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Working to heal the wounds of boarding school

United Nations panel hopes to undo the damage caused by U.S. government's Indian boarding school policies

By Karen Lynch

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The trauma of boarding school runs deep in Indian country. Stories, memories and research of this phenomenon were discussed during a session on healing this trauma at the Third U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York, City in May 2004.

Tuba City Boarding School on the Navajo reservation in its heydey in the 1920s.

As a world body, U.N.Permanent Forum geared its theme toward indigenous women, coinciding with sessions that addressed topics affecting indigenous peoples and the effects of boarding school in the U.S.

“People in Indian country are still becoming aware of the effects of boarding school trauma,” said Dr. Eulynda Toledo-Benalli, Dine’, currently performing boarding school healing project research with the Navajo people. “This is something about our history that is not being talked about in a way that encourages healing from its intergenerational trauma.”

She explained that the project fit into the U.N. theme of indigenous women because, “women perform important cultural roles as caretakers and preservers of family and legacy in Indian country.”

As a panelist, Dr. Toledo-Benalli said the pain she suffered as a second-generation survivor affected not only herself but her children, as well. “Many times I have said to my children that I’m sorry for the way I treat them. This is so, because parents learn parenting skills from their parents. It is said that the oppressed become the oppressors.

As Dr. Toledo-Benalli talked about the painful memories as a survivor, the memory of her father who was “snatched and taken to Colorado, to a place that he did not know even existed. My mother who was herding sheep was also snatched.

Dr. Eulynda Toledo-Benalli (right) talks about her experience as second-generation Indian boarding school survivor while Tonya Frichner of the American Indian Law Alliance listens in the session at the United Nations Permanent Forum.

“While at the boarding school, my father said they had to wear military style uniforms and were forced to march around as in the military. The sound of the school bell meant that it was always the time to march.”

Military style regimen became the norm at government boarding schools following the motto of Gen. Richard Pratt, “Kill the Indian, save the man.” Pratt, who commanded an Indian POW camp and is credited with establishing the first off-reservation federal boarding school in 1879.

“This motto on killing the Indian was used a peace policy because boarding schools were run like a lucrative business,” said Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Snipe Clan, Onondaga Nation, Haudenosaunee, President of the American Indian Law Alliance, during the opening statements of the panel on boarding school healing.

"It was also a forced policy rather than a cultural one," said Dr. Andrea Smith, Interim coordinator of the Boarding School Healing Project and a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. "It was a way to spend less money. But, it also introduced violence and abuse, and it repressed traditions based on a patricharchal system. It was essentially a mass violation of human rights."

Attendance at this session included those interested in the topic or associated with its trauma through relatives or family.

"I remember relatives saying years ago, that as children attending a government boarding school in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that they would have to sleep close together because it was so cold in the dormitories," said Vickey Downey, a Pueblo of Tesuque member and representative with Tewa Women United, an organized group of women in the northern New Mexico pueblos.

"These kids also had to pack extra food and fruits like oranges with them when going away to school because they were always hungry."

Peggy Bird, a former boarding school student and now a consultant and attorney with Clanstar Inc., an organized coalition of women working to end violence against battered, sexually abused, tortured, or stalked Native women, said the boarding school experience has had a tremendous impact upon lives of Native women as evidenced by high rates of violence across the country.

"In our work with Native women who are traumatized by violence and assaulted, we are seeing that many of us learned to drink in order to cope with grief, loneliness and poverty."

"I agree that the effects are intergenerational on families," said Charmaine Whiteface, a member of the Lakota Nation who attended the session and currently an advocate in Indian country, "primarily in the area of sexual, mental, physical, and emotional abuses. Prior to the boarding school years, our Lakota people historically had very strict rules of behavior and none of these abuses existed. Since then, crimes being committed are predominantly by felons who are abused in the same way as boarding school children.

"My parents both attended a catholic boarding school and experienced, as well as saw, all these types of abuses. They refused to speak the Lakota language to us and only wanted us to be 'white'. There was alcoholism and major physical, emotional and mental abuse in our home. They knew no other way: They were terrified of being Indian. If it were not for my grandmother who taught me in secret, I might not have even a little knowledge about my culture."

During the session, Dr.Toledo-Benalli mentioned that traditions within families is a mixture of a tribe's traditional teachings, and those of the "oppressors."

"Even though I know my father talked to us in Navajo for discipline, I also remember my mother's silence and her just treating us mean. Because both of my parents attended boarding schools, I realize that it was at times confusing. It is like internalized oppression."

"A definition or result of internalized oppression is "shame and the disowning of our individual and cultural reality. Without internalized oppression, we would not now have previously unseen levels of violence, especially against women and children ."

Healing the effects of violence and intergenerational trauma upon families and persons is taking place among victims throughout Indian country.

"Reparation is possible only when there is total healing," said Whiteface. "First, through awareness that devastation took place by the victims and the perpetrators were the federal government. Secondly, provisions need to be put in place for treatment centers and qualified personnel to deal with post-trauma stress disorder that is generational, often passed down through as many as four generations."

Through the Boarding School Healing Project this is taking place. According to Dr. Andrea Smith, “Our purpose is to provide healing from abuses; to educate Native and non-Native people about the genocidal practices of boarding schools; to document the abuses from survivors and the continued effects; and to build a movement to demand reparations collectively for Native peoples from the U.S. government.”

“For healing must come from our own people, from ourselves as Native people and perhaps through organizing a day of remembrance,” said Dr. Toledo-Benalli. “It was just 130 years ago that my people came back from the Long Walk. Now it is possible that we as Native people have better answers.

Whiteface agrees, that in order for there to long-term healing, “there needs to be the ability for each nation to again be able to re-learn our old ways and to be able to deal with breaking our rules in our own ways. This would mean the abolishment of the Federal Major Crimes Act.

“I know it is a big order, but perhaps the U.N. Permanent Forum is one avenue that could help us do that.”

One of the first writers in Indian country to ever address this topic on boarding schools was Tim Giago, current editor of The Lakota Journal, and a mission boarding school survivor, who in 1978 wrote the book entitled, “The Aboriginal Sin”, documenting the boarding school condition that effects the survivors and their families throughout Indian country.

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