

# Stewart Indian School museum to tell the full story

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Wednesday, a blessing ceremony will take place to kick off a renovation project that will bring a new cultural center and museum to the Stewart Indian School in Carson City.

Stewart Indian School opened in December 1890 with 37 students from the Washoe, Paiute and Shoshone tribes, and three teachers. By 1919, the number of students had grown to 400.

Stewart was part of roughly 100 boarding schools operated by the federal government starting in the 1870s. The United States was still at war with Native Americans, and part of that battle included forcibly removing Native American children from their families and sending them to schools with the goal of eliminating their language, traditions and beliefs.

For tens of thousands of Native Americans, their time at these boarding schools was characterized by abuse. Even still in the 1960s, a congressional report found many teachers still viewed their job as civilizing the students, not educating them. The schools still had a "major emphasis on discipline and punishment," according to the report.

Starting in the 1960s, the school shifted from vocational training to academics, and for many students, the experience at Stewart in the later years was a positive one.

Stewart operated for 90 years before closing in 1980 due to lack of funding.

Today the 240-acre campus is owned by the state of Nevada and listed on the National Registrar of Historic Places.

But with a troubled past rooted in abuse and government-forced assimilation for Native American youth, how will the new museum and cultural center balance the good and the bad of Stewart Indian School?

## 'IT SAVED ME'

Pam Peterson was 16 when she realized she was at a "sink or swim" moment in her life. She was skipping classes and getting Ds and Fs at her public high school in Pendleton, Ore.

"I just felt like it was a lot of pressure being a Native American student in a mostly non-Indian community," said Peterson, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. "I wasn't getting the kind of help I needed. I could go down the path of drug and alcohol abuse, or I could make a change."

She decided boarding school was the solution.

Chemawa Indian School in nearby Salem, Ore., didn't feel like a good fit, so with the financial support of her tribe, she traveled to Carson City to attend Stewart Indian School in 1976.

"If it hadn't been for Stewart Indian School, I don't know where I would be today," said Peterson. "It saved me."

Though Peterson's mother supported her decision to enroll at Stewart, it wasn't easy after her own experience attending a Catholic school growing up.

"She didn't talk about her experiences much because it was still so hard for her," Peterson said. "But she was never allowed to use her (Native) language, which she spoke fluently, and we were only allowed to learn a few words because she didn't want her children to go through what she had been through."

The contrast between Peterson and her mother's experiences isn't uncommon when it comes to the origins of many Native American boarding schools versus what some ultimately developed into.

"I just hope that they will be willing and open to telling all of the truth from the inception of the Stewart Indian School to where it is now," said Peterson of the new museum and cultural center. "The truth always needs to be told. That's it — plain and simple."

## **'A BAD SPIRIT'**

Herman Fillmore, culture and language resources director for the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, grew up hearing stories of elders' experiences at Stewart Indian School.

His great uncle had such a horrible experience at Stewart he enlisted in the Navy at 17 during World War II to get away from the school, Fillmore said.

"A community elder once told me of how he was walking to the river one day at about the age of 5 when a black car pulled up and two guys in suits grabbed him and enrolled him in school," he recalled. "He had no idea what was going on, but that's how life started for him."

"Another elder once told the story of being at his mother's bedside as she was passing away and he asked her in tears and anger, 'Why didn't you teach me the language and culture?' and she simply replied, 'Because if you didn't know it, they couldn't beat it out of you.'"

Fillmore remembers visiting the first museum at Stewart Indian School before it closed in 2001 and feeling like the information about it was "hokey" and "whitewashed."

But, said Fillmore, he also knows alumni who met the "love of their life" at Stewart and left the school with fond memories, much like Peterson.

"There is definitely a huge duality with how people feel about the school," said Fillmore. "It is a place where Native history can be told, but there was a lot of physical and sexual abuse that took place there, so there's also a bad spirit that hangs over the school."

Nevertheless, he sees potential in the old campus.

"Something positive could come from realizing the school's past," said Fillmore. "There's the possibility of having an immersion school on the campus where we could once again pass on our language and tradition."

## **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

It's a vision Nevada Indian Commission Executive Director Sherry Rupert shares.

"This school was meant to assimilate our Indian children, take away their language, take away their culture, essentially choose a different identity, so with programming through the cultural center and the way we're going to develop the facility out here, we want to bring those things back that were meant to be taken away from us as Native people," said Rupert from the commission's office inside the former home of the Stewart Indian School superintendent.

The Nevada Indian Commission was allocated \$4.5 million from the state in 2017 to renovate the school's administration building into the museum and cultural center and the first Stewart Post Office into a welcome center.

But Rupert doesn't want to stop there.

"I'd love to see the language being taught here," said Rupert. "Right now we have the annual (Stewart Father's Day) powwow, which is part of our culture, but more of the culture being brought back — the traditional arts and teaching facilities. There is so much we could do out here."

Rupert said the commission completed a master plan for the entire campus, one that reimagines the old buildings — handcrafted using masonry techniques by Stewart students — into studios for artists in residence or storefronts for Native-owned businesses.

"My hope is that we'll see life and vibrancy brought back to the campus. We'll see many more of these buildings utilized," said Rupert.

Of the 65 buildings on campus, only a third are currently in use. The rest are boarded up.

Additional state funding as well as public-private partnerships would be necessary to get the buildings ready for use.

In the meantime, the museum team is preparing content for the museum and cultural center, which are slated to open in spring 2019.

Rupert said they have talked at length about how to balance the story of Stewart Indian School, while putting it into the larger context of Indian boarding schools around the country.

The commission formed a cultural advisory committee with Stewart alumni and descendants to collect their stories, and hired researchers and Native artists to interpret the information into an exhibit — one Rupert says will tell the full history of the school.

"It's a sad part of our history that not a lot of people know about," said Rupert. "But through this cultural center and museum and then further development of the buildings out here at Stewart, we are going to be able to tell that story for the world to know about."

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## IF YOU GO

Spiritual leaders from the Paiute, Washoe and Western Shoshone tribes will conduct a special blessing ceremony at site of the future Stewart Indian School Cultural Center and Museum on Wednesday.

The 9:30 a.m. ceremony in Carson City is intended to bless the site before construction begins to renovate the former Stewart Administration Building into the new cultural center and museum.

To learn more about the event, contact Sherry L. Rupert, executive director of the Nevada Indian Commission, at [srupert@nic.nv.gov](mailto:srupert@nic.nv.gov) (mailto:srupert@nic.nv.gov) or 775-687-8333.