

Boulder-based coalition heals Indian boarding-school trauma



Wounded Yellow Robe, Henry Standing Bear and Timber Yellow Robe before and after their Pennsylvania boarding school gave them "proper" clothes and haircuts. (photo: NAA INV 00606600 courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)

Let the Healing Begin

By Kay Turnbaugh

The story of America's Indian boarding schools remains a little-known chapter in our history. Beginning in the 1800s and continuing into the 1950s, the federal government forced Native American children from their homes and sent them to often faraway military-style residential schools, a policy that had profound effects and is now recognized as cultural genocide.

A movement to bring the story to light and find ways to start a healing process for Native American individuals, families and communities is based right here in Boulder: the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS). Created as the result of a 2011 symposium on the Indian boarding-school policy, the nonprofit coalition has about 60 members and is growing. At the helm of

the board is retired attorney Jerilyn DeCoteau, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota and a resident of Eldorado Springs.



Christine Diindiisi McCleave (left) and Jerilyn DeCoteau of NABS. The Boulder-based coalition seeks to heal the multigenerational trauma caused by America's notorious Indian boarding schools. (photo by Kay Turnbaugh)

DeCoteau is also the daughter of two boarding-school survivors. Her mother and father met in a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Flandreau, S.D. Her mother was sent away to school when she was 6 years old and spoke only Lakota. New students arriving at such schools had their long hair cut short. Their clothes were taken away and replaced by uniforms, and they were punished if they used their own languages. Punishments included having your mouth washed out with lye soap, kneeling on beans or broom handles, or scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush. Students were kept at the schools year-round. Many grew up solely in the company of other children, under the control of a few adults who perceived their wards as savages to be managed and civilized.

DeCoteau says that as a child she felt the results of her parents' alienated childhood experience. "My parents had limited parenting skills—they weren't raised in a family situation," she says. She remembers her mother as "very regimented and stoic, but I think inside she was always sad. She wasn't really affectionate, because she was never parented. On the other hand," she adds with a rueful smile, "my parents came out of the boarding schools with other skills. The schools were good at teaching reading and writing."

Children attending the boarding schools did usually learn to read and write, but according to Boulder's Native American Rights Fund, "generations of these children ... returned to their communities not as the Christianized farmers that the federal boarding-school policy envisioned, but as deeply scarred humans lacking the skills, community, parenting, extended family, language and cultural practices of those raised in their cultural context."

DeCoteau's mother died at 47 from breast cancer, before DeCoteau had a chance to talk with her about her childhood in the boarding schools. "We heard snippets growing up, but our parents didn't talk about it, and we didn't know to ask," she says.

NABS now works to ask those questions, focus public attention on the history of the boarding schools and find ways to heal the damage they caused. The coalition hired its first staff person in October, executive officer Christine Diindiisi McCleave. A member of



Chemawa Indian School, near Salem, Ore., opened in the 1880s. It originally taught Native American children from the Pacific Northwest trades like wagon making, blacksmithing and "girl's industries," later adding farming and becoming an accredited high school in 1927. It still operates as a boarding school—the oldest one in the U.S. for Native students. (photo courtesy Oregon State Library)

the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians in North Dakota, she conducted her master's research on Native American spirituality and Christianity. Her grandfather survived a Catholic boarding school.

Although her grandfather never spoke of his experiences, McCleave sees parallels between the issues Native Americans are grappling with today (alcoholism, high suicide rates, domestic abuse) and the trauma suffered by Indian boarding-school students.

"Many of us know it, feel it, lived it. It's personal for me," McCleave says of her work with NABS. She stresses the need for healing because she knows from personal experience that it helps. "I've been sober for 13 years, and I've done a lot of personal healing work."

Bring the Bodies Home

By the late 1800s, an estimated 500 boarding schools were operating in 18 states and territories, including Colorado. By 1930 an estimated one-third of Indian children had passed through boarding schools. As a result, nearly every Indian family has suffered the effect, the historical trauma, of boarding schools. "And certainly nearly every tribal community has suffered loss of culture and institutional stability," says DeCoteau.



Pupils at institutions like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School rarely saw their families and returned home with PTSD-like symptoms. Many never returned; the school recorded almost 500 deaths and 1,842 escapes between 1883 and 1918. (photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)

Not all the children sent to Indian boarding schools survived. The Native American Rights Fund says reports include the disappearance of babies born to boarding-school students as the result of rape. Unaccounted-for thousands of children died from disease, malnutrition, loneliness and abuse. Survivors reported that many of the dead were buried anonymously, some in mass graves, on the grounds of the residential schools. The remains of these children have never been returned to their families or communities.

“Every boarding school has a graveyard. We would like to have the bodies returned,” says McCleave. At Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, for example, there were nearly 500 deaths and 1,842 desertions between 1883 and 1918. A petition launched this March by NABS and the Northern Arapaho and Rosebud Tribal Nations asks that the remains of students who died there be repatriated. The former school building now houses the U.S. Army War College, and the petition says that relatives of the children who died there “are entitled to have the remains returned so that they may grieve and heal from their loss in whatever way they choose and not have to travel all the way to Carlisle, Pa., to visit them. Nor should they be subjected to any further grieving resulting from having their loved ones identified as a tourist attraction for the Army War College.”

Trauma Through the Generations

The philosophy of Carlisle’s founder, former military man Richard Henry Pratt, was “kill the Indian and save the man.” He stressed civilizing the Indians by teaching them English, converting them to Christianity and giving them a trade. This was the policy the federal government adopted.

The students who survived the boarding schools returned home with problems similar to PTSD. “The policy was, at its core, a policy of cultural genocide,” NARF says. Its negative impacts persist today. Studies have shown that trauma can be passed down through generations—a process called epigenetics. And many Native Americans, including McCleave, believe that the spirits of their ancestors are still with them. That too can compound the trauma.

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— Native American Rights Fund

The Church Connection

NABS is asking the churches that ran Indian boarding schools to contribute to the healing process by doing research on their own roles during the Indian boarding-school era. “Truth-telling is a first essential step in the truth, reconciliation, and healing process,” NABS envisions. The Toward Right Relationship Project, sponsored by the Boulder Friends Meeting,

responded to this call when project director and longtime Boulder County resident Paula Palmer received a Cadbury Scholarship—a research grant that provided room and board for several weeks at the Quaker retreat Pendle Hill in Pennsylvania to study Quaker involvement in the Indian boarding schools. Palmer is a sociologist, writer and activist for human rights, social justice and environmental protection who served as executive director of Boulder-based Global Response for 17 years.

In 1869, Palmer discovered, the Quakers proposed the policy that became known as the Ulysses S. Grant administration's Peace Policy. Its goals were to replace the government's corrupt Indian agents with religious men who would oversee the management of the reservations, convert the Native people to Christianity, settle them into farming lifestyles and educate the children, turning them away from their Native cultures and toward European-American lifestyles. Two branches of Quakerism were put in charge of 16 reservations with a total population of more than 24,000 people. Other Christian denominations managed 56 additional reservations during Grant's presidency.

As a result of her research, Palmer developed a workshop called "Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples," which she and DeCoteau have presented more than 115 times in 18 states at the invitation of churches, schools, colleges, universities and civic organizations.

A version of the workshop was created with Native American facilitators for Native audiences, and a similar but shorter program is offered for middle school and high school classrooms.

NABS hopes that this Quaker project will provide a model for other church denominations to follow.

For more information about NABS, visit www.boardingschoolhealing.org. To learn more about the workshops, contact Paula Palmer at paularpalmer@gmail.com.

Taking Responsibility

A goal of the NABS Healing Coalition is to get the U.S. government to recognize what it did. Native American communities debate whether an apology should be sought, or even would be appropriate, for the wrongs and harms resulting from the boarding-school policy. DeCoteau thinks going to Congress is an important step. She says the federal government needs to accept its responsibilities.

"What we are looking for above all is healing, and that has to be defined by the community," says DeCoteau. She says that after hearing author Sherman Alexie speak in Boulder she realized that her Native communities are depressed: "We are suffering from historical trauma."

And as NABS explains, "Because these harms go on untreated, and until now largely unacknowledged, both the descendants of those harmed and the descendants of those who caused injury are in need of healing."

“Although it’s rare to meet an Indian without a boarding-school background, most people have no idea about this history. A big part of what we’re doing is education, learning how we got to where we are today,” says DeCoteau. “This is our story, yours and mine.”

Kay Turnbaugh is the author of several books, including the award-winning *The Last of the Wild West Cowgirls* and *Rocky Mountain National Park Dining Room Girl: The Summer of 1926 at the Horseshoe Inn*. www.kayturnbaugh.com
