

To: HNRCDocs@mail.house.gov
CC NABS: info@nabshc.org

May 25, 2022

**House of Natural Resources Committee for Indigenous Peoples Truth & Healing
Commission**



Greetings & Boozhoo!

My name is Debra Delk. I am Potawatomi/Ottawa from the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians in Michigan. The boarding school I attended is Holy Childhood of Jesus School in Harbor Springs, Michigan. I was there from 1964 to 1969.

I support H.R. 5444 – The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools Policies Act, because the world needs to hear our stories. The Indian Boarding Schools damaged our minds, souls, and hearts. Which we learned to cope with daily. Especially now with the findings of our children buried in these Boarding Schools we find this to be very challenging.

First, I want to say though I come from the generation before me who also went to same boarding school in Michigan. My mother being one such person but she never spoke of her experiences. I'm assuming it is because there were too many horrific memories that she was trying to suppress. I can't blame her because I tried to suppress a few of my own. However, now is not the time for this anymore as it is our time to tell our stories as survivors. We want to be the voice for so many others before us never had the opportunity to share about what happened to them. This includes my Mother and the effects it had on her. So here is my story for my mother who sadly passed in 1981 at 46 years old.

As mentioned, I attended Holy Childhood for four years, all of which were complete hell. The physical and mental abuse was an everyday ritual for us. We were told daily how we were nobody and would never amount to anything. They told us that is why we were in a boarding school because not even our parents would want us. They said we would be going to hell. Sadly, after being told this everyday you eventually start believing it! I internalized this messaging about myself when I eventually left that school.

Our group mother's name was Sister Naomi who met us at the door when we entered the school. I believe she was the devil himself and instantly knew I didn't like her. Also, I knew she didn't like me at all. I was in the 3rd grade with hair grown to my butt. However, on the second day of being at the boarding school all the girls were all told to line up single file. Then, Sister Naomi chopped our hair to above our shoulders. This was only the beginning of our hell. Later we all learned to walk single file everywhere and to listen for the bells, which told you when it was time to get up, go to school, eat, sleep, etc.

Additionally, only to add more insult to injury about taking our culture away, Sister Naomi would constantly talk about the bear walk. This is what we Indian Medicine in upper Michigan. One night after talking about it we all went to bed for the night. However, the next thing I knew we were all running around the dormitory hiding under beds, in the closets, bathrooms, anywhere that wouldn't find us. The nuns had dressed as bears and chased us all around the dormitory. That alone terrorized me so bad I wouldn't go to our communities' powwows or have anything to do with my heritage. To make matters worse, they also would take us to the basement where they had a bear hanging from the ceiling. It traumatized me so much that I blocked that completely out of my mind. Years later, another survivor and I were talking and it was then when that memory came back. Normally I won't talk about such things. Now I can share my story and talking about the torture that I endured. I was locked in the infirmary for days, physically abused, made to sit outside Sister Naomi's bedroom door all night long, and other children including myself had to kneel on uncooked rice on a wooden floor. This is not education but torture of Native American children.

However, I am proud to say as a Native American boarding school survivor and elder, I am now involved with my culture. I am very proud to be a part of such a group of resilient people. Thank you for reading my letter and I hope this can lead to greater healing for all Native American people!

Sincerely & Miigwech!

Debra Delk