

May 12, 2022

TESTIMONY OF DR. RAMONA KLEIN
BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE
UNITED STATES
HEARING ON THE “TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION ON INDIAN
BOARDING SCHOOL POLICY ACT” (H.R. 5444)

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of the Indian boarding school bill. I am Dr. Ramona Klein, an enrolled member of the Turtle Band of Chippewa based in Belcourt, North Dakota. I am a living survivor of the United States Indian boarding school policies and practices. I am a real human being who was placed in a boarding school away from my parents when I was seven years old. I am now almost seventy-five, and that experience has impacted my entire life.

What impact has it had? I ask you to remember your own child or grandchild going to school for the first time. The special moments when a child goes to school, but with the confidence that his mother or other relatives will come back to pick up the child at school. Remember that feeling. Now imagine that experience if you would not see that little child for the rest of the year, or perhaps even for years. For no other reason except that child is an Indian child.

I remember seeing my mother cry as she stood and watched six of her eight children board the big, green bus that took us to Fort Totten Indian Boarding School. That image is forever imprinted in my mind and heart.

I remember arriving at Fort Totten and my long hair being cut very short – much like a boy’s haircut – and being fine combed with kerosine under the assumption that I had head lice. I remember being given the nickname “Butch” by the other children because of that haircut. I remember being scrubbed regularly with dirty, brown soap and my skin becoming dry and chapped. I remember that they used a stiff brush and that the soap was made with lye.

I remember arriving at the dormitory, which was so big and cold, feeling so scared and alone, among only strangers. I remember scratchy woolen Army blankets. I remember being afraid to sleep, fearful of the matron’s son who walked the halls at night using a flashlight to spot me in bed. He touched my body like no child’s body should be touched.

I remember being hit by the matron with a big green paddle that everyone called “The Board of Education,” while I knelt on either a broomstick or a mop stick with my arms outstretched from my body. I remember thinking, “You will not get the best of me.” I was determined not to cry. I would not cry. And I didn’t cry for many years after I left Fort Totten. Today I would say, “You will not take my dignity.”

I remember being hungry. Very hungry. Hungry enough for my tummy to hurt.

I remember looking out the cold, frosted window and saying to myself, “Maybe tomorrow I will see Mama and Daddy.” Only to wait months for a short visit before I was made to board the big, green bus again.

This is only a snippet of my memories, as there is not time to share more, like witnessing a murder outside of the dormitory or being told by my teachers that I was dumb and could not learn. Being in that boarding school was the loneliest time of my life. It has made it difficult for me to trust other people, including the people on this committee, with my emotions, thoughts, dreams, and physical being. And how could that not be the result?

In spite of my boarding school experience, I became an educator myself. I have taught kindergarteners through graduate students, in public school, public and private universities, and Tribal college, including for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I have served as both the Graduate School Director and Chairperson of the Division of Education at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota. In all these roles, I have tried to create for my students an educational experience that affirms who they are and builds them up, rather than one that presumes to “save” them by attempting to strip away their dignity.

I work hard to apply the seven teachings of the Anishinaabe – honesty, humility, truth, wisdom, love, respect, and bravery. This is why, despite my boarding school experience, I believe that I have been able to show empathy to hurting students, to support and encourage others, and serve as a mentor whenever I am able.

What I want from the United States are resources that can be used to help heal the deep wounds of the generations of Indigenous people who have been impacted by the United States’s boarding school policies and the treatment of Indigenous children. I want resources to teach all Americans how boarding schools impacted and destroyed lives. I want resources to teach all Americans how we see evidence of that destruction today in people who suffer from and commit domestic violence, who suffer and commit sexual abuse, who suffer from addiction because they’re trying to stop the pain and nightmares, who experience extreme poverty, and even in underperforming schools.

I was asked one time why I didn't talk about the touching. I didn't talk about it then because no one that could do anything about it would have believed me. Still today there are people who do not believe these things happened. This must change. We must listen to the stories of the survivors and learn from them.

Thank you for the invitation to tell my story.