

# ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

## Opinions

### I was No. 77 at an Alaska boarding school. My children gave me the strength to tell my story.

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*A workman repairs fence at the girl's dormitory at the Eklutna boarding school in this 1938 National Archives photo. (National Archives, File)*

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I was called No. 77. I hated myself because of who I was, how I had been born, and mostly because of the face that always looked back at me. I learned I would never be anything worthwhile. So I decided to change it.

I learned the language they taught me, I went to the schools where they sent me and I tried my best. I played their sports and I was good. I excelled and I furthered my education just like they taught me and I was smart. I dressed like the magazines and I ate their foods. I even married the blonde who looked like the cover models.

*[As an elder recalls abuse, the horror of Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools lives on]*

I did my best to fit in, and luckily, the hippie days allowed me to get almost there, to the point of being somewhat comfortable in public. But then came my kids, one after another, until there were five little brown faces that overtook my two-story house with its plumbing and a refrigerator full of grocery food.

And they all looked like me. All of them. It was looking in the mirror again. But this time, when I looked at my mirror images, at these kids, I loved them. I loved them with such a heartbreaking love that I wanted to love myself when I looked in my own mirror.

And then I slowly began the journey, through them, to learn to accept who I was and who I was always going to be, an Indian. My kids were confident and proud; I became confident and proud. They were outspoken and I became outspoken. They knew who they were and wanted to learn where they came from.

I began to teach them, and as my long-ago memories resurfaced, I began to heal. They forced me at times to hurry with my journey to regain my self-confidence. They were young and curious. They did not know the pain and humiliation, the scars I carried, but they also did not know they were the ointment, the healing touch I needed to survive and begin to grow again.

*[Presbyterian Church apologizes at AFN for boarding school abuses]*

Through it all, I began to realize that one person did know about my struggles. The true gut-wrenching fear, sadness and anger I carried. My wife knew, and she watched and waited until one day I could journey on my own and share my story.

This is my childhood; this is who I was, who I became and who I am today. I am Fred John Jr. I am part of the hidden secrets of the 49th state, the last of the attempts of assimilation on the owners of this country. I am no longer scared. I have regained my voice. I want to share my story.

***Fred John Jr.*** is the son of *Katie John* and *Fred John Sr.*; he lives in Interior Alaska.

***Gwendolynne John Jenkins*** is the eldest daughter of *Fred John Jr.* and *Linnea John*; she wrote this based on Fred's recollections of his experience in boarding school.

*She is an Ahtna shareholder and mother, currently living in San Diego and working to enhance health care while raising her children to be respectful of our indigenous cultures and our elders who carry the wisdom we need to sustain healthy, prosperous lives.*

## Comments