

# Michele Keyes aka Ga'ya'ni:sha'

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May 18, 2022

Congressman Brian Higgins, CoSponsor  
Buffalo District Office  
Larkin at Exchange, Suite 306  
Buffalo, NY 14210

RE: [www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5444](http://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5444)

Dear Congressman Higgins:

I am compelled to submit a statement to be read as a descendant of residential schooled parents on our aboriginal territories in Western New York. This is our history and I pray this message is heard. The lessons we learned from our tragic history, also revealing the resilience and strength of our genetic makeup. The characteristics in the blood of ancestors' demand attention. It should be told to our children, as well as yours. We want the true history told. We seek acknowledgment. As the history is told, let us remember it also repeats itself. Seneca members must persevere for our next generations to understand and to never experience or tolerate the loss of identity. We are still here, and we remain into time immemorial. Please submit my statement into record as the loss of our language, cultural and natural rights are no longer to go unnoticed or unspoken. We Remain.

With this HR Bill 5444, comes the greatest opportunity for it to come to the forefront, speak of the policies of removal and adoption, how they erased communities through a lawful and calculated genocide. A total contradiction of the US Constitution and human rights, denied to indigenous peoples of this land. For a healing process to begin, we must first acknowledge and ask what do our members want restored? What are their needs? What are their stories? Limited timeframe to respond to HR Bill 5444, was at most hastened, on purpose? Where and when will be true testimonies and discussion? What are the next steps for a healing journey? Buffalo just witnessed the most brutal racial attack where 10 lives were just lost for the color of their skin. Congress must notice the parallels to this story, as it pertains to the indigenous people that remain in their ancestral regions by New York State government and Federal government Indian policies.

As I convey my thoughts, please notice I remain sincere, dedicated to the mission of awareness, and to will continue to tell the history of NYS Education, NYS Child & Welfare and Adoption policies. All pertain to my children and their children and with this insight, you may realize the significance it has to me, personally, growing up in the Mission House founded by Asher & Laura Wright, Presbyterian Missionaries, the beginning.

Sincerely,

Michele John-Keyes  
Seneca Nation, Cattaraugus Territory, Seneca Aksod, Bear Clan  
Descendant, Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Children, founded by Asher and Laura Wright, Presbyterian Missionaries on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation, Iroquois, New York State, 1855-1957, 2470+ orphaned, abandoned or destitute as described, Burich, The Thomas Indian School and the "Irredeemable" Children of New York, Syracuse University Press, [www.SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu](http://www.SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu)

The Thomas Indian School began under the auspice of the New York State Superintendent of Instruction, beginning in 1846. It was the first and only state-run Indian boarding school in New York. The goal, to acculturate and assimilate the Indian children into “the larger population”. We Remain.

The Merriam Report of 1928, surveyed and found deplorable conditions on reservations. With forced boarding schools who assumed responsibility for housing children with no families to care for or who would not care for them, NYS found a way to rid itself of its Indian problem. At minimum, this was the explanation for deculturation or taking away our culture and language, for assimilation to New York. The very existence of the boarding school was to establish and further exacerbate the Seneca and other indigenous children in their care. The effects were destructive to the family, to the communities, and to the Seneca members who always had a sense of Natural Rights. This life was gone. Life as they always knew, was taken from them. Their whole being shattered to live in “the larger population”. Lewis Merriam cited and documented federal Indian boarding schools and Indian Education. As perceived, the NYS authors, lawmakers, policymakers decided what was best for the “irredeemable” Indian children. Our ancestors were made to suffer as prisoners in our own lands, militarized and trained in servitude and domestication in our own territory. The Indian parents made to feel like the genocide of our people was somehow their fault and this was the best way to live now. We Remain.

The report of governmental incompetence was not considered, NYS ultimately closed the doors of the Thomas Indian School and walked away, graduating many children at 15. These children left to fend for themselves, to learn to survive with the traumas placed on them as children. These children were taught to be subservient to the “larger population, almost slave-like”. We Remain.

Our lands stolen by treaty, reduced by treaty, yet notice; the Seneca Nation has never been removed from our ancestral territories, we are unique. George Washington tried burning us before finding diplomacy and treaties could accomplish the larger goals of the newly found America. After the last treaties were negotiated in the 1840’s, only 87,000 of mapped acres remained. The decline of our people in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century yielded the highest mortality rates for infants. During this time, in the early 1900’s, 36% of Native children died. This is the story that I will tell. This is what I want you to know. Through all the trials my ancestors faced, we remained strong and determined. It is our prophecy that the women will lead the healing required to be human beings. We Remain.

The loss of life disrupted the networks of kinship and family. The loss of leaders, lifestyle, and population absolutely devastated our way of life, our very means of survival. The birth of New York and the United States affirmed to “kill the Indian, save the man”, wholly and totally without remorse. We remain.

There are many stories now being told, horrid and unconscionable practice and policy on Indian children. Those stories can be told by others, as my message is of conviction, determination, strength, perseverance, and the absolute will to THRIVE. We Remain.

The description of my people; the People of the Great Hill, The Seneca Nation, Onondowaga, one of the Five Original Nations, the Haudenosaunee. We are Warriors and descend from warrior blood, it is genetic. I am a matriarch that one couldn’t kill, we birth life, we constitute the Seneca Nation, we transmit the nobility of blood, we keep up the genealogical tree and the order of inheritance. We Remain.

It wasn't until the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the territory(ies) to begin looking like a community versus a slum with shacks and run-down trailers for our homes. Not many had the luxury of having a wood-built home, as economies in our reservation and rural areas were virtually non-existent. Families were trying to stay together but with no local work, many men left for city areas. The addictions and dysfunctions were normal reservation life. Alcohol, suicide, domestic violence; the effects of the physical and emotional damage was normal here. The attempts to Christianize our people had corrosive effects and deprived us of who we once were. We were trying to survive in this new world. We Remain.

My first memories were when I lived in the Asher Wright Mission home in 1966. I knew nothing about anything, at 3, I observed my other 8 siblings and how life evolved for each of them. I didn't understand struggle, both my parents vowed to remain together throughout it all. They gave up drinking and partying to my recall. Dad purchased a small parcel on the reservation as land is scarce and limited. My dad would eventually build our family home. The dysfunctions were not thought of that way, we had both parents, after the military, my dad worked, and mom took care of us and our home. We gardened, we canned, we raised beef for food. We foraged and gathered, Dad fished and hunted but became a Union Teamster and provided for us. He kept our family and built us a home. My realization of his struggles for us were because he had none, family or home. Most had one parent, a mom, and mostly I saw strength and struggle. This was life on the Cattaraugus reservation. My parents taught me to survive and better yet, understand my role and responsibilities. It is these teachings that run through my veins that I make a request to begin a healing journey. We Remain.

I think of the house, that Mission house, that I lived in for a few short years, the original house. If it could only tell the stories. The graves across the road, the children and families that suffered through this egregious era, termination. The impressions left behind from this house are undeniable and left an indelible mark of history cemented to my soul. The suffering attached to me; I have felt this was my whole life. I never knew why until now. I realized, we shall call them life lessons that I was there, in that home, for a reason. It is my story. We Remain.

I felt the spirits of the children, a young girl that was always in the back bedroom, hallway, back exit. There was an older female spirit, that watched over the kitchen and dining area. They were there, without a doubt. I was never afraid; I was too young to realize what was really happening, what was real, what was not. Dad brought us back there, as I know now, that it was his only home. That's how we came to live in that house, the Mission House. The house that this all started in, the NYS Thomas Indian School. We learned to live like they wanted us to, yet dad refused to give up his roots. We were raised in two worlds. Their world and our home world. Two very distinct environments. The medicine mask was my dad's, he never gave up who he was. My dad is my hero. My mom is my strength to carry on and tell the stories to our children. Lest we never forget who we are, where we came from and that, We Remain.

The trauma is really the core to my message and my request to acknowledge and to begin planning on healing, to understand how many Indigenous people and the loss of language and cultures the policies affected. The grave counts are only numbers, the actual event is ten-fold. Please consider my story as true and correct, as I recall and am now 59 years old and the youngest of my siblings. Begin with the apology that is due, please address by coming here to meet my mother who is still here as of this writing and is now 92 years old, a Thomas Indian Boarding School Warrior. Please remember your First Nations people, as this is only the beginning to a plan and pathway to healing a lifetime of trauma for Indigenous people all over this North American continent, Turtle Island. We are the Haudenosaunee and we have never been or ever will be removed from our ancestral lands. Nyaweh.

