

Dear Committee Members.

I wish to address three specific experiences in which Native American Boarding Schools influenced my life.

1). My ancestry comes from the tribes of the Piedmont region of North Carolina. My great-great grandfather was an Indigenous person who was held in slavery. After the Civil War, many of the people of our family married other Indigenous people who had been also held in slavery. At the time of the Dawes Commission, my great-grandfather refused to be enrolled as a Native American because he didn't want his children taken away and placed in government boarding schools. My great grandfather, instead, took his family to New York City where they could hide. My own father heard his parents talk in a Native language, but when he asked why his parents wouldn't teach it to him, he was told, "If we teach you, the government will come and take you away and put you in boarding school." My father was deprived of his cultural identity and his association with family members so that he could be kept hidden away from the government.

2). While living and working near the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona, I traveled with friends to visit an historic U.S. Park Service site. It was a U.S. Calvary Fort which also had the remains of a boarding school attached. When I was about to enter the site, I was hit with an intense desire to vomit. I was so overwhelmed by a feeling of revulsion emanating from the site that I remained outside the park while my friends went on to view the site. I have never had such a similar experience since then, but I will never forget how I felt.

3). Despite not being enrolled as a Native American tribal member, I am none the less a recognized member of the Native American communities where I have lived. A few years ago, I was employed as an Indian Education Instructor in the Central Kitsap School District in Silverdale, Washington. As part of my job, I regularly attended conferences and trainings regarding important issues in Native American Education. On one occasion, I attended a workshop at the University of Washington. The discussion centered on Inter-Generational Trauma. During an open response session, I was witness to two extremely elderly women who both said, "I have never talked about this before. . ."

The first woman was well into her 80's. She told of how when she was a young child, she was taken into a Native American Boarding School, but could not speak English. The Nun in charge heard her talking to another child in her tribal language. The Nun left only to return with a large knife which she proceeded to use to cut the tip off of one of the girls fingers. The woman said she didn't understand why this happened until, later when she understood more English, the Nun again heard her using her Indigenous language and returned with the knife and took off the tip of another finger while yelling at the girl to never speak her Indian language again. The 80 year old woman said that she never did. When she became a mother, when her children asked her about wanting to learn her tribal language, she would get very angry and yell at them that they should speak English only. I saw the hands and missing fingertips of this woman as I heard her tearful testimony.

The second woman was also somewhere in her 80's. She attended a boarding school on a small island near Vancouver Island, Canada. The children were taken there and couldn't leave. One night she watched from a distance as two boys stole a canoe so that they could paddle back home. She saw as the principal of the school took out a gun and shot one of the boys through the head. Later the principal used the fate of this boy as an incentive for none of the other children to make an effort to escape. This woman was from the Seattle area and many tribes in the region crossed the border into Canada, so I

don't know if she was a U.S. citizen at the time she was held captive in the boarding school. I witnessed the anguish of both of these women and have no reason to believe that they were lying.

I hope that my experiences will help to explain the devastating physical and emotional toll that many Indigenous people have suffered because of forced assimilation via Native American Boarding Schools. I have heard many other stories, but they were second hand. The stories I shared here, I have heard of from my own father, from my own experience and from the person who experienced the story.

Sincerely,  
Cynthia Watte Connel