

James “Jim” LaBelle Sr.
Boarding School Survivor
Hearing on H.R. 5444
Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act
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My name is Jim Labelle Sr., in my Inupiaq language my name is Aqpayuq or “Fast Runner.” My family originated in Kotzebue, Alaska, and I was born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska. I am a member of the Native Village of Port Graham and a shareholder in the Chugach Alaska Corporation. I am a Vietnam veteran of the United States Navy and have been married for 50 years to my wife Susan. We have three children and seven grandchildren.

I have been waiting to tell this story for my entire life. I come to you as an assimilated man, as an acculturated man. While I received an education and met all of the economic standards of your culture, I lost my family. I cannot speak my language. I cannot do the traditional fishing and gathering I learned as a child.

I was born to a white father and an Inupiaq mother. My mother’s people came from above the Artic Circle on the Bering Sea. My parents met in Nome, Alaska, and were married in Fairbanks where I was born. Before I went to school, I was bilingual and spoke both Inupiaq and English. My dad died at the very young age of 41 from cancer when I was 6 years old. My mother sent us to boarding school, thinking that we would at least be together in the summertime. That plan did work out for a few years, but one year I was met by strangers at the airport who said they would be our foster parents for the summer. I became an unpaid worker on a Fairbanks farm called Cramer’s Dairy where I was basically an indentured servant to that farm. I have recently come to learn that this was an “outing” program which was a common practice for the government to send out boarding school students as unpaid laborers during the summer months.

I was a product of two BIA Boarding Schools from 1955-1965. The first six years I was at the Wrangell Institute in Wrangell, Alaska. I later went to Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka, Alaska. We were sent to Wrangell by plane when they first took me to the airport, I was looked on with a roster, and they saw my name and immediately tied me together with other children with pieces of rope. They fixed a yellow name tag to our clothing and on that yellow name tag was our name, our destination, and our flight information. Speaking English was a commodity. I could see fright in the faces of children who did not speak English. Some children would curl themselves up in a ball and close their eyes and rock back and forth, others would close their eyes and try to blink you out like toddlers do, not wanting to believe they were there. Most of us had never ridden on airplanes before, only increasing the terror.

In Anchorage, we were met with even more children coming from all over. It was like an annual migration, every fall there would be these hordes of Native children coming from all over Alaska into hubs like Fairbanks, Juno, and Anchorage. At Juno, we were placed on PBY planes

which are amphibious. We took off from the water which, again, added to the terror. The entire trip was over a two-day ordeal.

When we arrived at Wrangell, we were bused to the Institute and the tempo began to change. There was an angry urgency in the Matron's voices. The school, like other government institutions, had massive signs that said, "United States Property, keep out." It was very imposing. We were taken into an open area and divided by gender. We were stripped totally naked, our hair was cut, and we were marched to the shower. Many of my classmates had never seen running water before and were frightened by the showers. One boy was hesitant to scrub his body, so a Matron scrubbed his skin until he bled. It sent a message to the rest of us. That first night in our barracks, and for many nights after, we called out for our mothers and cried ourselves to sleep.

Each of us was given a two-digit number marked on our government issued clothing which corresponded with our names. If you forgot your number, you were spanked. Many children had difficult names to begin with, so matrons found it easier to simply refer to them by number. The children who could not speak English did not know how to follow the rules and every time they opened their mouths they spoke in their own language. They were constantly beat. Those who spoke their language were placed on a high stool and given dunce caps. We unwittingly became part of the process of helping our classmates assimilate.

We were used to eating traditional foods such as moose, caribou, salmon, reindeer, berries, and grains. Now we were forced to eat industrial foods in one-pound cans. We had severe stomach issues, diarrhea, vomiting, sometimes all at once. We soiled our pants and beds, and the Matrons would force us to clean our own mess. For those that were deemed uncompliant for speaking their own language, they had to "run the gauntlet." It became a spectator sport. Little five and six year old's had to disrobe in front of other children who were ordered to hit those running the gauntlet with belts, and as hard as they could, otherwise they were next. When I was forced to run down the line, it was never a single run, it was often two or three times.

The most violent thing that will forever be sealed in my memory is, when I was ten years old, I was punished for horseplaying with a friend by a Matron. He forced us into the open shower unclothed and naked as he shielded the open door with his body. He reached in the back and pulled out a firehose. He turned a firehose on me and my friend. The firehose came from a water reservoir on the mountain top above the school which was always caked with ice and snow. I can still remember the incredible pain and shock of not being able to breathe from the force of the firehose. My friend had an ear infection and icy water was getting into his infected ear. He screamed louder than I did.

I witnessed the same matron punch out another friend of mine so hard that he splayed my friend's cheek open all the way up to his ear and half of his face fell open. He was immediately unconscious and came back from the hospital with his mouth wired shut. He could only drink through the straw. This violence became a daily reminder of the Matron's enjoyment for inflicting pain on children. Today we call them sadists.

There was also sexual abuse. These schools were magnets for pedophiles. At lights out, Matrons would start molesting the youngest children in the lower bunks and bathrooms. There were two or three Matrons on duty, and we were an open field of candidates they could abuse at their whim. As these children reached their early teens, many of them began molesting the younger children as well. So began the cycle of sexual violence in the school. In the girl's dorm, I can still remember girls going home as young as 11 years old and they were pregnant. One girl told me that she was a favorite of an administrator, and he would call her down from class and molest her every single day in his office. She admitted to me that she cut herself to relieve the pain and had maybe more than one personality. She passed away a few years ago now, and I think she is in a better place.

On our first summer returning home, my younger brother Kermit and I were eager to see our family again. Yet, because of how long we had been away, he asked, "I wonder if our mother will remember us?" During our ten years in boarding school, we indeed became estranged from our mother. We lost our ability to speak our language and do our traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering. At the end of 10 years, I did not know who I was as a Native person. I didn't know who I was because they never told us who we were. I learned American history, world history, math, science, and English, but never who I was as an Inupiaq person. I did not know what it was like to have a father figure or mother figure.

When I had children, I did not have the toolset that could make a parent. That lasted from when my children were 8 to 18, the years I was at boarding school. I could only relate to them when they were younger and when they became adults. I passed down to my children their own inabilities to speak their language or know their traditions as well. Some of them have children, and now that I am a grandparent, I can see some of my own grandchildren also not having any idea how to speak their traditional language.

Everything I have described happened to thousands and thousands of Alaskan children for generations. You have generations of children each experiencing the same kind of thing at boarding schools. It wasn't just BIA schools, there were also many Mission schools. Almost every denomination in Alaska had a boarding school, whether it be Presbyterians, Quakers, Lutherans, Methodists, Moravians, even Baptists. At Wrangell every fall the school would have the local churches come out to the school and we were divvied up to a denomination. My mother was a Quaker, but there were no Quakers who came to Wrangell. My brother and I were arbitrarily assigned to the Southern Baptist church, where we had religious instruction every Wednesday night and every Sunday morning for six years. These were federal schools, but yet they had an open-door policy with the local churches. Many times, I was told my mother was a product of the devil because she could speak her language and practice her traditions. I became ashamed of her, and never had the chance to apologize to her for that.

I have experienced large chunks of missing time in my memory, and many of my classmates became street people or alcoholics and committed horrible crimes they were incarcerated for. Some committed suicide. I have experienced many adverse health effects for my entire life because of poor nutrition and lack of proper healthcare at boarding schools. I have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, type II diabetes, thyroid illness, shingles, and

cataracts. It took many years of learning and therapy to undo the things at boarding school which I thought were normal.

This history has been forgotten and washed away. This Congress must confront our stories and the painful history of boarding schools.

Thank you.