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Public Testimony on Boarding School Experience

Urging the United States Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act

Juneau, Alaska

March 4, 2024

Quyana, Representative McCormick, Callan-aaq, allat-llu ikayurteten una resolution-aaq piurtevkangnaqluku tamaitnun yugnun ellam ilaunelngurnun taringesqumaluku mikelnguut cakviullrat ayaumallratni allanun nunanun apqiitnek boarding school-anun.

Arriving on a plane into an unknown island, taken on a long bus ride along dark, gloomy spruce trees – coming from a space where groves of trees were unknown. Upon arrival we are queued and received by whom-we-learned-to-call dorm aides. I'm told to strip down in front of other boys – naked – and I place all my belongings on a table where a dorm aide labels my clothes either with a magic marker – the smell I could still remember – or an engraver for those of us fortunate to have a watch. My clothes and belongings were branded with the Number 12. My new identity for the entirety of my tenure at Wrangell Institute. I was twelve years old, 89 lbs., skinny, with horn-rimmed eyeglasses too big for my tiny face that kept sliding down my nose. I was already labeled a skinny kid.

We were led to a communal shower, marched down the hall into a door that was split in half where we were issued a towel, a washcloth, a toothbrush, tooth powder, and Dixie Peach hair gel. Then we were marched into our dorm rooms – four boys to a room which held to government-issued metal bunk beds. The three roommates were strangers to me; I was a stranger to them.

We get clothed and again we are ordered to get ready to eat at the dining hall. More lines. One side was the girls' line; the opposite was the boys' line. We stood with our arms along the side. No touching. No talking. Mrs. Krepps would make sure that our shirt tails were tucked. We ate out of trays with metal utensils. We seemed to walk in lines wherever we went.

Institutional ivory soap, four-foot by four-foot square talcum powder box to dip our feet into after showering, the smell of institutional government-issued floor wax, government-issued laundry soap, the smell of government-issued wool blankets, the putrid smell of starched bed sheets, multiple voices simultaneously wanting to be heard yet silenced, myriad of music from the big boys' transistor radios who can afford to blare American music from the local radio station, the muffled cries of younger boys while trying to sleep, one audibly muttering, "Mama, Mama, Mama," between sobs. These lasted for at least the first two weeks after arrival.

We were left disconnected not only by our souls, but by distance – without any form of communication – some of our parents, like mine, had not gone to formal schooling to make sense of where their children had been taken.

One Saturday, I was issued a white shirt to iron in the basement. The shirt was to be worn by me the following day for church. I went down to basement and began pressing the iron several times onto my new shirt. When I was done, I brought it two flights up to present it to the dorm aide. It wasn't good enough; I was told to redo it. This happened two more times, then on the third try I realized that I had to plug the cord onto an outlet to smooth out the wrinkles.

Decades later, after purchasing my new home I got a washer and dryer. When the clothes were done washing, I put them in the dryer. When they were done, I pulled them out. They were

wrinkled. I stood staring at them, and even as an adult, I began sobbing. A trigger from the time I was told to iron out the wrinkles of my Sunday shirt.

We were the last bunch of students to experience the old BIA boarding school era. We lived cloistered, followed rules, punished, and worked off our punishments, which in most cases, were minor. The punishments were scrubbing toilets, dusting ledges off dorm partitions, picking up trash in the rain, folding laundry. When boys got into a fight, they were punished with a week to two weeks of chores and couldn't participate in afterschool and weekend activities, movies, dances, etc.

> Later in life, my mother, after a moment of silence, with her head bowed, says to me in her heart language, "Remember the time you were taken away to Wrangell when you were a little boy?
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> > NOTE: At that time, a single airplane would fly into our community to drop off mail and pick up passengers/patients to be brought to the nearest medical facility – Bethel – 200 air miles away, or to other bigger communities for meetings, workshops, etc.
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> My mother continues, "When I hear the drone of the plane in the distance approaching our village, I would hope you were in the plane to return home, but you never did."

This is just one comment from one mother whose child left for one school year. Imagine those mothers whose children left at ages younger than me and the torture both the child and mother felt, that with each moment of separation, the stronger the hurt, harm, and loneliness that they and the family members endured.

Learning terms like: *Nationalism is a frame of mind in which an individual feels loyalty to his nation*, yet not knowing what it meant. It was one of the many terms to memorize to receive a socially constructed passing grade by the system. Everything we learned was rote, whether we internalized them or not; it was just the way the system was established.

Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and even news (weeks later) of deaths in the community added scars to our separation. I remember Mrs. Bird from my village died in a house fire. Her son, Duke – age 14 – couldn't go home to bury his mother. Imagine what Duke was feeling: no mother, no home to go to when he returned home in the spring. No one consoled him. It was just another day at Wrangell Institute.

Weeks and months passed and then there was news that a traveling physician was on campus to do physical examinations. I don't know whether there was one separate for the girls, but we had Dr. X. This was my first-ever physical with a medical doctor. He was very kind and gentle. He asked me to strip down and lay on the examination table in the clinic. I acquiesced, and then he began to touch different areas of my body with a metal and rubber object, then set that object down and began using his whole arm to rub all over my chest and groin. When he reached my groin area, he began to fondle my genitals. Assuming that this was a procedure, I didn't react, but it seemed that he spent a lot of time in that area until I forced myself not to get aroused. I don't remember what happened next. I left. I never told anyone.

The same doctor arrived about three months later, and we went through the same procedure. When he proceeded to "examine" my groin area, I think I made some move or facial expression that made him say, "You don't want to play?" That is when he stopped, and I think I left quickly thereafter. I don't remember. I hope that was an isolated moment, but I doubt it. In hindsight,

imagine what he might have done with boys younger than me, let alone older boys who didn't know much about these kinds of things.

I learned decades later that Dr. X still practiced his field somewhere in southeast Alaska, but I hope to God we were last of his victims!

My nine months at Wrangell Institute stopped my Yup'ik clock. In those lonely, dark months I missed learning about being a Yup'ik boy. In fact, decades later, as a new professor at the University, one of my students asked what would happen to the streams in which the 'can'giiq' – a type of small winter fish – swam, if the waters were to suddenly freeze. This caught me off-guard, but I mustered a response saying, "I don't know, because at the time I should have learned about his, I was taken away to boarding school."

I consider my time at Wrangell Institute, although painful, lonely, rigorous, and structured. The students and relatives before me had a more challenging experience. I came to Wrangell already knowing English enough to get by. My cousins, however, who went to Wrangell 15 years before I was born, left home when one of them was five years old! The second year after that he was able to make sense of English to write my mother the enclosed letter:

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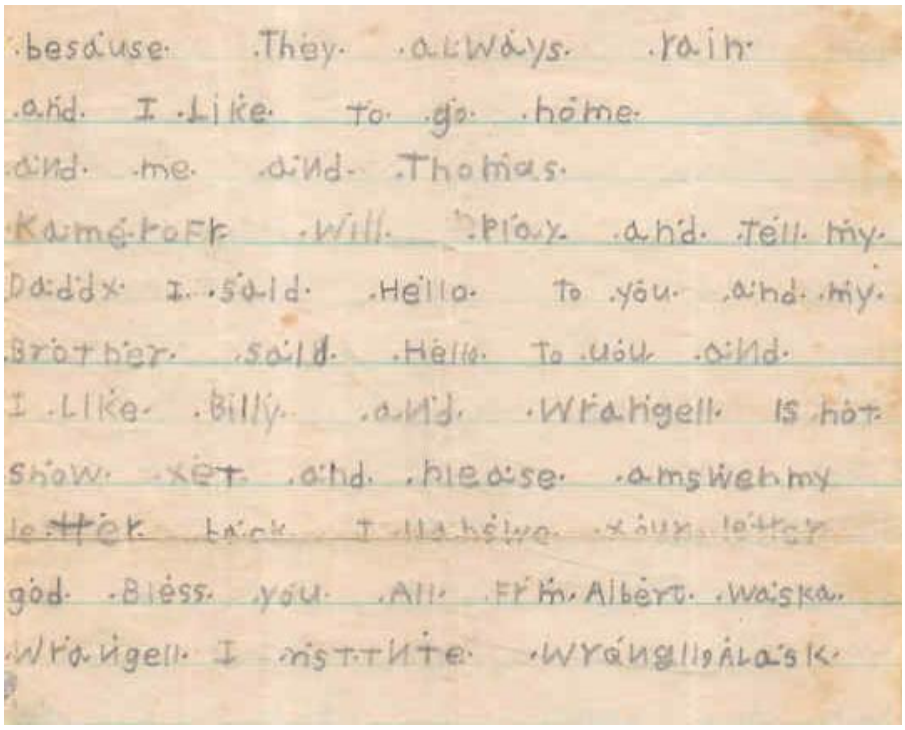
Wrangell Institute

Wrangell, Alaska

November 14, 1954

Dear Maggie, Charlie.

How are you? I am fine and you send me some packed and I am happy and how big is Billy and please send me some dry fish and I want some gum and tell Billy I said Hello to him and five more day be for we go home and please send me some writing tablet and tell her da ddx to send some candx Bay and some big Boxs make me cry and I thing of you and Billy and Thomas. Hello to you and I dont like Wrangell Alaska



The tone of the letter from Albert to my mother is, “I miss food from home and writes ‘I want pilot bread, and please send me some dried fish. I want to go home. It rains here a lot. I miss snow. I miss my family. Say hello to Baby Billy who was born a year ago that I wasn’t able to be there for.”

Whether my mother had someone assist her in writing to Albert, I don’t know. Whether Albert received any care packages, I don’t know either.

I’m sure there were many, many children with the same sentiments in their letters home to their loved ones.

I had my share of letters that I wrote home in between tears. I know a girl who drew a circle around her dried tears in her letter to her parents at the time I was at Wrangell.

Ten of these boys have since died. The eldest of these is 84 today. Their parents didn't speak English, and if they did it was school English. I'm sure some of them have left this world without sharing a story of their own abuse, but I'll leave it to them to tell what I don't know.

Leaving home and the comforts of hunting, gathering, collecting wood for the winter, eating familiar food growing up attempted to break us during our times away from home. Like the system forcing us not to use our heart language but using English instead molded our little minds to think, speak and write in the language of the dominant culture. It was a struggle for all of us, and the kids the generation before me were so beat up that upon their return home to their communities either couldn't speak their heart language anymore or refused to, because they were shamed enough to choose the language of our oppressors.

I was spared from losing my heart language because it was the only language through which my mother communicated to us in the home. She never went to school. I witnessed shaming of using our heart language, I refused to use my heart language during incarceration, but I fortunately returned to it albeit with some initial guilt.

Almost 44 years ago I entered my first year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as a freshman, wanting to become a teacher better than the teachers I had growing up. I wanted to become a teacher who cared and to show my students that learning can be positively transforming.

It was that first year that I was exposed to written Yup'ik, the language of my people, taught by a Caucasian. A language that I thought I could have lost was celebrated at a public school. I took it to heart to learn all that I can about my written language. Today I am professor of Yup'ik at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in the process of becoming a full professor.

This is a story from one person who survived boarding school. Know that even though I experienced and survived my one year at Wrangell Institute, I do not represent everyone who had other experiences. I have heard of more terrible stories about sexual abuse, but I reserve the right to have those people share their own because these experiences are personal, and I want to only share mine in respect of others who were brutally abused. I hope they find their voices to be able share their own stories so that we can all heal.

Decades have come and gone, but I still have triggers. Words like: hey, hey you, you need to, I need for you to . . . and pointing of a finger toward me still scare me. Crowds with a lot of noise make me confused, and often, at the end of the day, I still retrieve into a dark, quiet room to calm myself down. For me, these words are accusatory. I feel like I've done something wrong. I want to someday feel okay about these words, but I feel that I haven't been apologized. Boarding

schools have damaged young souls in the past, and that damage still lingers into adult and elder years for so many of us. When and how will the system recognize the scars that were molded onto our souls be taken away. I want to forgive, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs ought to find a venue to recognize their fault and lead us to spaces for healing. I'm tired of reacting. I want to live a normal life. I want my soul to be happy not just on the outside, but mostly deep inside where the little boy in me is licking my wounds.

For those who had it worse, I wish I could share their stories verbatim, but I hope today is the beginning for more stories to be heard through the proper channels so that they, too, can begin healing. My heart goes out to those who suffer more than I do, those who fell into cracks of depression, despair, alienation, separation, confusion, alcoholism, drug abuse, and variations of mental illnesses, accidental deaths from overdose of alcohol or drugs, and even suicide. This information is from events witnessed and heard in my region growing up; I do not have the facts or numbers to share today.

Again, this is one story, and not even a story of what the churches might have done and damaged souls. I hope my attempts to recollect my story on behalf of my boarding school brothers and sisters reveals even an ounce of the pain, suffering, anxiety, worthlessness of each one effected as the system attempted to dehumanize these resilient souls who deep inside are stronger than the system attempted to create them to be in the name of assimilation. This is about my experience at Wrangell Institute 54 years ago.