

May 19, 2022

Greetings:

My name is Carmelita Adkins. I am seventy-three years old. I am an enrolled member of the Colville Confederated Tribes of the State of Washington.

I attended St. Mary's Mission, a Catholic boarding school, from 1957 through 1963, with intermittent attendance at public schools. St. Mary's Mission was founded by Father DeSmet, and was run by Jesuit priests and Dominican nuns. The following is a narrative of horrors that I experienced, as well as other indigenous children who attended that school.

I am writing this narrative in support of "H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Act." I believe my story is very similar to others who attended Indian boarding schools.

Beginning:

I was only seven years old when my parents enrolled me at St. Mary's Mission. I had never been away from my family for long. My family of origin was fraught with alcoholism, and violence, and my parents decided I could get a better education at the boarding school. Several of my relatives also attended that school. From the beginning, I was terrified, afraid of the men wearing long black robes, and the nuns in their black or white robes, with wooden rosaries that clicked when they walked. Many of the nuns were from Europe, mostly German, and they had heavy accents. I had great difficulty in understanding them, but it didn't take me long to learn that I had to follow their commands or face harsh discipline. At the time that I attended, there were older students, and like most adolescents, they wanted to have boyfriends/girlfriends, but the strict rules on physical contact, and prohibition of these kinds of relationships stopped them from enjoying what other adolescents enjoyed. I remember witnessing verbal abuse of teen students, caught flirting with each other. I also recall hearing older girls talking about attempts by certain staff to do something sexual to them. Since I was only seven, I didn't understand what they meant, but I knew it was not good.

Environment: We were housed in brick dormitories. Boys had their dormitory, and girls had their own. Everyone slept in bunk beds. All activities were conducted in military style. We got up at certain times, made our beds, got dressed, and marched in two lines to the dining room.

If we failed to follow orders by the nuns, priests, or "brothers," we would face verbal and/or physical discipline, which often consisted of being slapped.

Our health care needs were minimally addressed. When there were outbreaks of head lice, the nuns prepared tubs of "sheep dip" (likely containing DDT), lined us up and dunked our heads in the "sheep dip." We then had to sleep with the stinking mixture in our hair, overnight. We also were forced to take cod liver oil as a vitamin. I remember getting sick and throwing up, because it tasted so bad. But I was also scared, because we could be forced to take more, if we didn't take it the first time.

3rd grade: 8 years old

When I was in third grade, there was an incident as described above, involving myself and my friend, Joyce. Meals were to be eaten in total silence. There was a "brother" called Mr. Bischoff, a very cruel, ill-tempered man, who stood at the end of the room, while we ate. If anyone tried to whisper or laugh, and he saw them, he would march down the aisle and slap the child (or children) with his big hand. One day, for some reason, during mealtime, I whispered something to Joyce. Mr. Bischoff saw me, and the next thing I knew, I heard him stomping down the aisle, and felt a hard slap to my face, and then a hard slap to my friend, Joyce. I remember feeling so stunned, that at first, I didn't react. I looked at my friend, Joyce, and saw her silently begin to cry. I can't remember if I cried, but I think I was too scared of Mr. Bischoff hitting me, that I don't think I did. I also remember how my face burned after he hit me. This same man would later become a priest.

Also, in third grade, I had a teacher named Sister Monica. She was a stocky, consistently cruel individual. I saw her slap my friend, Lois, over and over, while the rest of us watched silently, all because Lois couldn't pronounce "confirmation," correctly. Sister Monica had us all so scared most of the time, that we spent most of our time trying to avoid getting hit by her. Additionally, the nuns all would remind us that we had to follow the true faith of the Catholic Church, or we would burn in hell. All I remember is feeling scared and sad most of the time. I did not understand how much they dehumanized us.

Sexual Abuse by priests/nuns/staff at St. Mary's Mission:

A lot of my efforts at St. Mary's Mission were spent trying to avoid being hit. I learned to withdraw into the background, keep my grades up, and respond quickly to the commands by the priests and nuns. Some of my cousins were not so fortunate. My cousin and age mate, was sexually abused probably around age six or seven, by a priest, in his office. The building still stands to this day, and I hate to see it. She described being taken to his office and forced to do things that she couldn't even describe. She was one of the "bed wetters" in our dorm.

There were other girls who also wet the bed, likely due to being sexually abused. Every morning, we watched as they got up, and stripped their beds, and then were forced to rinse their sheets in metal tubs in the communal bathroom. They were shamed by the nuns.

Additionally, many years ago, I saw a list of identified priest/predators, and was startled to see the name of a priest that my best friend and I felt close to. He was one person, who seemed kind but later I heard there were stories about him and boys. One of my male friends, now deceased, told me that there was a brother, who bought beer and shared it with the boys, so he could sexually abuse them. He also described being slapped by a priest for no reason, other than the priest saying "I just felt like it."

By now, if you're wondering, why didn't we tell our parents? I tried to tell my parents, both of whom were not well-educated. But they refused to believe me, because, when they went to take me out for a visit, the priests and nuns would all act so nice. I realized there was no protection, even from family.

Neglect and abuse:

I have memories of being hungry all the time, while attending St. Mary's Mission. We never had any snacks, except on weekends, and that consisted of stale sandwiches (so the nuns didn't have to cook), and rotten apples donated by some benefactor. We would often sneak food from the dining room, if possible. For example, I put potato skins from baked potatoes, in my pocket, so I could eat them while I was in bed at night. When I related this story to a friend, she said it sounded like the Nazi concentration camps. To this day, I have issues with food, because of deprivation. The nuns and priests always got the good food, and if a student had the good fortune of cleaning their dining room, they could steal leftover toast or food. I was one of those students.

Abuse: Discipline always was severe, whether it was verbal, physical, or third party witness. Sometimes students had enough and they would try to run away. The school was less than ten miles from the town of Omak. Every time, the students got caught and when they were brought back, they were publicly whipped and we were forced to march and stand to witness these beatings. We could not react, or we potentially faced the same discipline. Father McDonald had a razor strap hanging in his office. He called it "Black Mike." And "Black Mike" was used to beat children.

Other neglect: Violence and suicide, accidents

During my time at St. Mary's Mission, two students died: one by hanging himself in the boys' dorm, and the other by falling off a cliff while on a walk nearby. Additionally, there was

another boy who was shot while playing with guns with another student. There were never any resources offered to help students deal with the trauma.

8th Grade:

I spent the last year of grade school at St. Mary's Mission because I wanted to be with my friends. Of the group that graduated that year, many have died, either by accidents or suicide. My best friend died from alcoholism, after losing several family members to tragic deaths. Other friends also died from alcoholism, much of it due to losses of children. Our class could be a study of multi-generational trauma, historical trauma.

The most "positive" aspect of attending boarding school was the bond that I had with my fellow students. We created our own family groups as a way to take care of each other, physically and emotionally. Most of us came from families that were affected by alcoholism and domestic violence, probable sexual abuse. Some of my classmates did not go home for visits because their parents just left them there for the whole year. All of us came from poor families, who struggled to survive.

Impact:

Today, I see myself as an example of boarding school survivor syndrome. How would you feel, if you were taken from your family, and your parental models were repressed, angry, violent, dysfunctional, predatory individuals? I am a recovering alcoholic, and have had feelings of loss of self-worth, depression, suicidal ideation over the years. I have two children, and both of them have suffered due to my lack of parenting knowledge. I am one of the fortunate ones, who sought education as a way to get out of the cycle of poverty, and found sobriety through cultural connections. I have grieved the loss of many of my friends and relatives, who were not so fortunate.

Historically, my adopted mother also attended boarding school in DeSmet, Idaho. She was of the older generation, who still spoke their language. She told me how they got beaten if they spoke their language. She remembered one student, Agnes, who had a thick Native accent. Agnes grew up only speaking her language, and she was beaten because she could not speak English. Today, I only understand a few words in my language. I remember my grandfather telling me that there was no use in learning our language, because we had to live like white people now.

There have been stories about indigenous people being sterilized without their knowledge. I believe that both of my adoptive parents were sterilized. Both attended boarding school; my adoptive father attended Chemawa Indian School. My mother had scars on her abdomen, that

were from an appendectomy, but they were across her abdomen, and in the area of her ovaries. My adoptive father told me he thought he was sterilized at the boarding school, because, after he had surgery, he never fathered any children.

The historical mistreatment of indigenous people through boarding schools has had a multi-generational impact on them. We lost not only our language and culture, but also our ability to parent in indigenous ways. We have learned to engage in lateral violence, creating high rates of suicide, substance abuse, accidental deaths, cultural self-hate. It was only through the strengths of our ancestors, who kept their ways in their hearts and minds, that we have been able to survive.

Support statement:

In conclusion, I again extend my support of "H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Act." Canada has extended some reparations to residential school survivors, and has extended apologies to First Nations peoples for the horrific policies that forced First Nations children into residential schools. After over five hundred years, it seems time for the United States to recognize and act to promote the healing of indigenous people. I am not sure of the full extent of the provisions of HR 5444, but I believe that any steps are better than none. I hope the healing may begin for all of us as a nation.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States, for the opportunity to provide this statement.

Respectfully:

Carmelita Adkins