

Testimony of

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Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians

Before the
House Natural Resources Committee
on
H.R.5444

SUPPORT

May 26, 2022

Representative Davids and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Resolution 5444. As a member of the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians and a boarding school survivor, I wish to provide testimony regarding my experiences in the boarding school system and its impact on me, my tribe, and our future generations. This resolution and this committee are the beginnings of the healing for many of us, and I want to thank you all for your work and for providing Native Americans a platform to speak out against these egregious wrongs done to us.

I have spoken on boarding schools and historic trauma for nearly two decades now, sharing my story with people from all walks of life—this is the story I share:

In the summer of 1955, I was five years old. Government agents and a Jesuit priest started coming around my grandfather's house. Our family was living with them at the time. We, as children, did not know the events that would change our lives forever.

The United States government and the Catholic church had a program in place since 1844 that gave them the right to take children away from their homes and place them in orphanages or Catholic boarding schools. This program was designed to assimilate Indian children into white society. Their motto was, "Kill the Indian, save the man." Many Native American elders were threatened with jail if they refused to surrender their children.

In August, the priest came back with a station wagon and asked us if we wanted to go into town to get ice cream. Who wouldn't? So, all of us children headed to town with him. But first, he told us we had to stop at the church. Another priest took us in the church, and he began baptizing us. We didn't know any better, and for ice cream, they could pour water on us all day.

The priest took us home, and I told my grandmother what happened. She told me that these men were trying to steal my soul. I didn't know what that meant at the time.

In September, the priest came back with the sheriff. The sheriff ensured that the children and their families were compliant with the priest's orders. They loaded us children on a bus with the priest and we were told that they were taking us to reform school. There were nine of us children in my family. The other families were forced to give up their children as well.

The bus traveled through the Upper Peninsula picking up children from different towns and reservations until we reached St. Ignace. They took us on a ferry across the Straits of Mackinac, and once across, we continued our journey to Harbor Springs, Michigan which is about three hundred miles from our home.

When we got off the bus at Holy Childhood of Jesus and saw the nuns for the first time, it scared me. The older boys were talking in our Ojibwe language and those nuns started slapping these boys. We were told not to talk in our language—only English. It was just the beginning of the abuse we were about to experience.

The nuns took us into a big room and told us that we were going to get our hair cut. When I arrived, I had long, curly hair. The boys were cut bald, and the girls were given page cuts. After your haircut, the nuns put white powder on our heads to delouse us. It was a very traumatic experience for all of us.

They took away our clothes and gave us different ones. Even though our parents bought us new clothes.

Wherever we went, we were forced to walk single-file, Indian style. If we talked or whispered, we were slapped. The older children that talked back were severely beaten.

A lot of the food we ate or tried to eat was foreign to us. Indian children never drank milk before and some of us younger children messed our pants. This called for a spanking. Children who refused to eat these foods were slapped or punched. And we were forced to pray before and after these so-called meals.

There were sexual predators among the nuns. They would pick some good-looking boys or girls and abuse them. I will not tell you the details of my own experience with the nuns, but I will say that it was confusing to me. I always wondered if the nuns could be so cruel to us—physically, mentally, and sexually abusive—what was their God like?

I spent eight years at Holy Childhood of Jesus and two years at another boarding school called Boysville near Clinton, Michigan.

The education I received was second to none. The boarding school not only broke me, but it broke our tribal community. They broke the family bonds, turning everyone into alcoholics. Where there was love, hate, anger, and rage took its place. Where there was respect, distrust and resentment took over. All good feelings were shut off from parents and elders. Children vowed to themselves that no one was ever going to hurt them again. Not physically, mentally, or spiritually. When the nuns beat us for believing in our Creator, replacing it with their God, it left a wound in our soul that can never be healed.

Self-pity is a feeling I cannot have. Self-pity only destroys peoples' ambitions if they choose to dwell in it. As the saying goes, "I felt sorry because I had no shoes until I met a man with no feet."

Treat people the way you would like to be treated. Respect them.

Self-worth, self-confidence, and self-esteem were replaced with self-hatred and a wounded soul. The school taught us to hate ourselves for who we were and what we believed in. They instilled in us great fear and shame that is still prevalent today.

When you are traumatized, your behaviors and psychology get stuck at that age. When you come under stress or go through a difficult situation, you revert to that age when you were first traumatized.

The nuns taught us that being an Indian was bad. We should despise ourselves for who we were. Self-hatred, low self-esteem, and great shame were instilled in us.

While this was happening to the Indian children, the white children were being indoctrinated by television. Cowboys and Indians were on television every day and night. These children heard things like, "dirty, rotten redskins," "dirty, stinking Injuns," and that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. There were about 50 Westerns on television a week. What do you suppose happened to a young mind seeing and hearing all the bad things about the Indians?

After being in the Catholic boarding school, I came back to Watersmeet in 1964 to finish high school. I am proud to say that I am a Nimrod. None of the seven boys in my family ever graduated from high school, and I wanted to be the first one. In 1967, I accomplished my first dream.

In 1968, I was drafted into the Army and eventually ended up in Vietnam. I spent 11 months, 22 days, and three hours in Vietnam. It was a scary experience. If a person tells you that he wasn't scared in Vietnam, he wasn't really there.

After Vietnam, I ended up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where I went to college to learn blue-collar skills. I became a welder, an electrician, a diesel mechanic, an automotive mechanic, and was good in hydraulics. The company I worked for built hydraulic cranes and sent them all over the world.

In 1978, I went to Iraq to put a crane together and helped build a city there. I was over there during the start of their war with Iran.

Today, my wife and I live in Bruce Crossing where I help veterans complete their compensation forms to get their benefits from the government. I have also spoken about these traumatic events regarding the boarding schools in Hannahville and at Michigan Technological University with my cousin Linda Cobe, and we were both well received.

While Indians were being killed by the hundreds on television and we were in the boarding schools being taught that Indians and their ways were bad, it is a surprise that there are still Indians today.

Television is a powerful thing. I know this as a fact. When we watched television for the first time it almost cost me my life. My brother who was older than me at the time saw some cowboys hanging an Indian for stealing a horse. So, we went out to play and my brother decided to hang me. It was a good thing my older brothers were around to save me, or I wouldn't be here today. I am not making excuses for people; I am just trying to shed light upon the culture back then. Everything culminated in this perfect storm that put the Native Americans on a path of self-destruction.

I became the rule of my world. I figured if God was that mean, and I was bound for Hell—as the nuns always told us—I wanted nothing to do with God. I became an alcoholic at a very young age. I was very abusive to people and resented authority. I wonder how many others went down the same path of life as I. How many committed suicide or are in prison?

I am very lucky to be here today, a better man than I was yesterday. I want to thank a lot of people for helping me on my life journey: the Creator, my wife, my pastor, my congregation, the VA hospital, and AA groups.

The historic trauma I experienced as a child is still with me today. I learned that if I could acknowledge that it happened to us, I can change its hold on me. What I learned was how historical trauma caused me to react very negatively to people, places, and things. I learned that I could change to be more assertive and more positive in my life.

Today, I hold a wellness group every week for our tribal members for those who want to discuss the impacts of historic trauma on our people. This group has met for thirteen years now, and throughout that time, we had the tribe's medical doctor, judge, and probation officer participate in some capacity.

These paths toward healing have made my spirit more alive than it has ever been. I thank the Creator for showing me and giving me a new and happy life.

Thank you all for allowing me this opportunity to share my story.

Respectfully submitted,



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