

May 10, 2022

Dear Committee,

I am the direct descendant of a boarding school attendee and am writing in support of H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

My grandmother, Ruby June Shade, an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation, attended Chilocco Indian School in Newkirk, Oklahoma along with her siblings. All siblings have since passed, except for my Great Aunt Maxine, who is currently in her 90s and on hospice. She currently resides in the Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma.

There are so many unknowns about their experiences. They did not like to discuss anything about their time at Chilocco, so most of the information has been taken to the grave. I regret not getting more information from my grandmother before she died, but I was only 14 at the time of her passing and the value of her stories was lost on me in youth. I didn't come to appreciate the value of her stories until much later, long after she had passed. Only in recent years has my Great Aunt given us some glimpse, sharing how they were often hungry and homesick for their parents who were over 160 miles away from Chilocco. She also shared that two of her brothers, were determined to make it back home and escaped when they were around 5 and 8, but they were found and returned to the school, likely with severe punishment. As mentioned, she does not like to share much of her experiences, so we are lucky with what little she will share with us.

Growing up it was common knowledge that my Grandma went to an "Indian school", but it was always framed that she did so to learn to speak English since her parents did not. That seemed reasonable to me, in a child's mind. But as I grew older, I came to understand that this was more of a silencing, one that later manifested in the form of addiction, poverty and disease that plague many native communities, mine in particular in the Cherokee Nation.

I am now 48 and live in Maryland, but left the Cherokee Nation at the age of 18 in hopes of dodging the curse of addiction, poverty and not going anywhere in life. I didn't want to become another statistic or validate another stereotype. The truth is, no matter how far I ran from home, I still had that sense of not belonging, no matter where I went. This, I believe, comes from my lineage to a suppressed culture and from a people that didn't know who they were anymore and worst of all—couldn't really talk about their pain with anyone, so they kept their secrets and coped by numbing with alcohol and drugs.

I have witnessed so many family members and friends succumb to drugs and alcohol. Many are just a shell of a person living in survival mode. I carry this with heavy heart and in the past have faced my own issues with addiction, one of the very things I hoped to escape when I left the Cherokee Nation all those years ago. I have worked hard to understand and heal this part of me, but the trauma is still there; that sense of not belonging and not having a culture to identify with. Feeling shame of who I am and where I come from. Not seen. Not heard. I watched my own father drink himself to death trying to fill this void. I'm still finding my voice, one that longs to tell my story and help others heal, but my voice is still shaky. Still, I hope someone will hear me.

The generations that attended these boarding schools are sadly dying out, but we, their descendants, deserve to have answers, so that we can stop the cycle of trauma and heal. We

cannot undue history, but we can reach the light by going through the darkness and exposing truths.

I support H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States.

Respectfully,

Monica Gifford Watson