



Behnaz Bigmoradi

ARTIST | US BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVOR



To The Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States:

My name is Behnaz Bigmoradi, I was born Deloris Dora Gakin. I am Lakota Sioux, Turtle Clan, registered with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. I am a Survivor from not only the Pierre Indian School in Pierre, South Dakota, but also the Eagle Butte Boarding School in Eagle Butte, South Dakota on the Cheyenne River Reservation. I was taken from a Day School in Little Eagle, South Dakota at age 6. I attended the Pierre Indian School through 5th grade and then was sent to Eagle Butte Boarding School where I attended through the 6th grade. Not only did I attend these schools, under duress, my Mother Mary Rose Brought Plenty; my two brothers, Marvin Marshall Gakin and Robert Charles Gakin; and daughter, Philana Rose Larvie-Alexander also attended Federal Indian Boarding Schools.

I am pleading with you all to go through with the H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. It is crucial that the truth is known about what happened to us and what we went through at these institutes that were set up by the Federal Government, which have hurt Survivors indefinitely and have taken the lives of thousands.

Our families were systemically abused and our family dynamics have suffered tremendously. I was taken from a loving place with my Grandparents, where I was cared and loved for, to what felt like a prison where I was punished daily for simply existing. This has gone on to affect how I handle my relationship with myself, with others, my family and even my children. I have struggled with mental health, as well as physical health issues during and after my boarding school experience. I was conditioned to hate my people, my culture, my skin, my language, my self. My story deserves to be told and the stories of the children whose lives were lost deserve to be told. Do you have children, grandchildren? Close your eyes and think of them. Now imagine someone coming into your home to take them away. Imagine that it is the law and that you cannot do anything to stop them from dragging off your relations, your children, to be abused. For over a century, unrelenting; that is what we went through.

I was taken against my will and without my Grandparent's consent, into custody of the United States Government. While in custody of the Federal Government, I was abused.

I was verbally abused: I was called a nigger baby, a melado, a dirty Indian, half-breed, prairie nigger, a bastard and a squaw by staff.

I was spiritually abused: My hair was cut and then thrown into my face, I had a cross shoved into my hand and was told to "go pray for forgiveness for what you are". This was done by staff members.

I was mentally abused: We were often pitted against each other and used to punish each other. I was told to spy on other naked girls in the showers. My name was taken away from me and I was called by my number: 199. We were shown graphic imagery of the Holocaust including footage of people having limbs cut off, etc. I was often confused as how I should act because it seemed I got punished for what seemed like everything, I didn't know what to do or how to act. This was done by staff members.

I was physically abused: I was beaten, slapped, whipped with boards and wet towels. I was jerked around by my hair. I was put into solitary confinement, in the dark, without any clothing, just my underwear, and made to sit on a cold concrete bench. Food and water was withheld as punishment. I was force-fed liquid iron. As punishment, I was put into the hallway to kneel on my knees holding bricks in each hand in the air. The staff would shout at me, "hold your arms out, make a cross, now raise your hands", then they would make me hold bricks. This pose was kept till they were satisfied. If I lost posture, I was told to get back into position. This was done to me by staff.

Staff promoted children policing and punishing each other; we were urged to do this.

At Pierre Indian school, a friend of mine, Lucy Takes The Horse, was caught running away from the school. It was the middle of the night, in the winter. Her and another girl were brought back and the staff began ringing hand bells to wake us up, shouting for us to get into the hot towel line. We were told to drench our towels in steaming, hot water and were told not to wring them out. Other students were encouraged to put open safety pins in the ends of their towels by staff members. These towels were used, by us, the students, to whip children who ran away. Staff told us to line up in two lines and Lucy as well as one other girl were sent between our lines to be whipped. I was not able to whip my friend, Lucy. I was violently grabbed and thrown into the line to be whipped myself by the scorching hot towels, with open safety pins. That was their punishment for running away, but we, the children, were still so desperate to leave that children still attempted to run.

At Pierre Indian School, my brother (Robert) was grabbed by the arm of a male staff member, Mr. Hathcoat and taken to the middle of the basketball court. Mr. Hathcoat then grabbed another student by the arm and took him to where my brother was. He urged the other children to gather around them and then told them to fight. They punched each other bloody, repeatedly. Mr. Hathcoat laughed and cheered this behavior on. When my brother 'won' he was beaten unconscious by the staff member. Mr. Hathcoat and another student then drug his limp body off the court and down the basement stairs. I wouldn't see him again for three years. I later learned that this same brother tried to end his life by drinking window cleaner while attending Brainard Indian School a couple years later.

The two stories I have shared are two of many, of the mistreatment we endured at the hands of these Indian Boarding Schools. I would be happy to share more, if given the opportunity.

It is important that our truths are told because the treatment we experienced and the abuse we endured continue to affect our communities to this day. Native people continue to suffer, having the highest rates of alcohol and drug addiction, suicide and poverty rates. We are hurting and have had no way to heal these wounds - until now. There is no way you can heal a major wound, a gash, until you clean it out, rid it of the debris. Sharing our experiences helps create understanding within our communities and families and can heal generations of the pain that we continue to carry. Abuse can physically change your DNA, and we were abused for centuries at the hands of the United States government. It's time that the US steps up and takes accountability so that we, as a people, can heal ourselves, our families and our communities. It is in the best interest of not only us and our people, but of the entire Nation.

Please consider passing H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act; something like this can change everything for us and our future generations. It's time that our healing is supported.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my story, and I deeply hope you can find value and importance in our shared goal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Behnaz Bigmoradi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Behnaz Bigmoradi, Lakota Sioux