

May 12, 2022

**TESTIMONY OF MATTHEW WAR BONNET
BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE
UNITED STATES
HEARING ON THE "TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION ON INDIAN
BOARDING SCHOOL POLICY ACT" (H.R. 5444)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of the Indian boarding school bill. My name is Matthew War Bonnet. I am of the Sicangu Lakota people who now call the Rosebud Sioux Reservation home. I am the son of Matthew War Bonnet and Julia Swalley, the grandson of Joseph War Bonnet and Jenny Yellowhair, and the great grandson of Folding Throat and Pretty Bird. I am 76 years old.

This topic I am speaking about today, the boarding schools and my experience with them, is a difficult topic to talk about. It is hard to speak about it without making myself feel bad by bringing up these memories. But I agreed to speak only because my sisters gave me permission to speak. I am one of ten siblings, and we all attended the same boarding school. My mother and father also attended boarding schools. I was only 6 years old when I was taken to the Saint Francis Boarding School in South Dakota in 1952. I attended this boarding school 24/7 for ten months out of the year for eight years total, the majority of my childhood. I left St. Francis Boarding School after the eighth grade in 1960.

My boarding school experience was very painful and traumatic. I remember when I first got to the school, the priests took us to this big room which had six or eight bathtubs in it. The priest put all of us little guys in one tub, and he scrubbed us hard with big brushes. The brushes made our skin on our backsides raw all over. We then had our long hair cut.

The school then put all the little guys in the same dormitory. We were together, first through fourth grade. At nighttime you could hear all the little children crying, lonely for their families. I remember seeing my sisters at the school, from across the room. I wanted to talk to them, but boys were not allowed to have any contact with girls at the school, even our own relatives.

During my stay at the school, corporal punishment was common. The priests would often get impatient and discipline us by hitting us with a leather strap or a willow stick. There was also a punishment tool called "the Jesus rope," which was a rope with several strands coming off of it. We were hit with that and their razer straps as well. One priest even used a cattle prod to hit us.

Another way the priests disciplined us was to lock us out of the school during the cold weather. This would happen and kids would be shivering and crying.

One time, a priest threw my older brother, Joe War Bonnet, down a flight of stairs and broke his arm. I think that priest was abusing him in other ways.

The priests also punished us by isolating us and limiting our access to food. One time I got in trouble and my punishment was for 10 days I was separated from the other kids and given only bread and water to eat. I don't even remember what I did to deserve that type of harsh punishment.

Each June, everyone's parents would come and pick us up to go home for the summer. My parents were Lakota speakers at home. Because we were at the school and were forced to speak English and only taught English and Latin, it was difficult to speak with my parents in our Lakota language. That got away from us. We have been trying to catch up ever since.

Once I got out of the boarding school, I went to high school in Pine Ridge. I was always very proud of our service people, our Lakota people who served in the military. One day I was talking to some fellow high school students and told them about my Dad's service in the army, and how he got captured by the Japanese. I stated that the Japanese tortured my Dad and cut off his toes. One guy I said that to said, "Your Dad never was in the army." We got in a fight right there.

I went home that night and spoke to my Dad. I directly asked him, Dad, what happened to your toes? My Dad told me. Dad said that his toes froze off when he ran away from the boarding school in his youth. Dad died later on from gangrene in his toes.

All of us kids that attended the boarding school, we never spoke about our experiences. We said nothing.

I still think about all the kids I went to school with. All the things they went through. All the hurt and the rage, and the feeling of nothingness that these schools caused them. Many didn't even recognize what had happened to them until many years later. These boarding schools caused long term trauma. Many tried to cope with this trauma through alcohol, and these same people who were abused then became abusers themselves, of their families and their communities.

Regarding my healing journey, I credit my Dad for being there for me and helping me. Because of him, I turned out the way I did. When I was in the boarding school, my Dad taught me a song to give me strength, spiritual strength. This song in a very simple way says, "Friend, the dawn has arrived, I live again." Every day I would sing that song to myself and then go play with my friends.

The boarding schools were sanctioned by the United States Government. The Government gave the churches our lands to christianize us, modernize us, and civilize us. But the churches treated us wrong. The kids that went to these schools, they were good spirits and then the church did things to them and made them the way they were.

The Government and the churches need to be held accountable for what happened at these schools.

I'm here today to acknowledge what happened to me and countless other Indian children and resolve the problems that the boarding schools caused. The Government needs to help those children and grandchildren of the boarding school survivors, so that these children and grandchildren will know that their grandparents were not just mean

all the time. I want them to know that their grandparents loved them, but we were struggling from the abuse we went through at the boarding schools.

I also want the churches to meet with Native people in their areas, sit across the table from them, and make a plan for the children and grandchildren. Our children need help. The churches need to take responsibility for the pain they caused so many Indian children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.