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# Today's Remaining Native American Boarding Schools Are A Far Cry From Their History

By [AARON SCHRANK \(/PEOPLE/AARON-SCHRANK/\)](/PEOPLE/AARON-SCHRANK/) • FEB 26, 2016

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At the start of his senior year at Wyoming Indian High School, Tim O’Neal was struggling.

“I was just drinking, partying, trying to be cool,” says O’Neal. “It messed with my schoolwork. My whole class schedule—all seven classes—I was failing and there was no way I could make up the grades, so I just asked my parents if I would be able to go to a boarding school.”

O’Neal ended up at Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon. The school has been there since 1880 and is one of the four remaining boarding high schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education.

“My experience was good there,” says O’Neal. They allowed me to catch up on some schoolwork, and when I caught up, I found out I was top of the class.”

O’Neal went from dropout to valedictorian for Chemawa’s class of ’09. In his year there, he says he learned to take care of himself.

“The best thing was meeting all the new people, other Native Americans, and making lifelong friends,” O’Neal says.

A century ago, children were stolen from their parents and taken to federal boarding schools, where they were abused and stripped of their tribal cultures. In the past several decades, most of those schools were closed or handed over to tribes—as the U.S. shifted away from its policy of forced assimilation. Those remaining, like Chemawa, look much different today, and they’re a popular destination for students from Wyoming’s Wind River Reservation.

“I really liked it,” says Rebecca Bell, who attended Chemawa in the 1980s. “It opened up a new world for me. I got to see the ocean, and I got to do a lot of things that kids back here didn’t even get to do yet.”

Bell’s husband, Lionel, enjoyed his time at South Dakota’s Flandreau boarding school in the 1970s. Bell says what they experienced was much different than what she’s heard of her grandmother’s time at boarding school.

“They had a lot things happen to them—where they cut their hair, and they were told not to speak their language,” says Bell. “But to us, it was just another option for high school.”

She and her husband valued that option enough to send three of their four children off to boarding schools. Bell says the horrors that older generations experienced at these schools never figured into her decision-making, mostly because she didn’t hear much about it.

“They didn’t really talk about it then, but they do talk about it now,” she says.

Back in the 1928, The Meriam Report—produced by the group now known as the Brookings Institution, concluded that children at Native American boarding schools were malnourished, abused and poorly educated.

“The boarding school era began under a military philosophy that was seriously steeped in genocide,” says Sergio Maldonado, the state liaison for the Northern Arapahoe Tribe.

He says that the assimilationist policy of “Kill the Indian, save the man” continued at boarding schools until about the 1970s. More negative reports on Indian education—and the spread of Civil Rights era consciousness—led their gradual shutdown.

Maldonado says the schools still standing today take a different approach.

“Of maintaining one’s cultural identity,” says Maldonado. “So it’s a complete philosophical change—we’re talking about polar opposites here.”

He says today’s remaining boarding schools are an option for Native students looking for independence or a change of scenery, but that doesn’t mean he’s glad they exist.

“Glad they exist? No,” says Maldonado. “Because it is simply the marginalizing of children from tribal communities and families. No, I’m not glad at all. They should have done away with 50, 70 years ago. Maybe even more. But we can’t change history.”

Those who run the existing boarding schools say there’s plenty of reason to keep them around.

“It would be inappropriate to try to remedy some horrible mistakes from the past by eliminating an institution now that is a hopeful place,” says Tripp Doepner, principal of Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California—another one of the remaining boarding schools many Wyoming kids go to.

Things have changed a lot at Sherman in Doepner’s lifetime. He says a Navajo woman who went there in the 1960s and was forbidden from speaking her language now teaches that language at Sherman.

“I believe that those efforts over the past 35 or 40 years have helped transform the nature of what BIE schools have tried to do which is to celebrate the culture of the students, of their families, of their ancestors,” Doepner says.

Some Wyoming students who’ve attended Sherman agree.

“They have a beading class,” says Scottie Nez, a junior at Fort Washakie High School who spent his first two years at Sherman. “And pottery—ceramics class. They have a basket-weaving class. And they have a Navajo language class.”

Fort Washakie freshman Alyssa Whiteplume spent just one semester at Sherman.

“At Sherman, we would do projects on how far back they made the school, and how they were treated there, and how they got taken away from their homes,” Whiteplume says.

Tim O’Neal from Chemawa says knowing that history—and its impact on Native people today—is important, but it shouldn’t discourage students from attending boarding schools.

“Compared to what boarding schools were in the past, they’ve changed a lot—from killing the Indian and saving the man, it’s a lot different these days,” O’Neal says.

O’Neal says if the boarding schools exist when his one-year-old son comes of age, he’d certainly allow him to attend.

*These reports are part of ‘The American Graduate: Let’s Make It Happen’—a public media initiative to address the dropout crisis. Supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.*

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