


HNRCDocs@mail.house.gov
cc: Native American Boarding School

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House of Natural Resources Committee for Indigenous Peoples Truth & Healing Commission

Linda R. Cobe



My name is Linda Cobe, I am Ojibwa/Oneida and a member of Lac Vieux Desert Tribe of Lake Superior Indians. I speak English because my Native tongue was taken from me. Ojibwa was spoken in our home. My parents lived a traditional lifestyle, we lived off the land, my father hunted, trapped, and fished. We were poor and did not have running water or electricity. My grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, and Cousins all lived in close vicinity of us. I am a survivor of boarding school. Myself, siblings, and cousins were all forced to attend Holy Childhood boarding school in Harbor Springs, MI. The school was run by the Sisters of Notre Dame, Catholic nuns, where we were forbidden to speak Indian, wear our clothes from home, or possess any items from home. I was 5 years old, it was 1964 when the priest came for us. I don't remember who was with him but they patiently waited for us to come out of hiding, shook a bagful of candy, and grabbed us and put us in the car. We took the long ride downstate, 5 hours, and arrived to a 3 story building, where the nuns came out to greet us. They were dressed in long black dresses with veils, with only their white faces showing. We seen other children that looked like us, boys and girls. They all had the same stunned look on their faces as if to wonder why we had to be there. We had separate dorms, girls on one side, the boys on the other, schoolrooms and cafeteria were on the lower floors. They started with the rules right away. They were strict and mean. We had to line up single file and march next door every day for church before school started. Our morning routine started with making our bed. It had to be made without any wrinkles and have hospital corners. If it had one wrinkle, they ripped it apart and you did it again. Of course you also got a slap for not doing it right. A slap or cuff to the back of the head could also come if you weren't ready to line up when we were told to line up, or if you missed a button, didn't pull your sock up, whatever, you could be yanked out of line, told to fix it, then shoved back in line. Punishments were also severe, many were made to kneel for hours for infractions. One girl had wet her bed and the nun made her scrub the entire bathroom on her hands and knees using her toothbrush. Mealtime was also stressful, having to eat slop, the same mush in the morning, we were expected to eat everything on our plate, and no seconds. I hated beets, was crying in my food because I knew I would be punished for not eating them. My cousin would eat what we couldn't so we wouldn't get in trouble. I had smile at him one time across the table and the nun came and slapped me across the face, told me I should be eating not playing. Nighttime was the most sorrowful, listening to the little girls sobbing into their pillows so the nun wouldn't hear them and come out and smack us around. We were homesick, we cried for our parents, we didn't want to be there. It seemed like we were constantly being told what stupid, dirty, stinking, good-for-nothing Indians we were and how lucky we were to be there. They made us write letters home and tell our parents we liked it there and the nuns were so nice to us. We had chores, there was always cleaning, they wanted the stairs and banisters to shine. The windows had to be washed inside and outside. One of my cousins told me she witnessed one child sitting on the windowsill, on the 3rd floor to wash the outside, while another child held his legs. I've repressed most of my memories of my one year there but I clearly remember

the worst beating I got for not being ready when the girls were lining up. I couldn't find the blue dress I was told to where, so I started crying. Sr. Naomi came over to me, livid, hit me so hard I fell to the floor, she hiked up her long dress and started kicking me over and over. I was crying hard as she yelled at me to shut up, you stupid good-for-nothing Indian. I was smart enough to know you don't treat someone like a dog, something less than human. We just wanted the time to be over so we could go home to loving parents. I've had male cousins tell me they were sexually abused by the nuns. Today they drink heavily to numb out the pain. I finally returned home in the summer, but in August, a Social Worker came to the house and said we were being neglected. Our parents had split up, there was domestic violence and alcoholism in the family. We were placed with a White, Catholic family in Baraga, MI. where our culture again was kept from us, they treated us like we were White children but at school, the other children treated us like Indians, we faced a prejudiced community. Our adopted dad was also alcoholic and began sexually abusing us, that lasted for years. The US government, in the 1960s had started the Indian Adoption Project to also help assimilate Native children. This was called the 60s Scoop, before the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 became law. It was all done for the Land Grab and resources, they used the Churches to force the assimilation through the boarding schools, destroying our culture, breaking up the family unit, and abused thousands of innocent Indigenous children. This was cultural genocide. How did it impact my life? It has taken most of my life, years of counseling, searching for answers, developing addictions, depression, divorces, to find myself again. It has been a painful process to look at what happened. I've had to build my confidence, regain my dignity, grow courage to tell my story. Not only was my language, culture, and identity stolen from me but so was my childhood. My real parents, whom I got to know somewhat, have been gone for years. My siblings are all gone, I have a half-sister that I do not know very well and we have an estranged relationship, I'm still meeting relatives I didn't know I had. But my older brother, Luther Brunk, a former US Marine, also attended Holy Childhood for 3 years, committed suicide at the age of 25, alcohol related. My other brother, Melvin Brunk, attended Holy Childhood, served in the US Army, was killed in a fatal car wreck, alcohol related. My younger sister Celia Mundell, attended Holy Childhood, developed diabetes, had addictions, passed away from Leukemia in 2018, she was only 57 years old. Our youngest sister Leona Brunk did not attend boarding school but our father and her siblings all did. She had addictions, developed diabetes also, had a leg partially amputated due to the diabetes, walked on in 2016, at the age of 53. They are all gone, I'm the last one and I often wondered, Why Me? Today I know why, I am their voice, they could not talk about boarding school or the trauma handed down from our ancestors. I am here to say that's what killed them, the US government and the Church broke their hearts and killed their spirits. Captain Richard Henry Pratt said, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man," they killed the Indian but they didn't save the man in my family. My story is the same as others. We need to heal from this pain. We need the truth to be told, the US and the Churches need to own up to what they've done. There needs to be Confession before Forgiveness. We need answers, how many Indigenous children died, where are they buried, how did they die? It is a shameful history and Indigenous people do not own that shame but we continue to feel the impact from that dark period. Intergenerational trauma may be passed down through our DNA but so is our ancestor's resiliency. We are taking back what was stolen, our language, our culture, our spirit, but much work still needs to be done. If there is a hell, we've lived it, if there is a heaven we want to go there, if there is to be justice, then start by instituting the Truth, Healing, & Reconciliation Commission to fully investigate and address the U.S. Boarding School policy and its impact on the Indigenous Peoples.

Miigwetch, Thank You, Linda R. Cobe

I am available to appear in person to read my statement if necessary.