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**Feature Stories**  
**A Painful Remembrance**

by Mary Annette Pember  
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Dr. Eulynda J. Toledo founded the Boarding School Healing Project to shed light on the long-lasting effects that some religious and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools have had on American Indian communities and families.

Many in Indian country have expressed that the trauma from the boarding school experience continues to terrorize the hearts of American Indians. Although much has been written about this history that looms so large in the North American indigenous experience, it remains an obscure topic in mainstream America.

Dr. Eulynda J. Toledo, a member of the Diné tribe and project director of a grant from the National Institute for Disability Research and Rehabilitation, is working to bring attention to the "intergenerational trauma" of the boarding school era through the recently founded Boarding School Healing Project. Toledo and her colleagues maintain that many of the social ills plaguing current generations of American Indians, including sexual abuse, child abuse, violence towards women and substance abuse can be traced to the generations of abuse experienced at Indian boarding schools. Toledo describes intergenerational trauma as post-traumatic stress disorder that has been passed down through generations.

Beginning with President Ulysses Grant's "Peace Policy" of 1869, thousands of American Indian children were forced into government and religious boarding schools away from their families and land or forced to attend Christian day schools located on reservations. The "Peace Policy" was embraced as a more economical solution to the "Indian Problem" of the day than costly military campaigns against the tribes to gain control of their lands.

On Oct. 6, 1879, Captain Richard H. Pratt, a veteran of the Indian wars, opened the first federal Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pa. His motto at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was to "kill the Indian, and save the man." The philosophy of forced acculturation that stripped Indians of their culture, language and religion was quickly embraced by the United States government, which appropriated funds to support more than 400 such church-run schools and several Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Students were trained to become contributing members of American society by receiving training for low-skilled jobs.

Carlisle was modeled on a prison school Pratt had created earlier for Indian prisoners of war in Florida and was run with military precision. Pratt's punitive philosophy of rigid order became the desired model for other Indian boarding schools. Children as young as five years old were taken from their families and subjected to a life of harsh discipline in which punishment was swiftly meted out for offenses such as displaying any Indian tendencies. Their mouths were scrubbed out with lye soap for uttering any words in their native language.

The children were forbidden to visit their parents, forced into hard labor and subjected to a host of abuses, including physical and sexual abuse by school officials, employees and peers, according to former students. Since the schools usually functioned with limited funds, children frequently died from starvation or other preventable diseases.

The system continued well into the 20th century. Students who attended such institutions during the 1970s and '80s recall severe beatings and sexual abuse during their years at the schools.

Toledo, an instructor in early childhood and Native American women courses at Navajo Technical College, and her colleagues with the Boarding School Healing Project are working to create quantitative links between the current epidemic rates of child abuse, domestic abuse and even drug and alcohol abuse in Indian communities and the violent legacy of boarding schools.

A Project Based on Healing Toledo is careful to take a gentle approach in her research among the Diné people about their boarding school experiences. She ensures participants that a Diné counselor will be on hand if any discussion triggers painful emotions. As a second-generation boarding school survivor, she knows whereof she speaks. She admits that trying to be scholarly about a topic that is so deeply personal has been emotionally and physically draining.

Of her own time at mission school she recalls, "I always knew somewhere in my being that I was hurt even though, at age five, I didn't understand the school's true mission of 'killing the Indian to save the man.'"

During the research, participants expressed feelings of loss and detachment from self and family while at the schools, as well as a deep level of low self-esteem of "never being good enough." They also expressed anger and resentment at having to care for younger peers.

After generations of being criminalized for being American Indian, there is tremendous shame attached to these abuses and a reluctance to address them, according to project members. The project's goals are four-fold: healing, education, documentation and accountability. According to their mission statement, "the project is a starting point to address child sexual abuse. By framing abuse as the continuing effects of human rights abuses perpetrated by government policy, we hope to take the shame away from talking about these issues and provide space for communities to address the problems and heal."

Toledo says that the boarding school policy was a direct U.S. governmental policy to colonize native peoples and take away their lands. "Whites justified their want for our lands with the claims that Indians needed to be 'saved' and 'civilized.'"

She says, "In 1818, the House Committee on Indian Affairs put it this way, 'put in the hands of Indian



Pictured here: Colville Indian boys pray before bedtime with Fr. Keyes, St. Mary's Mission School, Omak, Wash., 1959. At many Bureau of Indian Affairs and religious boarding schools, American Indian children were punished for "displaying Indian tendencies."

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children a hoe, a primer and a Bible."

Toledo maintains that Indian people today are suffering the aftershocks of colonization that have resulted in an internalized oppression. She points out that some recent generations of native people have willingly sent their children to government and Christian boarding schools, where they have experienced similar abuses.



Gregory Yates, of Encino, Calif., a lawyer for former students who allege they were abused at Indian boarding schools that were run by religious organizations, waits Oct. 1, 2007, in Spearfish, S.D., to address the South Dakota Supreme Court.

She notes that boarding schools effectively taught Native peoples to view themselves as a sub-class within White American society. "The curriculum was designed to make us into servants and, therefore, economically powerless," she adds.

This process indoctrinated Indians to believe that abandoning their traditional ways for a life of servitude was the best they could hope for; therefore sending one's child to boarding school was providing the child a chance for survival.

Toledo describes the shame and the disowning of individual and cultural reality as an example of the direct fallout from the "boarding school bomb."

She and her colleagues are convinced that without the internalized oppression experienced at the schools, Native communities would not have such high levels of violence now.

"A definition or result of internalized oppression is 'shame and the disowning of our individual and cultural reality,'" Toledo says. She notes that prior to the boarding schools, traditional native cultures did not have significant histories of violence especially against women and children.

"Native people must reclaim their traditional ways of family and discipline and 'decolonize' our minds to overcome these problems," Toledo says. Even today, many American Indian parents send their children away to be educated at boarding schools run by religious groups or the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Conditions at such schools have greatly improved, but Toledo insists that this tendency to send their children away is a vestige of the oppression passed down from earlier generations.

According to the Web site of the office of Indian education programs, 11,500 students currently reside in 56 BIA schools. However, only seven of the schools are located off reservations, and most are now operated by the tribes themselves through local school boards. The federal government's policy of coercive assimilation at the schools has been replaced with Indian self-determination, the BIA's Web site indicates.

Still, the National Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research has reported that all of the 185 residential and day schools are plagued with a lack of funding and substance abuse and suicide among students. A report by the Government Accountability Office found that at least 60 percent of BIA schools have inadequate facilities.

Toledo explains that the Boarding School Healing Project is seen as a restorative project based on healing.

"Healing requires us to restore ourselves, emotionally and spiritually, and work towards justice," she says.

The project also seeks restorative justice through working with human rights advocates and tribal judicial systems.

She points out that one of the forms of genocide, as explained in the international human rights arena, is "forcibly removing groups of people away from their families and homes."

Therefore, Toledo maintains, the boarding school experience qualifies as genocide. Project members have presented their research and findings in a number of national and international forums, including the third session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held in New York City in 2004. In this vein, they are working at gaining reparations from churches and governments for boarding school abuses.



Toledo and project members emphasize that the main focus is healing themselves and their communities. They insist that no amount of money could ever compensate for the pain and atrocities of the past.

Dr. Eulynda J. Toledo teaches early childhood and Native American women courses at Navajo Technical College in Crownpoint, N.M.

Dr. Andrea Smith, assistant professor in the program of American culture at the University of Michigan and member of the Cherokee tribe, also works with the Boarding School Project. She cautions, "This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized meant for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget."

Toledo agrees.

"We have not even touched the surface of abuses. We are slow, because it is painful. But we will do it. We will do it together." Learn more about the project at <http://www.boardingschoolhealingproject.org/>.

--Mary Annette Pember

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