

Response to the Request for Supportive Testimony for H.R. 5444

Submitted By:

My name is Suzanne L. Cross PhD, ACSW, LMSW, LLC (Bneshiinh kwe – Birdwoman), Citizen of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of MI. Resident of Okemos, MI.

My Mother – Violet C. Jackson Cross, attended the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial School, in Mt. Pleasant, MI from 1920-1927. Also, her two younger siblings, Rosetta Jackson and Joseph Jackson attended this boarding school.

My position of support for “H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act”.

I support the Act for several reasons which include each tribal nation in the U.S. has a right to know where their ancestors were sent to school, and/or transferred to another school or an asylum.

They have a right and need to know how they were treated in the school(s), and if they did not come home due to loss of life their families have a right to know where their children’s remains are located and the repatriation process. The lack of this knowledge is harmful as the families/tribes work to attempt to move forward with the continual feeling of emptiness and the void in their histories created by destructive acts.

The American people need to learn of the Indian Boarding School Era and its impact on the tribal nations in the U.S. Additionally, a proper

curriculum which includes teaching in schools on the topic be required.

Also, an active movement to end microaggressions toward American Indian students at all grade levels is of utmost importance.

My son, at seven years of age would take his traditional dance regalia to school to share the meaning of each item and the importance and value of dancing/drumming and gathering as a people. I was concerned for his safety. I said, "you know you may get teased." He responded with, "that is the way children are." Closed his suitcase and off to school he went. My question is, "why does a seven-year-old have to teach non-Native children about the culture of this country's first people? This should have been the teacher's role.

Personal Account:

I have been presenting on the topic of U.S. Indian Boarding Schools for over fourteen years at Educational Conferences, Tribal Conferences, Social Work Trainings, Tribal Communities, Universities and Colleges. I am hopeful that by sharing a portion of my research findings and my Mother's experience will exemplify the resultant intergenerational trauma, and my own personal path to healing from being raised by a Mother who attended an Indian Boarding School.

I didn't know you went to boarding school??

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Presented in Narrative Format

At lunch, my friend and I were sitting across from each other in a restaurant, when she noticed my **first action** was to **quickly** take the silverware, which was rolled up in a cloth napkin and put it in the **exact, proper setting**. Then she noticed I cut my food into tiny, little pieces and ate with **exactitude**. She asked, how did you **learn** to do that?

I said, Boarding School. Her response was, “I didn’t know you went to boarding?” I promptly responded, “I didn’t, **but my mother did.**” Actually, I was surprised at **my own response**. But on occasion, the **truth avails** itself when it is **least expected**.

I **intend no diversion** from the experiences of others who actually attended the boarding schools. However, it is **important** to acknowledge **parental attendance** had an **impact** on the lives of their children, and continues to **resonate** into subsequent generations.

At seven, **Violet**, my mother, **Rose**, her six-year-old sister, and **Joseph** her four-year-old brother, were removed from the family home **due to lack of food, their father working** away from the home as a **lumber jack**, and their **mother deceased at childbirth**. The “**government people**”, as they were called at the time, did not understand the concept of the **extended family system**. As a result, they were **oblivious** to the fact these children **were being cared** for by **relatives** and the **community** as a whole.

When my mother, auntie and uncle, as children arrived at the **Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School**, they were immediately **separated** in to age and gender groups, their **hair cut crudely short**, and stripped of their traditional clothing, including **scared protective items**, which were **discarded**.

They were then deloused with a harsh chemical power, which **burned their eyes, mouth, throat, and skin**.

Next, they were suited with **dress code attire** and assigned to dormitories based on **gender and age**.

My mother **only** saw her siblings while marching in rank to and from buildings. She and her sister did not acknowledge one another for **fear** of being severely disciplined. However, Joseph who was only four, upon seeing his sister who was marching across the compound to the lunch hall as he marched in the opposite direction, broke rank, ran to her and embraced her tightly as he became **tearful** and **inconsolable**.

She held him for a moment, and then the Matrons separated the two of them. The **punishment** for breaking rank was **administered swift and harsh**. They both experienced **the public humiliation** of being **beaten with a belt** in front of the other children who **stood in military straight lined silence**.

As she recalled, from that day forward, while at the school, when she saw Joseph coming toward her, she would turn her head away from him, **as to give him no acknowledgement** at all, so neither would be punished again for the **same act**. She was so remorseful as she accounted this incident; it **troubled her all of her life**. She resented having to **reject** her little brother in order to save them both from the **wrath of the strict disciplinarians**.

I make the **assumption** of my mother as being a “**high spirited child**”, which **intensified** her negative boarding school experience. Her punishments included the acts of name calling, slapping, punching, being forced to eat or go without food, and extreme cleaning duties. The punishments she received **most frequently** required her to kneel on uncooked rice on a cement floor for hours, being beaten with a belt, locked in a dark broom closet or outside in a wooden box.

She also witnessed the **sexual abuse** of others, including young girls in the 100-bed dormitory at night by the **Matron** in **exchange** for food. Food was placed on a young girl's bed, to **convey** it was her turn to spend the night with Matron.

My mother said **“I could almost feel when it was going to be my turn to spend the night with her”**. Her method of prevention was to **break the rules** during the day to **provoke** a beating with the belt, for she **knew**, “the Matron **never** spend the night with a girl who had **just** been beaten.” **This provocation** became **her** method of self-protection.

A second significant incident that repeatedly came to mind for my mother was the last time she was locked in the broom closet. The broom and mop handles were laid crisscrossed on the floor and she was required to kneel on them. If at any time the door opened, and she was not kneeling, **more time** would be added to her **punishment**. She indicated she would **distract** herself from the **pain**, by thinking of how **her life** would be **as an adult**; and how she was **going to treat her children**. **She knew it would be the opposite of this!**

After two years of being disciplined in this manner, she felt something inside of her would **crumble** or **die** if she did not fight back. So, when the door opened instead of kneeling, she stood facing the opened door **proudly**, as if she were dressed in her traditional clothing and had her **sacred medicine bag**.

She was told to **“get down, kneel”**, she defied the order by standing, the order was repeated, but she continued to **stand firm**. The other children began to notice that she was not giving in to the order, which caused **more distress** for the Matron. After she **defied numerous** attempts to make her kneel, Violet began to repeat under her breath, “nduh-muhshkuhwihzee (nda-mashkawizii), nuduh-muhshkuhwihzee”, until she found herself yelling proudly, nduh-muhshkuhwihzee”!
Which translates to **“I am strong.”**

Her behavior drew **too much** attention from the other **children**; as a result, three adults removed her to the out-of-doors. She was then **beaten** with a **belt** and **locked** in a **wooden box**. She recalled it being **cold**, and she was left there for **three days** with **no food or water**.

From the eyes of an **observer**, she was punished even more **severely**, however, she felt she had **won** by standing up for herself and by speaking aloud **one** word of her language. She was never put in the closet again. **Unfortunately**, for the following **seven** years, the **belt** and **the wooded box** became the punishment of **choice** whenever she broke the rules.

I learn much from my mother's boarding school experience, which includes; to eat quietly and precisely for the **consequence** of making **any** noise with your silver or plate ware, was to **silently** take **mandatory** leave from the table.

To clean the home **in such detail** as to require tooth brushes, q-tips, and toothpicks to remove the **smallest particle of dirt**, which was **barely seen** by the **naked eye**.

I learn a **different American Indian history** than the children in the mainstream schools I attended. I learned the meaning of **injustice**, **brutality**, **mistrust**, and the **cost** of many, many **losses**.

I also learned **survival skills**, which include;

- To honor and keep your children close to you,
- The importance of observation and the analysis of situations,
- Concern for the safety of others

- Importance of organization and detailed planning,
- Perseverance and self-reliance,
- Wounds can heal with the right environment
- Mothers and daughters can be close, despite the Boarding School experience
- and yes, most of all, protecting my spirit.

Miigwetch (Thank you)

My Position:

Although, I did not attend a U.S. Indian Boarding School, I understand the impact on children raised by attendees, their families, and tribal nations. As an Associate Professor, a Private Consultant, and Indian Boarding School Researcher, I have had the opportunity to interview attendees and discuss with them the traumatic impact the U.S. Indian Boarding Schools have had on their lives, and the lives of their children, and grandchildren resulting in intergenerational trauma which still impact their lives today. Tribal nations need the Boarding School Era address as part of the healing process. Questions need to be answered about the missing children, the Indian Boarding School Era and its impact needs to be taught, children's remains need to be located and returned to their tribal nation, support for healing and education programs need to be created in concert with tribal governments/members.

I send my appreciation for the opportunity to provide **testimony in support for the H.R. 5444/ S. 2907** to the **Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S.**”, the **Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States**, and **The National Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS)**. The history of the Indian Boarding Schools and the impact on subsequent generations needs to be acknowledge and addressed to assist in the healing of tribal nations.