

May 24, 2022

Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples  
15 Independence Ave SE  
Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**RE: Testimony in Support of HR 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act**

Dear Honorable Chair Teresa Leger Fernandez, Congresswoman Sharice Davids, Congressman Tom Cole and Congressional members,

I am submitting this written testimony in support of H.R.5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. I am a descendant of a boarding school survivor and a daughter of a boarding school trauma victim. My sisters and I, there are five of us girls, grew up from a very young age knowing that our late mother Toni Sheldon citizen of the Tulalip Tribes was a victim of sexual abuse beginning at six years old from a Federal Indian boarding school attendee.

On Thursday, May 12 the Subcommittee held a hearing with survivors who spoke to the atrocities they faced as attendees to the boarding school and they were not limited to mental abuse but included sexual abuse, physical abuse, torture and how the adults who were put in charge of these innocent children taught the children to abuse the younger children so they could act innocent in the abuses taking place. The sexual abuse and mental abuse that was committed by the church has been passed down like a horrific plague to the innocents of Tribal communities.

Our late mother may never have known what it felt like to physically be in the cold hallways of a Federal Indian Boarding school but she sure grew up with the scars of Federal Indian Boarding Schools. Her perpetrator attended Federal Indian Boarding Schools and he perpetuated sexual violence to many young girls in our family. He died a lonely death tormented from his own experiences and the evil abuse he gave to his family and the suffering he experienced as a child at the hands of the Federal government.

Our late mother was suicidal by the time she was 13 years old. She would later be diagnosed with bi-polar mental disorder and fibromyalgia. She died in 2020 from liver failure which we believe was from the trauma she experienced her entire life. She was born in 1954. When she sought help from sexual abuse she was told by her mother to wake up her older brother for help. A helpless little girl who started wetting the bed and was made to take cold baths after she soiled herself. When you listen to victims of Federal Indian Boarding Schools, they share the same story in how our mother was treated even though she was supposed to be in her home safe and secure but the monster lived with her.

By the time our mother was in her teens, she tried to run away multiple times. She sought help from teachers, ministers and even the police to be told she just needed to go home and try to be a good daughter. To suffer in silence.

The victimization and discrimination did not stop for her. She was constantly told in school she was a “stupid Indian and couldn’t learn anything” when she asked for help. She only succeeded in graduating school and college out of spite to prove them wrong, not because the school system cared about a young brown native girl. When she asked for help, she was told it was her fault or that she was not trying hard enough because Indians were not smart people.

She soon relied on alcohol and drugs to assist with the pain. She would go to her first treatment center when I was in third grade. She would end up going to multiple treatments to address her heroin use to cover her pain from the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. She could not drink water or wear shirts that touched her neck due to her abuse. She always knew where exits were and always checked the room for who was safe to be around and who was not.

She had many careers from being a nurse, to an artist to a social worker for Indian Children Welfare (ICW) office for the Tulalip Tribes. I never understood why she would want to work for ICW when you see children and families at their absolute worst until one day she explained, “I do this work so when a child tells me their stories, they know that I believe them.” She was able to identify with them and could see their trauma before they ever said it outloud.

Our mother had a hard time being touched. She could not easily hug for most of my youth. One day when I was eight years old, I went to my mother to hug her before going to sleep and she wrenched up her entire body as if she was in physical pain. She would not hug me back but she allowed me to hug her. Finally one night, I told her that every night I will come and hug her before I go to sleep, she can either tense up and hate it or allow me in and give me a hug back. She later told me as an adult that this was the moment I taught her how to hug. She had not known and/or could not hug her own children because of her abuse. We learned to ask permission for a hug because some days she could not stand for another person to touch her.

Growing up with a mother who is suicidal, suffers from addiction, and who a victim at such a young age, makes you ask “what is wrong with me as a daughter”? Why cannot we not love our mother enough to want her to live. Why aren’t we enough for her? What can we do to get her to want to be an active role in our lives” Growing up we did not have access to webinars and books on intergenerational trauma and how it gets passed down.

Our mother would tell us, “I can only stop so many cycles in our family, you girls will be responsible for taking the next steps to breaking the cycles.” This is why I am writing to the United States Congress to demand in our later mothers name, Toni Sheldon, that her life deserved better. She deserved to grow up as a happy and healthy little girl. She was more than her worst days. She deserves to know that the pain she suffered from and the pain that derailed

her entire life was not her fault. The pain our late mother endured came from the United States Federal Indian Boarding School Systems and the churches who helped run them.

You are responsible for breaking our mothers spirit and passing H.R. 5444 is to admit the federal policies put in place to destroy the native child did in fact due this. Genocide was committed and those who survived lived some of the most difficult and painful lives. You can even say that many were not living; they were simply surviving. I ask as a daughter of Tonis' that you please honor my mothers life. That you acknowledge the pain and suffering she endured and make it right. She lived her entire life, thinking that she should have done something differently so she wouldn't endure the abuse she did.

No Native child should ever grow up thinking the abuse they endured is their fault. I believe in Congress and I believe in the power that you have as a law maker. To do what is right and to do what is needed, to acknowledge the generational trauma the Federal Indian Boarding Schools left behind that is still plaguing us as Native peoples.

You, an elected official, appointed by the people of the United States, have the ability to apologize to our mother and to all our Native children who should never have lived this life of self hate, self harm, to have gone without their traditional way of life because the church taught them to hate themselves and hate their songs, their foods, their teachings and to not listen to the spirit inside them begging them to forgive themselves for being born Indigenous. I could go on and on about the hardness of our mothers life but she was a proud woman and would not want me to wallow in the pain but to exercise my ability for change which is why I wrote out a small piece of her important story to share with you today so that you would in fact support and pass H.R. 5444.

This bill is the first step, accepting the wrongs the United States government perpetuated against us Native peoples. I look forward to watching President Biden and Vice President Harris apologize to Native people for the genocide committed against our Native children in Federal Indian Boarding Schools as they sign this bill into law.

t'igwucid - thank you

Toni Sheldons' Daughters  
Terra Perrin  
Theresa Sheldon  
Heidi Follstad  
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Citizens of the Tulalip Tribes