

Official statement submitted in support of H.R. 5444/S.2907 to the Natural Resources Committee for Indigenous People of the United States by Mitch Walking Elk

**-My name is Mitch Walking Elk. I am Enrolled member of the Southern Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. I also am part Hopi and Choctaw. I attended the Seneca Indian School, Wyandotte, Oklahoma from 1957 to 1961 or 62. Seneca was operated by the federal government. I later attended Oaks Mission, a Lutheran ran school in 1962 or 63. In 1965 I briefly attended Concho Indian School, Concho, Oklahoma. I am currently 71 years old. My younger brother, Lonnie Ray Tasso (later Hulvey) also attended Seneca Indian School as well as my older sister Rosie Duvall.**

**I was expelled from the Seneca Indian School for being a chronic run away. I also ran away from Oaks Mission and never went back and I informed the staff at Concho Indian school that didn't want to be there so I was sent home.**

**-H.R. 5444 Truth and Healing Commission's Boarding School Policies Act has my full and Complete support.**

**Personal Statement:**

The majority of the information I am presenting will pertain to the time I was a student at the Seneca Indian School, located adjacent to Wyandotte, Oklahoma.

I am a third generation boarding school survivor. My great grand-mother Mary Louise North-Tasso attended Carlisle Industrial Indian Boarding School, from 1879, the year it opened to 1884. From there she went to the Genoa Boarding school where she worked "in the Indian service." I think that means she was an employee. Her daughter, my grandmother, Jennie Nettie Tasso attended the Concho, Indian School and then Chilocco Indian School. My mother did not attend any boarding school. My mother was handicapped and I distinctly remember her saying to me that if she didn't send us, my younger brother and I, to the boarding school, we would be taken away from her.

I was raised in part by my grandmother who spoke the Cheyenne language fluently but who had a great disdain for the white man's way of life. Although influenced by the boarding school and Christianity she also maintained a memorable connection to the "old ways" of our people of which she shared with us on many occasions. Being taken to the boarding school removed that opportunity for me/us nine months out of the year.

-I was taken to the Seneca Indian Boarding school on a very dark night at the beginning of the 1957 school year. **The following two paragraphs are from my autobiography, "There will Be No Surrender" released in Germany in 2012, Traumfaenger publications.**

**"Resistance to what the white man had in store for us started for me right then and there. I held on to the car that had brought me there with all of my six year old might as the man from the school, a man I later came to hate, had my legs stretched out pulling on me as if I were being blown by the wind while someone else tried to pry my arms loose.**

**Years later I went to a counselor to gain a better understanding of why I was so insecure in my relationship with women. As I was telling him of the initial boarding school experience he interrupted and asked me who was in the car. He could have taken a hammer and hit me between the eyes and it would have had the same impact. My mother was the person in the car and the overall issue was one of abandonment."**

This issue caused me untold grief and trauma for decades. It wasn't until I "began" to understand the where's and why's of my deeply seated insecurities that I was able to enjoy some peace and trust in my relationships. But that in no way meant I was "fixed."

I've never spoken publicly of this next part. On or about when I was in the third grade I was taken into a supply closet in the basement of the dormitory where the barbers shop was located. There were a number of older boys, ages 13 plus, who had become students at the school. One of these boys assisted with the cutting of hair and had keys to be able to go in and out of the barber shop area at will. I was approximately 9 or 10 years old at the time. That boy persuaded me to go with him to the basement and coerced me into the closet. I say coerced because I was not a willing participant and also didn't know how to say no. I was sexually abused by him on more than one occasion. I recall two times specifically but there may have been more. This is the only incident of sexual abuse I recall experiencing at the school but this robbed me of my innocence and has caused me to struggle unnecessarily for years. and it was wrong for any student to have keys that gave them access to any part of that facility.

Another really odd part to this is years later, when I was about 15 or so, and too young to sign up for the selective service, I did. And I used the name of the boy by whom I had been abused. I'm not sure if this was a form of Stockholm syndrome, revenge or not but something is not right about this. Part two of this story is the Viet Nam war was going on at the time and I, under his name, received a draft notice at my home to which I did not respond. I was later arrested by the FBI and placed in jail in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was given a deferred sentence.

Other abuses at the school occurred daily. Physical, mental, emotional neglect and the lack of compassion were emotionally destructive. The emotional loneliness in and of itself was heart breaking and emotionally damaging. They all made me not want to be there so I began to run away. My running away was interpreted by school officials simply as my not wanting to go to school. It wasn't until I was in my 40's that I realized that I ran away because I was being abused. Running away caused me to receive severe whippings as

punishment that was extreme to the point of breaking blood vessels in the back of my thighs, being placed in jail until I could be taken back to the school and subjecting myself to all forms of dangerous situations. No one asked me if I was running away because I was being abused. And quoting from my autobiography, "I didn't stop running for years."

On one occasion I fell asleep on the highway pavement because it was still warm from the sun and the night was cold. I woke up barely in time to avoid being ran over by a car. On another occasion I was hospitalized for frostbite in the Claremore Indian Hospital Located in Claremore, Oklahoma for a period of days until I got better.

The man of whom I wrote earlier was the boys supervisor and became my jailer and torturer and I was terrified of him. He would take me to one of the lower rooms in the dormitory and I was made to squat down and do what he called the duck walk until I fell over or do pushups until I couldn't do another. After that I was made to sweep and mop the floor on my hands and knees. I witnessed this man, who was also the schools basket ball coach intimidate referees, other coaches, and fellow employees. I was so afraid of him I was afraid to think my own thoughts for fear that he might know what I was thinking and punish me for it. And some of my thoughts involved my hate for him. I later came to understand that the fear he instilled in me resulted in my being afraid of being rejected. That caused me to hold back from providing input at times when it might have been helpful to others in certain situations. It also prevented me from taking positive steps that might have been beneficial to myself such as applying for employment. I wouldn't apply for a particular job for fear that I wasn't good enough or because I might not answer questions well enough and would appear foolish.

I also feel and believe that unresolved boarding school issues affected my marriages. I am currently on my fourth marriage and fortunately have been married now for twenty-years. Being in prison ruined my first marriage, and two of the women I was married to previously are also boarding school survivors. One of them had been sexually abused. Two people who are boarding school survivors who have unresolved abuse issues is not a good recipe for a healthy relationship or marriage. My current wife who is Ojibwe is a boarding school survivor as well as her mother and three of her brothers. We have been able to at least be aware of the issues brought about by having been placed in an abusive boarding school situation and that awareness along with love and respect we have for one another has contributed to the survival of our relationship.

Along with my marriages, my children have also suffered as a result of my being in the boarding school. When I became aware of how I had been affected from having been placed in the boarding school I openly said "This stops with me." Ironically one of my daughters, following the breakup of one of my marriages and because of unfavorable conditions in her home and not liking the relationship I was currently in wanted to go to a boarding school. I told her this. "When you are home and you are running and playing and you fall and hurt yourself and we hear or see you, we run to you, pick you up, hold and comfort you, kiss you, clean your wound if there is one and put a band aid on it. In the boarding school, you get the band aid!" She insisted and in part because I was glad she was making a positive choice to deal with an issue in her life I agreed to allow her to go to the school. In later years and after she had heard and read stories of how the boarding school was years prior to her being there, I asked her what her thoughts were about the

differences between her experience and mine. Her response was, "They were different times." Her experience wasn't horrific as what I described and she chose to go herself as opposed to my being forced. In my instance however.....

Black marks on the floor, not having clothes folded properly in the drawers, not having one's morning or afternoon detail done properly all resulted in humiliating punishment. I recall nothing that was encouraged in a positive manner. It was all under the threat of "something is going to happen to you and it's going to hurt" if something wasn't done to the satisfaction of those in charge. And anything related to native culture was non-existent. It wasn't shared, talked about encouraged or anything. It was omitted in its entirety. We learned how to pledge allegiance to the flag, sing the star spangled banner square dance, and put on plays about Abraham Lincoln and the establishment America. But when it came to our own culture, language (s), ceremonies, etc; there was nothing.

Another aspect of abuse that I endured at the school and I have heard and read other boarding school survivors relate had to do with bed wetting. In my instance I wet the bed frequently. I was made to wash my own sheet and hang it out on the line early in the morning the same time girls were leaving their dormitory for breakfast. It was very humiliating to have them see me and to hear their laughter and demeaning remarks.

Once I moved to an older boy's dormitory I upon occasion would still wet the bed. The dormitory matron, whom I felt didn't like me and who was very strict and very very mean, to me anyway, began waking up those with this problem during the night. One of the painful memories for me was waking up one night in the bathroom having received a very hard slap to my face by her and her commanding me to use the bathroom. I had walked from my bedroom into the bathroom all the while still asleep and it was the slap that woke me up. I can still see the hatefulness on her face when I opened my eyes. I am certain that there are other ways one can be awakened aside from abuse.

Quite often years later as an adult while attending various conferences in Indian country, I noticed that when the topic of discussion would turn to the boarding school, I would begin to get choked up and quite often would leave the room or at least go to the back of the room because of the gamut of emotions that would begin to overwhelm me. I set a goal for myself to be able to talk about the boarding school without getting choked up or down right openly crying. I have not yet achieved that goal.

In 2009 I attended a viewing of the movie *Older Than America*, a story of what the boarding school system did to the children. After watching the I couldn't get out of the theater fast enough so no one would see the the emotion I was struggling with as a result of the movie. That's how much of an impact the boarding school had on me. I am not 71 and I am still deeply emotionally affected by my boarding school experience.

On another occasion at an Indian education conference on the Oneida reservation, at Oneida, Wisconsin, I listened to Brenda Child, author of the book *Boarding School Seasons* read old letters from students to their parents who had been in school in the early 1900's into the 20's, 30's and 40's. I was so touched by what she read and was so touched and grateful that such an issue at long last was getting addressed that when she completed her presentation I made my way through the crowd of people around her to shake her hand and thank her for what she had shared. But when I finally got to her I was so overwhelmed with emotion all I could do was cry. I was embarrassed but was encouraged immensely when she gave me a look of total understanding and then gave me a hug. Later I received a letter from her asking if she could quote some of the lyrics from a song I had written and recorded on my CD titled "Indians" a portion of which speaks to the issue of the boarding schools. I of course agreed and towards the end of the first chapter of her book, she included the lyrics. I have lost a number of relatives to death over the years and have for the most part come to terms with those losses. I have yet to do the same with my boarding school experience.

As I mentioned my running away from the boarding school was interpreted as just my not wanting to go to school and the law stipulated that I had to be in school. So it was no surprise that eventually that because of my running away I began to wind up in jail. During the times I was away from the school I needed to eat and be warm so I began to steal what ever it was that I needed. Once I and another boy stole two of the horses that the school owned and rode for three days before we were apprehended. Upon being caught we were put in jail in Locus Grove, Oklahoma until the boys supervisor was able to come and take us back to the school. The punishment was extra work duty, verbal intimidation and threats. They even said that they were going to hang us but I think that was just a bad joke.

On January 1, 1964 I was sent to the Oklahoma State Training school. I had just turned 13 years of age and had already spent over half of my life in White man's institutions. Just prior to being sent to Helena I had been sent to an orphanage called Cookson Hills Christian Home located in the hills of eastern Oklahoma. After witnessing another youth being physically assaulted by one of the house parents I decided it was a place I did not want to be. So I and another youth who was older stole a car and escaped. Upon being apprehended and after another short stint in jail, I was sent to Helena.

Following Helena I became involved in a life of crime and was later sent to the Oklahoma State Reformatory, the Oklahoma State Penitentiary and the Ohio State Penitentiary. I finally got that part of my life straightened out in 1981 at the age of 30. As I mentioned earlier I first entered the Boarding school at the age of six. So for the next twenty-four years because of being displaced out of my home where as dysfunctional as it may have been I was loved and cared about I became the victim of a system that was even more dysfunctional, uncaring and abusive. I accept responsibility for decisions that I made that were wrong but I contend that the BOARDING SCHOOL WAS THE LAUNCHING PAD AND CONTRIBUTING FACTOR FOR ALL THAT FOLLOWED IN MY LIFE.

One of the things that is painful in this memory is that some of the people who inflicted damage to us were our own Native people. Some, as well as the non-natives, were nice and some were not. But our people who worked at the boarding schools were the recipients of genocidal policies the same as us. Whether they were just hurt and acting out what they had been taught or were trying extra hard to satisfy the oppressor, they did their job really well when it came to fulfilling the goals set down by those in authority. And we paid for it with our lives, innocence and happiness.

Many of those that were the direct abusers are now dead and gone and the Boarding school system has been and is now being called to task. The prisons, mental Institutions and more recently discovered, cemeteries are filled with the victims of the Boarding school system whether they were operated by the church or the government. It's beyond time for justice for ALL of the victims of this tragic period in this countries historical and recent past. It is also extremely sad that it took this long and only after the graves of innocent children were discovered who died as a result of being put in a place that was not there home and not among loved one's that action is being undertaken to address the tragedy of the boarding school system.

In conclusion I would like to restate my full support for the H.R. 5444/S.2907 and the efforts National Native Boarding School Healing Coalitions for the Truth and Healing Commission. I greatly appreciate the support of the natural Resources Committee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States.

Submitted By Mitch Walking Elk  
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