supportive Testimony for H.R.5444/S. 2907, The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States**

I am writing this letter in support of H.R.5444/S. 2907. The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S. must move forward so that our Nation's truth can be brought to light. There are many, including myself, who still suffer from the echoes of this cruelty. I stand in solidarity with my fellow members of the First Nations who also support this action.

I give my thanks to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for the opportunity to speak about this matter. I hope that you will hear the words of my ancestors, as well as my own.

My ancestors and I wish to be known as survivors, and not victims. That any child lived through the hellscape of the Boarding Schools is a testament to their astonishing determination and strength. Today, I am fiercely proud to name some of those survivors as my forebears.

I am Anne Burgeson, a descendant of those who were forced to attend what were known as Indian Boarding Schools. My tribal identity and that of my ancestors has been stolen from me. Although I seek my Nations, I cannot name them as of today because that information was stolen from my family. I can only guess as to what my Tribal affiliation may be.

I ache with the emptiness of the not-knowing. My family and I have been robbed of the touchstone of our heritage, spiritual traditions, ancient traditional knowledge, and even the most basic connection with the Nations we have descended from. We have been here for tens of thousands of years, and yet an arrogant few tore that from my grasp in the span of a child's incarceration.

My parents pieced together what they could find about Native American heritage in general, and Indigenous culture and traditions were deeply honored in my family. At the same time, I was forbidden to ask my grandmother about the matter. My parents never directly told me that I was a Native child.

From the earliest time I can remember, I have had a knowing within the marrow of my bones that I belonged to some unknown, unseen group of people. I also knew that if I looked very hard, one day I might discover who they were. I could see that they stood waiting for me. As a child, I didn't understand why I could not seek answers from my parents or my grandmother. I sensed a deep undercurrent of pain and shame - one that I couldn't navigate as a child.

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As an adult, I have come to learn much more about the incarceration of Native children in this country and the resulting generational trauma. I believe that trauma, combined with the fear of my family for my safety, resulted in their keeping the full truth of my heritage from me.

It should be remembered and noted that until 1978, Federal Laws still existed which permitted the taking of children from their homes without any due process in the Courts, and indeed without any reason at all. I have been told by friends in the local communities that Federal officials would knock on their doors during the 1960s and 1970s to ask if their family was Native American. My friends would reply they were not. All the while, they were terrified, as they knew the officials would find any reason to seize their children from their secure and happy home. That was then legal for no other reason than their First Nations heritage. Blood quantum appears not to have been a defining factor for the Federal officials; ANY amount of Native blood put a child in danger of being taken. These times are not deep in the past, but are within recent memory for many Americans.

I cannot tell you why my parents didn't share my heritage with me during my childhood. They proudly taught me about the First Nations. Perhaps my father, working for a Federal contractor, feared my sister or I might be identified and taken. Perhaps my mother didn't want to upset her mother, who had hidden her own Native identity all her life. Perhaps my grandmother feared for me, too.

At long last, DNA technology has permitted me to determine that I carry a significant amount of Native American heritage. Determining any link to a specific Nation is impossible, I am told. I do not wonder why. Throughout history, anthropological data was often gathered from Native American communities with the sole purpose of declaring them to be lesser beings than White Americans. This gave fodder to the mill of racist and exclusionary laws and practices.

I do know that my mother's and grandmother's line extends into Washington State. My grandmother was born into Washington Territory in 1900, where it was illegal for Native Americans to marry other races, as her parents may have done. In many States, Native Americans were denied all aspects of citizenship. Had anyone known about their Indigenous heritage, my ancestors would have lost the property they owned, their marriage would have been declared an abomination, and their children would have become bastards. They might well have been criminally prosecuted, or as often occurred, they might have been lynched or otherwise annihilated.

And so, my family concocted what is called a survival story. For generations we were all carefully taught that fiction in order to keep us safe.

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I have been robbed of the cultural and historic data that informs me as a Native woman. What is clear is that two of my ancestors, likely of the Cherokee and Pottawatomie Nations, left Kansas for Washington Territory. One of those ancestors had been born around the time of the Pottawatomie "Death March" from the Great Lakes region into Pottawatomie County, Kansas. There is no record of her birth, her parents names, nor her Tribal identity. Her first appearance in U.S. records is as an indentured servant in a Wisconsin household. It is known that Boarding Schools likely sold older children into indenture. Her husband was born around the same time in Pennsylvania. Again, there are no records of his family. He served in the Civil War for Wisconsin, fighting for the Union Army in Vicksburg and other battles. I believe he may have attended Carlisle Indian School.

What I implore you to hear me say is that there is terrible historical and multigenerational trauma that has descended through my bloodline with each generation. Depression, alcoholism, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, emotionally distant parenting, emotional trauma and trouble -- all have followed my family members for generations now. Growing up, I never knew what was wrong with us. Finally, recent documentaries from many of the First Nations have begun to shed light on this for me. With truth the healing can begin.

There are others more expert than I in this subject, but I can tell you that historical trauma and intergenerational trauma have burdened me for my entire life. It is only recently that I have been able to identify the characteristics.

Generations after my ancestors were taken and forced into the Boarding School System, I resonate with their pain and trauma. I search for their Nations, and mine. At each PowWow I attend, someone will see my Native heritage in my face, and will ask my Nation. When I tell them that I don't know because my ancestors were stolen and placed in Boarding Schools, the reaction is universal. There is a sudden flash of pain and shared trauma that crosses their faces, followed by compassion, a pat on my shoulder. "Oh, I'm so sorry," they murmur. We know what that means.

I implore you to enact this legislation and more so that this cycle of destruction and horror can be brought to light. With truth can come healing and long-overdue justice. My ancestors were living in peace, and those innocent children still cry out in fear and pain. I carry the voices of my ancestors to you today, and ask that you listen.

My ancestors deserve to have their personhood, culture, history and dignity restored to them. And so do I, along with all First Nations descendants.

To the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States, I thank you again for hearing us, and for letting me speak.