

Rep. McCormick

Juneau State Capitol

House Tribal Affairs Committee

Room Davis 106

March 4, 2024 3:30p

House Joint Resolution 17, “Urging the United States Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act”

Dr. Walkie Charles will also provide testimony of his experiences in a boarding school.

Ben Jacuk and Emily Edenshaw will present on their research from the ANHC.

Honorable Members of the House Tribal Affairs Committee and Mr. Chair,

Thank you for sponsoring this legislation and hearing on a topic that has and continues to traumatize generations of Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

I wholeheartedly support the passage of House Joint Resolution 17, “Urging the United States Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act”

If I may, I would like to introduce myself in accordance with our cultural protocols. However, I would also like to do so as a means of outlining my cultural identity that the missionaries at Haines House, a Presbyterian boarding school, attempted to eradicate.

Yeidiklas’akw ka Kaa.háni yóo xát duwasáak

Cháak' naa áyá xát

Shungukeidí naax xát sitee

Kaawdliyaayí Hit dáx ayá xát

Jilkaat kwáan ayá xát

Lukaax.ádi yadi ayá xát

My Tlingit name is Yeidiklas'akw. It is an ancient name whose meaning has been lost in antiquity.

My ceremonial name is Kaaháni, which refers to the stature or status of an individual. In the ceremony in which I received this name, our clan leader said that my stature was “Woman Who Stands in the Place of a Man.”

I am an Eagle of the Thunderbird Clan and the House Lowered from the Sun from Klukwan in the Chilkat region.

I am also a Child of the Sockeye Clan.

My identity is also intertwined with our clan crests—the Eagle, Thunderbird, and Sun.

We, of our clan, are also spiritually strengthened by our White Bear, Shark, and Killer Whale spirits.

In addition, our clan is entitled to wear the U.S. Naval uniform and to use the name Schwatga as payment for the failure of Lt. Schwatga, of the U.S. Navy, to pay a debt to my great, great clan grandfather during the Klondike Gold Rush era.

For the record, in English, I am also known as Rosita Worl.

Kidnapped

I remember that day as if it were only yesterday. A woman got out of a car in front of our house in Petersburg, where I lived with my grandparents, and asked, “Do you want to see your brother?” My brother

was living in Juneau. At age the age of six, I didn't think to ask any questions, and, in my excitement, I eagerly got into the taxi with her.

We were driving past Ohmer's Cannery, where my grandparents were working, when the cab driver asked Mrs. McGilton, as I remember her name, "Don't you want to tell her grandparents that you are taking her away?" She responded immediately and emphatically, "No, keep driving." It was at that moment that I realized something was dreadfully wrong.

When we stopped, I jumped out of the car and tried to run away from the three adults to no avail. I was thrown into the back of a small float plane like I was a piece of luggage.

I started to cry and couldn't stop. Even when we arrived in Juneau and boarded the Princeton Hall, a "mission boat," I continued to cry.

Several years ago, while attending the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Fairbanks, a gentleman approached me and asked if I knew him. I didn't know that he was Del Hayward of Metlakatla. He told me that he saw me when I was brought aboard the Princeton Hall. He said I was sobbing uncontrollably and that I was struggling to catch my breath. He said that a missionary came and told me stop crying, then slapped me.

When we arrived in Haines, I was taken to Haines House. You might be aware that the federal government paid for "contract schools" in Alaska, which were run by various Christian denominations that had established mission schools.

The Christians and the federal government shared the same policy—to suppress Native cultures and to civilize and Christianize Alaska Natives.

My next memories are of being in bed, still crying, and looking out the window and seeing the moon over a mountain.

I kept wondering—why am I here? I learned that Haines House was an orphanage, which made no sense since I had a large extended family who had cared for me after my mother died.

The man who was listed on my birth certificate was not my father. He had been sentenced to prison for trying to burn our house down with me and my mother in it.

The days were horrific, but the nights were also difficult. I would weep silently so as not to be punished for crying. It was made worse as I would wet my bed. Lest I get in trouble, I would lie in my urine until the sheets dried.

On weekends, I would wait until all the other girls in the dorm had pulled off their sheets and stacked them in the middle of the room. I would then pull off my sheets and run and put them into the middle of the pile.

The chores were difficult and would violate today's child labor laws. As a six or seven year old, I was required to make toast in large ovens. I would crawl onto the open oven door and lay the bread on the shelves which I had pulled out from the heated oven. After a few moments, I would have to then turn the bread over to toast the other side.

I also had to iron sheets in the large commercial mangle. I would have to stand on a chair to put the sheets on the large rollers and pull the heated mangle down. Fortunately, my aunt who was living in Haines later came to work at Haines House and was assigned to the laundry. After that, I no longer had to iron sheets but could instead play in the basement laundry room.

Children at Haines House were also rented out for various jobs. On some wonderful occasions, my grandparent would rent me. Instead of working, we would go blueberry picking.

Another painful memory is the evenings when all the students would gather in a hall, sitting on the floor while I stood in the front, facing them. I would say things to them, and they would all start laughing.

I could never understand why they were laughing at me. This was one of the methods the Christians had devised to manipulate students into

shaming other students as a means of suppressing Native language and culture.

One of the missionaries' forms of punishment was having children run through a gauntlet of two rows of older students facing each other. Each student held boards with holes drilled into them.

The child who was to be punished was required to run through the gauntlet while the older students would hit them with the boards. To ensure that the older students were hitting the punished student severely, older students would be required to run the gauntlet if it appeared that they weren't hitting hard enough.

At night, the older girls would hold me and ask, "Why don't you listen?" I have to say I don't know why I didn't always follow the rules despite knowing that I would be punished for my misdeeds.

I used to think that I must have imagined these sorts of punishments, but later I heard others confirm the stories of having to run through these gauntlets.

I would prefer not to discuss the sexual abuse except to say that it did happen.

Another memory that haunts me is seeing girls who were almost comatose. They would walk without ever talking or smiling. They would walk like they were zombies.

I often wondered what happened to them, for one day I would see them and the next day I wouldn't. I note that several months ago, a young child's skull was found on the Haines House grounds. To this date, the skull has not been identified.

One of the most degrading memories I recall was being filmed as I was bathing completely in the nude. Even at that young age, I had a sense of modesty.

Another girl, who looked white and who had been brought to Haines House, was also required to bathe in the same tub. After we got out of

the tub, I would be given a plain, cotton dress while she was given a frilly organza dress.

I understood that these films were used to raise funds for the mission and, I imagine, to symbolically convey the cleansing away of Native culture. However, I never quite understood the rationale for contrasting a Native girl with a non-Native looking girl except to point to a difference in status between Natives and non-Natives, as signified by the plain cotton dress I got while she received the frilly organza dress.

Decades later, I met the non-Native-looking girl and we soon discovered that we were the two girls in that film. It never occurred to me that she had found the experience as humiliating and traumatic as I did. We spent the evening crying together over those sad memories.

In Tlingit culture, children of sisters are viewed as brothers and sisters. The mothers of these brothers and sisters are viewed as mothers to all the children, so we called our maternal aunts “mother.”

My mother, Bessie Quinto, tried for three years to get me out of Haines House. Unbeknownst to her, I had been released into the custody of the man who tried to kill me and my mother. He had used the excuse that he needed to care for me and was released from prison on these grounds. He was an evil man, and it took my mom time to get me away from him.

Of the ten types of trauma recognized as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) studied in 1998, I experienced all ten. From what is publicly known of my life, it may appear that I have been resilient and overcame my trauma.

I have tried to suppress my memories of those three years and have been fairly successful. However, in reality and in all truthfulness, I know that those three traumatic years took their toll on me in ways that have not been apparent to others.

More recently, I have found that I am becoming increasingly emotional in remembering those years. At a recent event in which the Northern Lights Presbyterian Church in Juneau offered reparations for their

discriminatory acts toward Dr. Walter Soboleff in closing his popular church, we had a panel discussion.

I wanted to share my Haines House experience with the Presbyterian leaders in the hopes of persuading them to acknowledge the wrongs they committed against generations of Native students who were held in these boarding schools. I was surprised at how emotional I became.

Even in preparing for this testimony, I had periods of emotional stress. I called one of my close friends, who had also endured the pains of a boarding school. He told me that he also continues to experience similar periods of emotional stress.

I am but one of the multitude of survivors of the boarding schools that have caused generations of trauma. At Sealaska Heritage Institute, along with colleagues from the University of Illinois, we have conducted epigenetic studies that demonstrate that intergenerational trauma is a reality reflected by changes in one's DNA.

With the lack of funding for education here in Alaska, I am fearful that a return to boarding schools will be proposed. We cannot afford to make the same mistakes with a return to boarding schools and boarding home programs. We cannot condemn further generations to ongoing trauma.

Thank you for listening to my story.

Gunalchéesh.