

Good afternoon,

My name is Kerry Hawk Lessard, and I am a descendant of Clark Gregg, an Assiniboine citizen of the Ft Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes. My ancestor attended the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania, arriving on April 15, 1890 and departing on June 17, 1895. My ancestor is a graduate of the school and was trained as a printer. After graduation, he relocated to Baltimore, Maryland where myself and many family members reside to this day.

There are a lot of things I don't know about Clark Gregg, starting with his Nakota name. While the ancestors before him are listed on Indian Census rolls with the names given to them by their people, his is notably absent. When I think of the importance of our names, ceremonial or otherwise, being unable to refer to him by anything but his English name gives me unspeakable pain. Knowing, too, that I have a whole extended family in Wolf Point, Montana that I do not know is a loss I feel every day of my life. It is as if US Federal Boarding school policies forever truncated what should have been a strong, vibrant family tree. This is hard to reconcile. It is also likely why I have undertaken years of study as a medical anthropologist to understand how to heal these intergenerational traumas and why I apply this research in my current role as Executive Director of a Title V Urban Indian Health Program serving our people in Baltimore, MD and Boston, MA.

In the course of my academic research, what I heard from community members was that they felt they could not achieve and sustain wellness because they are disenfranchised from a culture and people that is their birthright, and that they are subject to lateral violence or invisibility that communities who will not see them as who they are: descendants of boarding school survivors and relatives of those who did not survive. It's why every Memorial Day weekend, my organization, Native American LifeLines, joins with the American Indian Society of Washington, DC and tends to the graves of the children whose lives ended at Carlisle, so far from home. And as I participate, I cannot help but wonder if there are children among them who knew my ancestor. Who were his friends. Whom he loved.

It is for these reasons that I write in support of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act" (S.2907, H.R. 5444).

***A full inquiry into generations of policies directed towards cultural genocide and assimilation is critical for reconciliation and healing.*** This is not abstract; our relatives tell us explicitly that they are unwell because they cannot overcome the wounds of the past.

***Testimonies from survivors, descendants, and tribes must be collected.*** Indigenous voices have been silenced for too long and our languages are in critical condition.

***Commission findings and recommendations must be shared publicly.*** Our people have a right to know and have the right to acknowledgement that goes beyond the mere performative.

***Investigation must go beyond the Department of the Interior Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative.*** A compilation of all previous research and honest collaboration of partners must occur for a comprehensive review of Federal Indian Boarding School Policies. Again, our people have a right to know and a right to be heard.

Clark Gregg died in 1899. While marrying a first generation Irish-American and having a family, his life was too short. And I will always wonder whether his time at Carlisle contributed to this in any way. My tugáši is not here to answer this question or to advocate on his behalf. But I am.

I implore the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States to stand with and for our children and families.

Wopina nina tanjka. I thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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Executive Director  
Native American LifeLines