

My name is Janette Marie Rautanen, and I am a Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa Tribal Member. I am a direct descendent of a Mt. Pleasant MI Industrial Boarding School Trauma Survivor and I am writing this testimony on behalf of the "Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act" (S.2907, H.R. 5444). I am honored to share my story and am hopeful it will provide support for the development of this commission.

I grew up on the southside of Chicago in an apartment in a working-class neighborhood called Roseland. My parents married young with no high school education. I was the first born so I have the greatest memory of the domestic violence, poverty, sexual and physical child abuse. I also have the greatest memory of my extended family members and the elders. It is a history filled with alcoholism, secrets, despair, and silence. In my family, like most Native families, we were taught never to question anything and to accept our world as it was. For me, that meant spending most of my childhood with my paternal grandparents in their tiny apartment. I did not question the physical violence I witnessed, the blood, the screaming. To me, accompanying my grandmother to the corner bar was a blessed outing; eating potato chips and drinking pop as we listened to the jukebox play old country songs. The smell of beer, cigarette smoke and male sweat is an odor I will never forget. I learned to equate this memory with "love" and the joy of being cared for by the most important person to my life.

In the winter of 1967 during one of my fateful visits, grandma asked me to accompany her to pick up my aunt Marcy from a high school dance. We only made it as far as the liquor store where grandma bought a six pack of beer. We went to the lake, and I sat with her in the car while she drank the beers and smoked Pall Mall cigarettes. I held the bottle opener in my coat pocket, and I knew it was an important job. Grandma loved me so much and she trusted me, she hugged me and nurtured me and I adored everything about her story telling. She was the one person I truly loved so much.

For some reason, grandma did not drive to the high school that night. Instead, we went back to the liquor store so she could buy another six-pack. She was crying and yelling and I wanted to go home but I was scared. In that pivotal moment of quiet shame, I dropped the bottle opener into the pocket of my wool coat and it fell through a hole into the lining. I told her I could not find it knowing she would not be able to open any more beers. Somewhere between the screaming and the crying, grandma drove us to the train tracks by the Calumet River. She looked at me and told me to get out of the car and go or she would park on the tracks and wait for an oncoming train. I begged her not to but she was adamant and I had no choice but to flee. Thinking I would find way back to home to Roseland, I started to cross the 95th St bridge. It was at the top of the bridge I met a man on a bicycle. He assured me I would never

make it to my home and convinced me to accompany him to a nearby tavern. The familiar smell comforted me, and I was given a pop and a bag of chips. Because I knew how to spell my last name, the owner was able to find our phone number in the telephone book and contact my parents. I still recall the rage in my dad's eyes, and I was convinced his anger was directed solely at me for causing this trouble. Never saying a word, he dropped me off at home where mom yelled at me for peeing my pants. Dad left to unleash his anger on my grandparents and that night my grandfather had a stroke that ultimately caused him to die. I can still hear my father crying at the kitchen table and would later witness his wrath as he destroyed our apartment; the living room floor covered with broken glass, my mom the victim of his explosive temper and me the scapegoat for this horrible event. I paid dearly for the choices I made that night and learned quickly to wear that shame and guilt for the damage I had caused my family.

The rage that followed is a horror that has haunted me my entire life. Only my own alcoholism at the age of 13 put that monster away but my suicide attempt at the age of 24 reopened the Pandora box. I was fortunate to have been in the military when this occurred so I had access to a mental health system that allowed me to speak the words. I would soon begin a lifelong descent into trying to make sense of who I was as a person, and who we were as a family and as a people. Nothing made any sense, and the vacuum of silence and emptiness was deafening to my existence as a young woman trying to navigate motherhood and being a wife. I failed miserably at both, but I did succeed in finally going to college. Educating myself was the only salvation I could find. My sobriety at the age of 26 also fueled my desire to understand, to learn, to educate and to give back to my community. Grandma and dad would also achieve sobriety and together, we shared many good times as healthy adults embracing our culture. Our last time together was at a pow-wow in June of 1998. That summer, my grandma passed away and six months later I lost my dad to cancer.

Grandma told me hundreds of stories of the old days; her life as a child growing up on Drummond Island, MI. Sometimes she would weave into her recollection a traditional story that was told to her by her elders. These powerful messages existed to provide guidance and understanding of how the world worked and why events happened as they did. Grandma said she only went up to 6th grade, but I trusted her judgement and her wisdom. Sometimes, I was confused when she would talk about living in projects in Detroit or the dead babies that were sacrificed for the curse of the "bear-walking". Sometimes, when we sat at her table, she would stare out the window for a long period of time and I would wonder what does she think about? When she visited me in San Diego, we would walk

along the beach picking up sand dollars and all I knew is how much I felt loved. We never spoke of that night in 67. And grandma never shared stories of trauma or pain. She lived only inside a world of peace and simple joy.

In 2004, my brother Rick sent me a copy of a list of names of children who had attended the Mt Pleasant Industrial Boarding School. On the list was my grandmother's name Evelyn LaPointe and her brothers Richard and Louie LaPointe. There was also another brother David LaPointe who died at the school. The dates ranged from mid-1920 to early 1930. Grandma was born in 1921. Students at Central Michigan University had started researching the local history. The Boarding School buildings had become a hot topic of debate; "preserve them or tear them down?" The land they sit upon encompasses many acres; the remaining buildings weathered or dilapidated from time. There is a cemetery along the backside of the property. But there is no telling how many children or babies were buried on that site. The property now belongs to the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. Most of their elders were required to attend the school. It is a symbolic testimony to an unforgotten time of policies that paralleled manifest destiny, eugenics and an ethnocentrism that is beyond comprehension.

Once a year there is a Healing Ceremony at the site of the MT Pleasant Industrial Boarding School. Tribal members are allowed to gather in front of the main building and a list of names of the children who died at the school is read. Prayers are offered and the community can mourn and honor the elders.

I attended the Healing Ceremony in 2012. I imagined my grandmother as a young girl looking out of the window of one of the buildings. I thought of the day when the fancy dressed men came to her small house on Drummond Island and took her and her brothers away from Grandma Liza. There were no procedures or forms or hearings like today when CPS removes your children. There was no social worker to follow up or services to put in place to ensure a positive transition. Most people did not read back then, and I doubt Grandma Liza had ever seen too many white skinned men much less at her front door. I think of them traveling by small boat or canoe to reach the mainland where the men put them on the train with the other children to go to Mt Pleasant, Michigan. I imagine the horror of being small innocent children with big different looking men saying words you cannot understand. I imagine being six years old, confused, terrified and wanting to run away.

In recent years there has been an avalanche of information that has poured into the conversation of forced assimilation, cultural genocide, and historical trauma. But for many of us, it is too

much too fast. It is overwhelming. It is devastating. Why? Why did we never know? Why did I not get to help grandma heal? Or help my dad heal? Were they thinking about it when I caught a glimpse of their sorrow in the countless hours of deafening silence? Did they never think about it because they were so afraid? What about me? I have thousands of questions with no answers. I feel as if my entire existence has been nothing but a shadow of a world, I knew nothing about as if I too woke up one day and found myself a stranger inside of this strange new reality that no one in my family can even bear to acknowledge. The pain is just so raw and so deep to my soul I can only process it in little, tiny bits. And then I must walk away.

It is imperative to not only the native communities but our entire society to find a way to disseminate this information into mainstream conversation, our educational system and the world so we may understand how this happened. Why this happened. And what is still happening to our native families who live fractured lives, torn apart from their communities, ashamed to share or embarrassed to come forward. People ask us about our histories or our identities and sometimes we don't know. Sometimes we are unsure if it is disrespectful to talk about it or if we must wait until someone gives us permission to talk about it. Most of the time, they ask nothing at all because most people are just too uncomfortable to engage in the conversations. Even me, I attended college 3 times, am a military veteran and I knew nothing of the Boarding School Era, my grandmother's past and my father's pain.

I am submitting to you my story in hopes it will bring light to the current challenges regarding this history and how despite the tragedies my family knew, the love we shared was immensely beautiful. I want so much to honor my grandmother and her brothers and all the native children who never returned home. It is my sincerest goal to do anything I possibly can to educate others and recognize the resiliency that is our Native community.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you. Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States and to all of those committed to this journey.

Sincerely,

Janette M. Rautanen

Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa