

H.R. 5444 / S. 2907, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the US Act.

My name is Dr. Denise K. Lajimodiere. I am a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, Belcourt, North Dakota. I am what is referred to as a generational – I did not attend boarding school but suffer from the abuse my parents and grandparents survived at boarding schools. My parents and grandparents were part of the Stolen Generation and were sent to Carlisle, PA; Marty and Stephan, SD; Wahpeton, ND; and Chemawa, Oregon.

Please accept this testimony in support of H.R. 5444 / S. 2907, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the US Act.

In 1925 my father was taken, or stolen, from an old Cree couple raising him on the Turtle Mountain reservation in north central North Dakota. His mother had died in the 1918 flu epidemic and his young father was unable to cope with raising him, so he was given to this couple at the age of two years old. They hid him from the Indian Agent until he was nine years old. He was sent to Ft. Totten boarding school, which he promptly ran away from. Elders tell me he was most likely being sexually molested, especially since he refused to talk about his time there, compared to letting me interview him about Chemawa. He was then sent to Chemawa, OR from 1925-1929. He didn't speak a word of English. He tells of beatings immediately upon arrival for not speaking English; lye soap put in mouth if caught talking Cree. He tells of being beaten by the 'gauntlet,' where boys lined up to his him on his back as he was laid over a bed, with a leather strap with metal studs. He was brought to the school infirmary where he lay on his stomach until wounds healed. He carried those physical and emotional scars until the day he died at age seventy-seven. He said the gauntlet killed a boy from Browning, "Ruptured his kidneys."

They woke to reveille, practiced marching with wooden, then metal, guns everyday he was there. They marched everywhere, to church, school, breakfast, lunch, supper. His life was rigidly controlled, every minute of it. Bells and whistles dictated every move. He said the Army (WWII) was a piece of cake compared to boarding school.

He saw four boys that had run away be brought into the school cafeteria. Ropes were tied to their wrists, then thrown over a beam and the boys were lifted up until their feet couldn't touch the floor.

Torture!

He said that boys would die in their beds. Today we know this is failure to thrive syndrome. He said they would just quit eating and waste away from pure lonesomeness. He said students would commit suicide on the railroad tracks in front of the school.

He was good at math and was assigned as a 'Carpentry Apprentice,' detail, where he spent half days there and half days in classes. He and his fellow students build many of the buildings. For free. He left Chemawa with a 6th grade education, if even that since only attending classes half days.

This was still the era of Pratt's 'Kill the Indian in him and save the man.' Dad became an alcoholic and in a drunk super would often say, "I just want to be a man, not a f***ing Indian. Dad said he never considered himself a man because he was Indian.

My mom died at age 48 when I was 23 years old so I didn't have as much of a chance to visit with her. She was sent to Stephan in the mid '30s. She did say she was locked in a closet by nuns for not speaking English. If she peed her pants because they wouldn't let her out or forgot her, she was beat with a belt for that. For punishment she was made to kneel on a broomstick.

Stress torture!

I can't find the Catholic records of her years at Stephan.

She also was sent to Wahpeton. I got a copy of her records from the Kansas City Archives. She ran away soon after being sent there. I can't find any graduation records for her at the boarding schools or here in Belcourt.

My mom's brother was sent to Marty, SD., a Catholic boarding school, in the mid '30s. He said that the nuns cut out the middle of a tire and beat him and other students with it for discipline.

My mom's father was sent to Ft. Totten, ND. He stole a can of tomatoes, a sweet fruit to the hungry little boys in his dorm but got caught. He was made to lay over a barrel and beat with a hose. The pain so intense he passed out.

My dad's father was sent to Ft. Totten along with his sister. A photo of them in 1898 shows him wearing a military style uniform. He was nine years old.

I just found records for dad's mom. She was also sent to Ft. Totten.

One of the legacies of being an intergenerational is recognizing that my parents were parented by boarding schools. Which means never being told they were loved, never being hugged. Instead, beatings and beratings for being "stupid Indians, you'll never amount to anything."

Both my parents never spoke a word of their beautiful tribal languages for the rest of their lives.

My siblings and I were parented the way my parents were – beatings with the belt, verbal abuse, never hear 'I love you,' never hugged, and with no knowledge/information on what it was to be Indian. My father became a violent alcoholic. Through years/decades of therapy I'm doing well, went on to receive a Doctorate in Education and a successful career. My sister and brother did not do so well. She is emotionally unstable and alcoholic. My brother died an alcoholic.

For further boarding school survivor testimonies I refer you to my book, *Stringing Rosaries: The History, The Unforgivable and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors* (NDSU Press, 2019). The book documents survivors' stories of forced assimilation; forced Christianity; loss of language, self-esteem, identity, culture, ceremonies, traditions, loneliness due to loss of parents and extended family, feeling abandoned by parents.

Survivors experienced near starvation/malnourishment; rampant sexual abuse; rampant diseases; corporal punishments that maimed and killed students; forced child labor; they witnessed kids being beaten so severely it led to their deaths.

Survivors experienced unresolved grief, mental health issues, relationship issue, drug and alcohol abuse.

Fundamental human rights were violated in boarding schools. The schools represent Cultural Genocide.

The have left a lasting legacy of Intergenerational Trauma along side Historical Trauma. It is a legacy of Historical Unresolved Grief, of Disenfranchised Grief. A legacy now called Boarding School Syndrome which includes recurring intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, detachment disorder, deficient knowledge of traditional culture and cultural skills. Trouble sleeping, poor anger management, deficient parent skill, tendency to abuse alcohol or drugs.

Boarding schools represent a deliberate policy of ethnocide and cultural genocide and human rights abuses. Survivors call them “somewhere between dungeons and death camps.” They were overcrowded, understaffed, underfunded with limited resources. They were places where diseases ran rampant.

Thank you to Deborah Parker and her outstanding team at NABS for tirelessly working to bring this issue to national attention. I am a founding member of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS). I am so pleased to see NABS bring a decades old goal of bringing the history of the worst of the boarding school era to the attention of Congress. I wept with relief upon listening to Sec. Deb Haaland at the press conference, and again listening to the witnesses’ testimony.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for this opportunity to share my story.

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Ojibwe, Turtle Mountain, ND
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