

Miiyuyam. My name is Kelly Leah Stewart. I am Gabrielino-Tongva and Payómkawish (Luiseno). My ancestors – while not recognized by the U.S. federal government – are the original inhabitants of the Los Angeles Basin, along with parts of San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, and North San Diego counties. I am also a descendant – by blood and through marriage – of thirty-three former St. Boniface Indian Industrial School students, three of which are interred at the St. Boniface cemetery, located in Banning, California. Two generations of my family attended St. Boniface between 1890 to 1935, with some being part of the first cohort of students at the institution.

Additionally, I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Joint Degree Program in Education Leadership at the University of California San Diego and California State University, San Marcos, where I am writing my doctoral dissertation on St. Boniface. My dissertation examines the actions taken by the U.S. government, Catholic Church, and settlers to eradicate California Indian knowledge transmission practices in efforts to assimilate Mission Indians into Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. colonial societies. Furthermore, my research examines St. Boniface's impact on former students and subsequent generations of descendants, explicitly centering on California Indian acts of survivance. I am the first California Indian woman and descendant of former students to explore the legacy of St. Boniface. In addition to my forthcoming dissertation, I previously conducted research on the institution in my master's thesis, [\(Re\)writing and \(Re\)righting California Indian Histories: Legacies of Saint Boniface Indian Industrial School, 1890 to 1935](#), examined my family's experience at the school.

I am writing to express my support for *H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act*. Since its establishment, the U.S. federal government – along with state governments and multiple churches across the nation – enacted various policies – and invented legislation – designed to sever Native American peoples' connections to Indigenous knowledge systems to gain access and title over our lands illegally. On multiple occasions, the U.S. government ignored Indigenous sovereignty and ways of governing by violating and hiding various treaties established between the U.S. government and Tribal Nations. In terms of colonial schooling and Indian boarding schools, the U.S. government provided substantial financial support and resources, which were then used to steal Native youth from their tribal communities to force them into federal and religious day and boarding schools, where Native youth experienced genocide through colonial education. In these institutions, Native youth were stripped of their indigeneity, used as sources of forced labor, and provided an inadequate education. As such, the U.S. government has a moral, financial, and legislative obligation to atone for their wrongs by offering resources and legislation to support Native communities as we begin to investigate the atrocities committed against Indigenous youth in our efforts to move towards healing from the traumas enacted against us at the hands of this government and to (re)claim our sovereignty as the original peoples of the land on which we allow you to reside.

As the descendant of over thirty former Indian boarding school students, the legacy of these institutions – institutions created by your forefathers – has significantly impacted me, my family, and my Tribal Nations. My great-great uncles, Paul and Emmanuel Gonzales were two of the 100 California Mission Indian youth to be forcibly taken to St. Boniface Indian Industrial School, formerly located in Banning, California. A few short years later, my great grandfather, Louis Florian Gonzales, would also be taken to the school to obtain the “education” promised to our people. During his time at St. Boniface, Louis was stripped of our Tongva and Payómkawish culture. As the last family member to be connected to our traditional knowledge systems taught to him by his mother, Maria Francisca Lisalde – a known midwife and healer for Native families in San Timoteo Canyon, our family lost our culture for three generations. My grandmother, Carmelita Gonzales, and her siblings (Leonard, Gilbert, Raymond, Dora, and Emma) were forced to attend St. Boniface, further decimating our connections to our ancestral knowledge and

education systems. My grandmother, who was taken to the school before she even turned five, shared with many of her children and grandchildren about how she would run away from the school because she feared the priests and nuns at the school and wanted to return home to her family at the Gonzales Ranch. My great aunt, Emma, shared with me how the only thing she received in terms of the *promised* western education was a penmanship course alongside endless religious indoctrination. She also spoke about how she was given different charges, of which butter churning was one. Before her death, she reflected on how she never got to taste the butter she churned as it was reserved for the priests and nuns. Upon completing their time at St. Boniface, my thirteen and fourteen-year-old great uncles, Leonard and Gilbert, were sent to help build the Riverside Mission Inn. They didn't get to return home to reconnect with their family; they were forced to help create what has become one of the biggest tourist attractions in Riverside. My uncle Raymond may have had it the worst out of all the children. He was a sickly child and required healing through traditional plants that only his grandmother knew how to use. He would have inherited her knowledge and experience and carried on her work as a healer, but the U.S. government and Catholic Church stole that education from him – from all of us.

The negative impacts of Indian boarding schools didn't end with their closing or Native youth being permitted to attend public schools with white and racialized children. My mother's generations, my generation, my nieces and nephews' generation, and my great nieces' generation carry the legacy of these institutions – for our family, we carry the legacy of St. Boniface and our ancestors' time at the school. My mother spent most of her life knowing she was Native, being forced to work with state and government agencies so that she could (re)claim ties to her Tribal Nations via federal census and California Indian Judgement Rolls. While she carried the oral histories of our family to meetings with Bureau of Indian Affairs staff, they required her to find documents providing “proof” of her Native heritage – records they had in their possession, often at a tremendous financial burden to her. Denying her access to the documents that would confirm what she knew to be true only gave her fuel to fight them and to prove that the oral histories she brought them were correct.

I carry the legacy of my ancestors' experiences with me daily. They are the reason why I've chosen to undertake the traumatic and heartbreaking work of being a scholar who does boarding school research. Every day – through every archival document I review, every article I read, and every story I collect – I relive the experiences of my great grandfather and his brothers and my grandmother and her siblings. As a youth, I was ashamed to tell friends that I was Native. The U.S. government has done such an excellent job of erasing California Indians that I knew friends and teachers would not believe me if I told them I was Native. I was also ashamed that I had no knowledge of our traditions and couldn't speak our languages. I carried a shame forced upon my family due to Indian boarding schools. My research started as a way to atone for my rejection of my indigeneity. But as the years have passed, it has become a way of (re)connecting with the ancestral wisdom that I carry within me. It has become an act of refusal. Refusal to be silent and refusal to let my ancestors' sacrifices be in vain. While we may never fully get back what was stolen from us, I am doing everything in my power to make sure the cycle of shame that was reinforced at the boarding schools ends with me. My nieces and nephews will carry stories of our ancestors' resilience and refusal at St. Boniface.

I want to note that as California Indians, we not only carry the legacy of U.S. federal and Catholic mission boarding schools, but we also carry the legacy of Spanish and Mexican colonization via the missions and ranchos, respectively. We carry the last effects of the genocide financially sponsored by the California government, which the U.S. government reimbursed. My Tongva and Payómkawish ancestors are the original inhabitants and caretakers of some of the most ecologically diverse and rich land in Southern California. While your government continues to deny us our very existence by denying us recognition –

and despite three waves of colonization and three attempts to physically remove us from our lands – we are still here, and we are not going anywhere.

So, I hope when you approve this legislation in the House and the Senate, you also include the Spanish missions and Mexican ranchos in investigations of California’s Indian boarding schools. Why? Because colonial schooling – the stripping of our culture and our knowledge transmission practices – began with Spanish contact and continues today. To fully atone for the wrongs done to California Indians, you have to start from the beginning. In bringing California into your nation, you inherited the atrocities committed by Spanish and Mexican government officials, religious leaders, and settlers. Thus, it is now your responsibility to right those wrongs.

I want to close by reinforcing my support of *H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act*. This government has benefited from Indigenous peoples and our land for far too long. It is time that the government honors the treaties – ratified and unratified – and helps obtain the answers we have sought for generations as we move forward in our healing.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States for holding this space for us and collecting these testimonies.

Sincerely,

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