

May 21, 2022

Dear Committee:

Kwe. My name is Jacqueline Siebert and I'm a proud member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe. I am the descendant to a survivor of the Native American Boarding School named "Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children."

I am a proud supporter for H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. It's a wonderful policy and would bring much healing to our community.

My grandmother Mary Back (Karonhiaiens) attended the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children better known as "Thomas Indian School" from ten years of age to 15 years of age. She attended 1924 to 1929. Her younger brother (my uncle) also attended a Native American Boarding School but his information and physical remains is still unknown.

My grandmother's past was never talked about. There was an understanding with my family that you don't ask grandma anything about her past. It wasn't until 2013 that she was finally ready to tell her story even though she passed in 1979 from diabetes. She did this through my uncle by leaving little breadcrumbs for him to follow.

In 2013, I received a surprise call from an uncle I never met before. This was my father's oldest brother named Uncle Don. We instantly adored each other and became fast friends. His presence and welcoming energy was an unexpected gift. He was the father I never had.

During our two and a half hour phone conversation, he explained to me that he began researching his genealogy and discovered that grandma was 100% Native American from the St. Regis Mohawk tribe. There was silence for about five seconds and then I said, "that doesn't surprise me. I've always known that I'm Native American." He asked, "how did you know?" I said, "not only by my features but most importantly, it's in my heart."

My uncle told me that he wanted to visit the Thomas Indian School in person and maybe we could get more information about grandma. It seems on paper she disappeared from 15 years of age to 20 years of age. So we made plans and traveled to the Seneca Reservation for the big Iroquois Pow Wow.

On our six hour road trip from Syracuse New York to the Seneca reservation, we talked about his childhood and everything he could remember about grandma. At ten years old, my grandmother's father died from falling off a scaffolding while building a Catholic Church in Quebec. Her mother had severe alcohol issues and it didn't take the state too

long to find this out. Without any time to grieve, New York State took my grandmother and her younger brother. The state placed both of them in Native American Boarding Schools.

The difference between the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children and other Native American Boarding Schools is that this was a state school. Not federal. This meant that the federal schools had priority. The native children that attended the “Thomas Indian School” never had priority and barely had anyone from the state check on them. This allowed horrific behavior from the school’s staff. The staff consisted of mostly Catholic nuns and Catholic priests.

Physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse ran rampant at this boarding school. Beatings took place daily to my grandma with rubber hoses, rulers, and belts with belt buckles. Emotional abuse also happened daily by the Catholic nuns who told my grandma she was nothing but a dirty Indian and then placed her in a dark closet for hours with mice to torment her and bite her.

All children had their haircut off and was given uniforms. For Native Americans, hair represents their strength. The uniforms and school looked like a prison and it was run like a prison. Not a school for children.

If they tried to speak their language at all (because it took them time to learn English), the children would be punished. My grandma was made to stick out her tongue and then the nuns would take a needle and pierce it through her tongue. If she cried, she’d be placed in the dark closet with mice or taken downstairs in the basement where a catholic priest would beat and rape her.

During the summers, the children were never allowed to return home. The female native children were forced to work as maids in the high-end hotels in upstate New York. All the money they earned during the entire summer was taken by the Catholic nuns and the priests. Not a penny was given to them. The male Native children were forced to do physical labor by digging ditches. Many of the male children didn’t return from their summer jobs so my family assumes my uncle’s physical remains is still lost in the ditches somewhere.

At 15 years of age, we believe my grandmother escaped and ran away. There’s no paper trail whatsoever of her. She only told my uncle, “when she left school, she was a waitress at a hotel in upstate New York.” This is where she met my uncle’s father Charles Siebert.

They got married and moved from upstate New York to Long Island New York. My grandma soon realized that her husband was a severe alcoholic, verbally abusive, and physically abusive. He was everything she learned at the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children.

Being pregnant and scared, my grandma stayed in the marriage. In the 1950’s, it wasn’t acceptable to be a single mother or a minority. Never mind being Native American. That

was a death sentence. No one would know she was Native American. Including her kids for their safety. She was light skinned enough she could pass for being white so she changed her entire existence and went from Mary Karonhiaiens to Mary Back to Marie Beck. Everyone thought she was German except her husband's German family. They knew she was Native American and she was told daily that she was "lazy, dirty, and had to stay on the porch." She was not allowed in their house.

My grandma did the best she could and held her family together. Family was the most important thing to her even if it was dysfunctional. She was a great cook and sugar was her drug.

After her husband passed of heart issues, she became a nurse. Although she was good at her job, she never recovered from the horrific experiences at the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Indian Children. A good example of this is when my uncle said, "he took grandma with him to church and she had a very strange reaction." I asked him, "what happened?" He said, "she fell to her knees and began to cry and scream uncontrollably." I said, "grandma never cried and was mostly stoic." He said, "I know. That's why it was so shocking." He said, "she begged and pleaded not to be taken in there!!!! She cried uncontrollably and couldn't breathe." Like she had a psychotic break. My uncle reached for her arm to help her stand and took her to the car to calm down. Once she was calm he told her, "my wife and I have to go to church." She said, "I'm not going in there" and waited in the car for them. My uncle never discussed that breakdown again with her.

Each generation of my family has suffered from my grandma's boarding school experience that was filled with neglect and abuse. This kind of behavior that my grandma learned was "normal" from the infamous boarding school and this is all she knew. To this day, the nightmare that never ended from the "Thomas Indian School" repeats itself. Alcoholism, physical abuse, verbal abuse, and sexual abuse is still very present in every generation.

I again support the H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. We are victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. This is needed in our community.

I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak and thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous People's of the United States.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my families experience and to give a voice to my grandmother.

Nia;wen,
Jacqueline Siebert