

May 9, 2022

TO: Representation, H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act

FROM: Nancy Marie Mithlo, Los Angeles, CA

Dear Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States,

My name is Dr. Nancy Marie Mithlo, a citizen of the Fort Sill Apache Tribe of Oklahoma and New Mexico. I am an American Indian Studies professor at UCLA currently living in Los Angeles in a three-generation household, however my permanent home is in New Mexico, near my relatives on the Mescalero Apache reservation. My father, Roy D. Mitchell (Fort Sill Apache 1922-2000), was a boarding school student at Fort Sill Indian School near Lawton, OK (ca. 1928 - ?) and later St. Agnes Academy in Ardmore, OK (ca. 1932-?). My uncle, Harry Mithlo, published an account of my father's boarding school story in *Becoming Apache*, (Texas Tech University Press, 2020). My grandfather William Watson Mithlo, was born a prisoner of war (political prisoner, indefinitely detained) at Castillo de San Marcos, St. Augustine, FL (date of birth unknown) and was still living when I received my doctorate in cultural anthropology at Stanford University in 1993. We believe he was 104 years old at the time of his death. Our tribe (Chiricahua Apache) was held as prisoners for 27 years, from 1886-1913. Our claim for damages due to imprisonment was [denied](#) under the Indian Claims Commission. Despite being born the son of a political prisoner, my father earned a graduate degree in engineering and was a professor at Auburn University before devoting his career to serving as a professional engineer with Housing and Urban Development, providing disaster relief out of Jackson, MS where our parents raised us in the 1960s and 1970s.

I am in support of "H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act" that would provide for a Federal Commission to locate and analyze the records from the 367+ known Indian boarding schools that operated in the U.S. It is well-known that these records are largely inaccessible and are housed in disparate federal, state, hospital and church archives, private collections, and other unknown repositories. Despite being a university professor, I have not yet in my career had the luxury of time and funding to even find out my father's whole history. Although our family is aware of his childhood abuse, we only know the vaguest of details as he did not often speak of these atrocities. I understand that the proposed commission will bring together boarding school survivors with tribal representatives and experts in education and health to fully understand the impacts of this federal policy of Indian child removal.

My father spoke of how as a 6-year-old student at the Fort Sill Indian School, he was forced to light a gas stove and how it would occasionally blow up in his face, throwing him to the floor. At St. Agnes Academy in Ardmore, OK, he was physically beaten by the nuns and he tried to run away several times but was not successful. He stated that once when his mother (Marie Sundine, nee Gray) did come to visit him, the nuns told her that he was too busy playing and could not see her. Sadly, I recall my mother stating that the stories my father told her of his childhood in boarding schools were so awful that she could not imagine them to be true. If this country had

fully exposed the immense trauma of these institutions earlier, my father might have known that his childhood problems were not his own individual issue, but a systemic government plan to forcefully assimilate Indian children and destroy Indian people. Dad died at the age of 78 due to high blood pressure and heart failure, a condition that he struggled with all his adult life. I wonder, if he was left with his family in Apache, OK might he have had a better life, might he have lived longer, might he had been healthier? Might we all be healthier today? Clearly, growing up without the parental love and oversight that any child deserves made my Dad's life harder. Today, due to intergenerational trauma, many children of boarding school survivors suffer from health issues inherited from the government's abuse of their ancestors.

I struggle myself as a child of a boarding school survivor to teach traumatic historic boarding school legacies and to support Native American students in learning this history of genocide. We have inadequate support systems or even appropriate language in which to process these histories. To address this lack, I recently submitted a Mellon Foundation funded proposal titled "Trauma and Memory in American Indian Higher Education," to develop a plan whereby colleges and universities can adequately support our American Indian students struggling to bear the pain of the learning this challenging material. [Studies](#) demonstrate that American Indian college students experience depression and anxiety at disproportionate rates compared to their peers.

I urge you to support "H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act" so that our Native communities (and the general public at large) can finally have access to a full accounting of the genocidal campaigns waged against our country's original peoples. We deserve access to this reckoning of the past. Thank you for this opportunity to submit my request.

Yours,

Nancy Marie Mithlo, Ph.D.