

My Dakota name is Cankudutawin, Red Road Woman. My English name is Ruth Robertson. I was born in Fort Yates, North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. I am an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate of the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation). I currently reside on the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota and serve my people as the Chief Judge of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Court.

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of my father, Reverend Wilbert D. Robertson, because he cannot do so for himself. He never received this opportunity, but he deserved to. My father, who was born in a makeshift hospital in Fort Totten, ND on the Spirit Lake Nation Reservation in 1934 and was also a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, died of COVID-19 on Thanksgiving Day, 2020.

My father was a veteran of the Korea and Vietnam Wars who retired from the Air Force and dedicated his life to the service of others after a lifetime of hardship. He was also a boarding school survivor.

I support the passage of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Policies Act, H.R.5444, and I know he would too.

At the age of 4, my father was taken from his mother's arms and enrolled in Fort Totten Indian Boarding School. He would remain there until he graduated, at 17 years old. His 7 brothers and sisters would also attend there. One of his brothers, who was rarely ever spoken of, never came home. To this day, I do not know what became of him, or where his remains are buried. My father and aunts and uncles couldn't even bring themselves to say his name.

My father said very little of the years he spent in boarding school, but he spent the majority of his youth malnourished and underweight. He once spoke of children freezing to death in their beds there during the frigid winter months. My father could not speak the Dakota language, but he could understand it. As a child, I would listen as my Uncle Emerson Robertson spoke Dakota to my dad, and watched as my dad responded in English. My dad had the Dakota language beaten out of him as a child. My Uncle Emerson was also beaten and punished on a daily basis for keeping the language, but he refused to give it up even if it killed him. As an elder, he became a Dakota language teacher on the Spirit Lake Reservation. That willful little Dakota boy helped save the language at great personal cost.

My father thirsted for knowledge and was an avid reader. Throughout my childhood we were poor, but he prioritized education. He had quite a collection of books. He could have gone far in another time and place, but the boarding school he attended was more focused on teaching the children how to assimilate and act wasicu (white) while pushing trades that would make them a productive part of a new servant class. Still, he read every book in the boarding school library before leaving that awful place.

The ways in which my father was negatively impacted by boarding school were often not on the surface. He had deep emotional scars and had extreme difficulty expressing love. He never learned how to parent, either. His parental models were the villains who worked at the boarding school, abusive priests and teachers. In my entire life, I never once heard my father say "I love you," or "I am proud of you." He passed away without being able to say that to me. But I thank Wakantanka, The Great Mystery, that I learned to say it to him before it was too late, and that I taught myself to my own children, as much as possible.

My father was a good person. I honestly believe he tried very hard to be a good dad, with what little he had to go on. He was a good provider. I was his youngest child, so I didn't bear the brunt of his

dysfunction. By the time I arrived on this earth, he was sober. Before me, he struggled with alcoholism, and was abusive to my older brother and sister. Especially my brother, who was the oldest child. The historical trauma my father carried got passed down to us differently. In my brother, like my dad, it also manifested as alcoholism. When the bottle took his life, he was a broken man.

Boarding school has affected survivors and their descendants in a million little ways, some of which we may not be entirely cognizant of. I am still uncovering teachings and behaviors I exhibit that were passed down from my father from his boarding school experience.

So now, I say, let the dead speak. I hope through this document, at least a little, I've given voice to those I've loved who were incredibly damaged by boarding schools, and if they managed to survive, lived their lives with wounded souls.

Let the truth come to light. Through truth, there can be healing. Let the little ones who are scattered in the ground across this country, finally come home to their relatives.

The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Policies Act must pass.

This is all I have to say.

Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States, Wopida (thank you), for the opportunity to speak.