

May 25, 2022

House Natural Resources Committee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Washington, DC

My name is Denise Gauthier. I am a descendant on the ancillary roll of the Menominee Nation. My father, Victor Anthony Gauthier, was an enrolled member of the Menominee Nation, born July 21, 1918, passing away November 14, 2010. He attended St. Joseph's Indian Industrial School in Keshena, Wisconsin, from approximately 1924 to 1930, then was sent to attend Flandreau Indian High School in Flandreau, South Dakota, from approximately 1931 to 1935.

I support H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act because those that did not survive Indian boarding schools, and survivors and their family members, deserve to have the truth told and know what happened to their loved ones. The practice of removing Native children from their families must be discontinued. Repatriation of those children who did not survive must occur so they may be returned to their rightful homeland and families.

My father was sent to St. Joseph's Indian Industrial School (St. Joseph's) in Keshena, Wisconsin, when he was old enough to attend school. Both his parents had passed away and he was being cared for by the Chickeneey family until he reached school age. Some of my father's siblings were already at the boarding school. Once he was admitted, he was not allowed to converse with his sisters, only having contact with his one older brother, as his other siblings were older and were no longer attending St. Joseph's. He never spoke of his time at St. Joseph's except to say he was not allowed to speak the Menominee language. He was beaten if caught. My father only spoke Menominee when he started living at St. Joseph's. He never stated how long it took him to learn English, but I would assume he accomplished it rather quickly.

After St. Joseph's he was sent to Flandreau Indian High School. Again, I heard the story of being punished if heard speaking their native language, except the story he shared with me is that of the hanging of a Native student. He told me the priests just stood and watched it happen, not intervening to stop it.

My father spoke more about his time serving in World War II than attending Indian boarding schools. It was as if he feared discussing what happened. He wouldn't allow me to attend the Indian school in Riverside, California (Sherman Indian High School), and would shout at me, almost in fear, any time I would mention attending. He never offered an explanation why he wouldn't allow me to attend Sherman.

I believe he held very dark, horrific, memories of the boarding schools his whole life and wished he had the ability to divulge what he experienced. He was deprived of his culture, as I was, too. I would ask him to teach me to speak Menominee and he would say he didn't know how. I could see fear in his eyes when he told me this. However, conversations on the phone with his sisters and brother proved he could still speak Menominee. He just didn't want anyone to know because of the fear instilled in him at the boarding schools.

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I sensed so much fear and pain in him surrounding his childhood memories. Not experiencing family life during his childhood made it difficult for him to raise me and my brothers once my mother divorced him. He raised us alone, struggling to do his best.

To heal, I want to know what he went through at St. Joseph's and Flandreau. For him, I believe the truth being revealed will serve justice for him. It would have helped him heal had it happened while he was alive. Since he didn't have that opportunity, his children could benefit tremendously from the truth being told. H.R. 5444 is of utmost importance for survivors, family of survivors, and family of those who did not survive. They need the truth told so healing may start.

I want to thank the House Natural Resources Committee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for allowing me to submit my story. I hope my story will speak for those who may not feel comfortable in submitting their story.

Respectfully and Wāēwāēnen,

Denise Gauthier
Proud member of the Menominee Nation

