




ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Rural Alaska

'Healing event' at Alaska Native Heritage Center commemorates children who died at residential schools in Canada

 Author: **Bill Roth**  Updated: 1 day ago  Published 1 day ago



Jim LaBelle Sr. speaks to people gathered at the Alaska Native Heritage Center for Remembering the Children, a "healing event" commemorating children who died at residential schools in Canada. LaBelle, 74, spent 10 years at two boarding schools in Alaska. (Bill Roth / ADN)

Jim LaBelle Sr. "Aqpayuq" -- "fast runner" in Inupiaq -- was born in Fairbanks in April 1947. His father was white and his mother was from Kotzebue.

LaBelle said his mother was an alcoholic and was given the option to give up her two boys for adoption or send them to boarding school. She chose the latter because she still would get to see them in the summer.

LaBelle is a survivor of 10 years at boarding schools in Alaska. "Powerful over the powerless," is how LaBelle described it. "This happened for generations."

LaBelle spoke Thursday to people gathered at the Alaska Native Heritage Center for Remembering the Children, a "healing event" commemorating children who died at residential schools in Canada and whose unmarked graves have recently been documented.

[US churches reckon with traumatic legacy of Native residential schools]

When he got out of school, LaBelle said, he knew "everything about the world. I did not know who I was as a Native person.

"I learned many years ago boarding school was a place to acculturate and assimilate us. With respect to me, they were pretty successful: I didn't speak my language anymore. I would not know how to do traditional hunting, fishing and gathering. I became estranged from my family. I had a lot of anger."

In 2018, as a member of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, LaBelle took a tour of a cemetery at a boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on the 100th anniversary of the school's closing. LaBelle learned that at least 14 Alaska Native children were buried there.

[Remains of Alaska Native child and 9 more Native Americans buried at Pennsylvania boarding school will be returned to relatives]

“We’ve been in the process of trying to help them find their descendants, find their loved ones. We are trying to figure out a way to get them home. We know that other boarding schools in the Lower 48 have Alaska Native children buried there.”

[More than a century later, disinterment kicks off Aleut girl’s long journey home to St. Paul Island]

About this Author

Bill Roth

Photojournalist Bill Roth, a University of Alaska Anchorage graduate, has been working at the ADN over 35 years.

Support independent reporting on what Alaskans care about most.

Subscribe Now

Log In **×**

Get your first month of unlimited digital access for only **\$1.99**
