

James LaBelle, Sr. Responses to Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Hybrid Legislative Hearing
05/12/2022 @ 1 p.m.ET

Legislative Hearing on H.R.5444

Questions from Representative Grijalva:

1. For how long have you shared your story?

Answer: I first began sharing my boarding school stories in 1969 with my wife Susan (Tabios) LaBelle. Susan also attended Wrangell Institute and Mt. Edgecumbe. As our family grew, I began sharing some stories with my sons Kermit, James, Jr. and daughter Maleah beginning in their adolescents.

In the mid to late 1990s I sat on the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Sobriety Committee (later renamed Wellness Committee). It was towards the late '90s that AFN was successful in obtaining some \$30 Million dollars from Congress in order that indigenous people in 229 Alaska villages' could address alcohol problems in their communities. A small portion of money was used was used to hold a statewide conference to kick off the entire program. The conference was attended by over 200 people from across the state.

Collectively, conference participants began rousing discussions as to what were some of the underlying reasons for such maladies caused by alcohol abuse. The overarching reason was attributed to Historical Trauma (HT). The consensus of HT was **Boarding School**. A local reporter attempted to interview me at the close of the conference, but the interview was cut short as I could not answer her questions. All the memories of accumulated abuses that I experienced at Wrangell Institute (1955 to 1961), came flooding back. I choked, I could barely breathe, and unexpected tears came. I had never told my story outside of my family before. Clearly, I needed help.

I began seeking counseling and therapy at the urging of my wife. I was becoming abusive to my family and others around me. Taking her advice I began sharing my boarding school stories in 'Talking' and 'Healing Circles' and a faith-based program called "Beauty for Ashes," There, we shared many traumatic childhood experiences. In that setting I shared my stories of boarding school - including being physically, mentally, spiritually and sexually abused. I was beginning to learn where my anger at the world was coming from.

2. Are there characteristics or patterns you see in your grandchildren because of your boarding school experience?

Yes. I entered boarding school as an eight-year-old bilingual speaker of both English and Inupiaq. After 10 years in two BIA boarding schools, I could no longer speak Inupiaq. I consciously suppressed speaking that language because I did not want to get punished like the many other children I witnessed get beaten and shamed. When my own children were born I did not nor could not speak Inupiaq to them. Nor did I encourage them to speak my language either. Upon deep reflection, maybe erroneously, I thought my kids would suffer the indignities by speaking Inupiaq. Now of course my adult children have passed down the same pattern of being English speakers to their own children, my 5 grandchildren.

Questions from Representative Leger Fernandez

3. How should we get churches to acknowledge their role in forming and implementing boarding schools for American Indian and Alaska Native children?

Some churches have made apology to various indigenous people across the country for the role they played in acculturating and assimilating indigenous children. That was a first good step. The next step is for those churches to take active ownership going forward. By that I mean that apology should then come with an agreement to respond to questions asked from your committee also to freely sharing their

boarding school records. Those records should include **contracts** made with applicable federal agencies and any subsequent subcontracts made with third parties: roster(s) of children – their names, tribal affiliations, times of attendance by year (s), classes attended each year, whether they were part of an ‘Outing Program,’ whether they received any medical examinations and any records of items brought with them to the school. What was the disposition of those items? I would ask the churches to provide a list of any student (s) who died while in their custody. They should volunteer questions to burial; whether they were buried on campus grounds or in a nearby community cemeteries.

Many religious denominations had national, if not regional headquarters across the country. All churches who had contracts with the federal government should provide church names, their contact addresses and roster of their staff by name and position should be provided.

4. What does it mean to you when religious institutions continue to withhold records from this era?

They may be hiding a shameful past. Like our federal government churches are good at record keeping; especially if it means the possibility of receiving more money from those federal agencies. It is my belief that churches should not be exempt from providing those records; Afterall, it was the **Taxpayers who ultimately footed the boarding school tab.**

I believe your subcommittee should be granted **Subpoena Powers** to seek truth and information from those churches, and any of their subcontractor(s) who refuse to freely respond for information requested.

Again, I attended two BIA boarding schools; Wrangell Institute from 1955 to 1961 and Mt. Edgecumbe High School from 1961 to 1965. Wrangell Institute administrators invited the local church groups to come on the campus every fall. It was then that all 300 – 400 boys and girls got divvied up between the churches, without permission from our parents. During those six years at Wrangell Institute the Southern

Baptist Church affiliate began my brother's and I's religious instruction by shaming my mother's traditional culture; her language, traditional singing, dancing and drumming, especially her Spirituality. I was told my mother was evil and practiced Satanic rituals because she continued her cultural ways. In time I began avoiding being seen with my mother in public. I was ashamed.

I am most grateful to have been asked to provide oral and written testimony to your subcommittee. I have waited for over a half century to share my early childhood stories with you and the subcommittee. I remain available to answer additional questions you might have.

Respectfully Submitted,

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