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FACING THE LEGACY OF THE BOARDING SCHOOLS:

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Eulynda Toledo-Benalli Has Devoted Her Life to Saving Diné Knowledge

Eulynda Toledo-Benalli is my Western name. My Navajo name is Nídeezbaa'. It's a warrior woman name. All Diné women have warrior women names signifying the way we go to war and the way we behave in confrontation—the warrior-ness in us.

My father, who did not speak a word of English, was snatched from his hogan at age six by the U.S. government and taken to a boarding school about 300 miles away in Colorado. His hair was cut and his moccasins were taken away. He was just a little boy, but they made him wear a military uniform. The students had to march every morning and only had 15 minutes to eat. The same thing happened to my mother. The curriculum was constructed so that my mother could not become anything better than a housewife, and my father could not become anything better than a farmer. That was the U.S. government's way of trying to change us and take the Indian out of us.

I grew up hearing about the hardships. My parents said get an education — a Western education — because that was the way to survive. My mother also said, "Get an education because you can never depend on a man." Not depending on a man is a very Navajo-woman thing. Navajo women are self-sufficient. We are in control of our homes and property.

When I was five years old, I was sent to a mission boarding school run by the Christian Reform Church at Rehoboth, New Mexico, which was very puritanical. There was a lot of psychological, emotional, verbal, and even physical abuse. My brother, sister, and I seldom went home. We never told our parents about the abuse because we didn't realize we were being abused. Now when my mother hears about it, she cries. She says she didn't know this was going on at the schools. And my siblings and I wonder, "Why did you leave us there?" I could never do that to my children. But you have to understand that the oppression was inter-generational.

I flourished in Western education. I graduated from the University of New Mexico. After college, I took my father's advice to return to my people and taught middle school on the Navajo reservation. I got my master's degree at the University of New Mexico and taught among the Diné for 20 years. I met my husband and we raised a family—three children and one grandchild.

Ten years ago, I was hit by a drunk driver on the reservation. He was a Navajo substance abuse counselor. He died at the scene. I had two collapsed lungs, a lacerated liver and a crushed pelvis and leg. I had been a half-marathon runner before that—that's how I met my husband, our dates would be running dates. My children were one, two, and 13 years old, and it felt like my life was taken away from me. I had to go to rehabilitation therapy and learn to do a lot of things again—to sit, to eat. I couldn't understand why this happened to me.

While I was recovering I would sit in a wheelchair, at home, listening to the radio. I heard about the massacre at Acteal in Chiapas.¹ Immediately I felt their pain. I know what it is to be in a totally hopeless situation. At the same time I became angry, and wondered why indigenous peoples are still being killed. So I started educating myself on what was happening in Chiapas. I thought, "I still have a brain." I could not walk well and I could not do a lot, but because I had a lot of ideas, I decided I would go back to school.

At the University of New Mexico I took a course on the Psychology of Women. I found that I could not recognize myself in the text. So I chose to write my dissertation about Diné women's knowledge. The Diné come from Changing Woman, who is one and the same as Mother Earth. Diné women hold high status in traditional Diné society. We perpetuate Changing Woman through a sacred ceremony for women. I wanted to find out about how much this ceremony had been disrupted by boarding schools. I knew that the boarding schools had disrupted our traditional life, our place in society, our relationship with what we know and think, our

language, and our practices. Even today, the educational systems and the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act threaten our indigenous knowledge. On the reservation, our teachers and principals may be Diné, but they have to follow a policy that is not based on our framework.

Our Diné cultural behaviors are embodied in our language, thought, and prayers, which have always been passed down by our grandmothers and mothers. But these women have been suppressed—our minds have been colonized. Indigenous women's knowledge needs to be documented. This knowledge is uniquely ours and does not have Western categories, but it is just as valid as Western knowledge.

In a lot of ways Diné men have been colonized by the U.S. government. In 1864 the U.S. government rounded up several thousand Dine' and forced them to march 300 miles to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were interned. When we were allowed to return to our lands in 1868, the government only acknowledged men as leaders, and so our tribal leaders and tribal council were only men. The U.S. government also put land titles in the men's names only. Traditionally, when a man marries a Navajo woman, he goes to her place and she is the owner. She has the right to kick the man out. In the Navajo Nation, men honor women. Navajo prayers, songs, and stories talk about the need for us to maintain balance. But today the majority of our tribal councils are men.

As I went through my doctoral program at the University of New Mexico, I realized that all the theories that were considered cutting edge—such as embodied knowledge, language, and thought—were pedagogies that the Diné had used long before Western theorists came upon them. So it was easy for me to use this theory to bring forth Diné traditional knowledge from the women with whom I did my research.

I graduated with distinction because of my ability to weave Western theories with traditional indigenous theories. I now live in Crown Point, New Mexico, and work at one of our Diné community colleges as the director of research. We were the first indigenous nation in this hemisphere to have a college.

Navajo boarding school survivors are finally recognizing the abuse that was done to us, and have started the Boarding School Healing Project. We have realized that a lot of our problems stem from that experience—domestic violence, alcoholism, suicide, abandonment of children, poor parenting skills. My sister and I talk about our parenting skills and we have to apologize to our children. There are a lot of things we learned from the mission schools that we repeated,

and it was wrong—it was not our Navajo way of child-rearing. We have a long journey ahead. The Boarding School Healing Project is starting by documenting the abuse that took place and demanding reparations.

Right now I'm starting the research and documentation for the Boarding School Healing Project by seeking out Diné who went to boarding schools. There is going to be a lot of trauma that comes through, so I have to be prepared to provide support for that. But people are eager to tell their stories.

The Boarding School Healing Project has designated October 6 as a day of remembrance. October 6, 1879, was the day that General Richard Pratt took children from all Nations and opened the boarding schools in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Many children died. When I think about the stories my father told me, I am horrified, especially as a mother. How could anybody snatch children and take them away and say it's because of the law? It must be the most painful thing, not only for the child, but for the parent. Now people have choices. I just tell my children that I would never do that.

I spent so many years of my life being in a Western mindset that I have decided to dedicate the rest of my life to Diné and indigenous women and our knowledge. Some people may be offended by this decision, but I am at a point in my life where that's all I have time for.

1. On December 22, 1977, 32 Tzotzil women and 13 men in the Los Naranjos displaced persons camp in Acteal, municipality of San Pedro Chenzlho, Chiapas, Mexico were murdered by heavily armed paramilitary forces.

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