



Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma
PO Box 470
Pawnee, OK 74058
918.762.3621 communications@pawneenation.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, July 10, 2022

Pawnee Nation Delegation responds to Department of the Interior's Road to Healing, "concrete acts of atonement"

ANADARKO, OKLA – All Native Americans, “carry the trauma of boarding schools,” said Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Saturday, at her first stop on her Road to Healing tour, a national tour to meet with U.S. boarding school survivors. A Pawnee Nation delegation attended the emotional and revealing meeting at Riverside Indian School in Anadarko, Okla., one of the oldest U.S. Indian boarding schools.

“I’m so proud of all the elders who spoke so openly and bravely about the abuse, rape, and human trafficking they experienced at these schools as children...they were so brave and a lot of them said this was the first time saying these things out loud...it was very emotional and a lot of us were just in shock,” said Pawnee Nation Executive Director Jenifer Gover LittleSun who was part of the Pawnee delegation who listened to hours of testimony about the trauma endured at the hands of U.S. government and Christian denomination educators and staff.

Executive Director Gover LittleSun said the delegation included herself, Pawnee Nation Business Council (PBC) President Echo-Hawk, Nasharo (Chief) Council Head Chief Pat Leading Fox, First Nasharo Chaui Band Matt Reed, PBC Secretary George Gardipe, Linda Jestes, boarding school survivor, and David LittleSun, Director of tribal Re-Entry programs working with ex-offenders and their families dealing with generational trauma. The Pawnee Nation delegation “were in attendance to represent their Red Star Families,” survivors of boarding schools, as well as second and third generations of Pawnee boarding school descendants who live with generational trauma.

“Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act Fund of March 3, 1819 and the Peace Policy of 1869 the United States, in concert with and at the urging of several denominations of the Christian Church, adopted an Indian Boarding School Policy expressly intended to implement cultural genocide through the removal and reprogramming of American Indian and Alaska Native children to accomplish the systematic destruction of Native cultures and communities,” according to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, a national nonprofit that supports the ongoing need for healing and awareness.

Gover LittleSun said the testimony is necessary to validate the trauma that occurred for the survivors and to start addressing funding for the lack of quality behavioral health services for

victims and their community's generational trauma. Native communities are often underserved and at or below poverty level.

“Have you ever heard of a school with a cemetery?”

On May 11, 2022, the Department of Interior released Volume One of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, an investigative report that recently confirmed, “from 1819 to 1969, the federal Indian boarding school system consisted of 408 federal schools across 37 states or then territories, including 21 schools in Alaska and 7 schools in Hawaii. The investigation identified marked or unmarked burial sites at approximately 53 different schools across the school system. As the investigation continues, the Department expects the number of identified burial sites to increase.”

Boarding school survivors testified on Saturday about their own abuse and the abuse of others for speaking their language and for just being vulnerable children taken from their homes. Some spoke out about ongoing sexual abuse, and human trafficking, and some children never coming back after being purposely taken by school officials. Deaths of Native students attending the boarding schools was so common that many have cemeteries with marked and unmarked graves of Native children of all ages from infant to young adult.

“Have you ever heard of a school with a cemetery?” said Gover LittleSun about the appalling survivor testimony.

Unlike the hundreds of other Indian Boarding Schools, the Pawnee Agency and Boarding School does not have a marked or designated cemetery on site and that is troubling to members of the delegation who have heard passed down stories of murdered children being buried in the basements of the school's buildings.

“Gray U”

The Pawnee Agency and Boarding School was established when the Pawnee Nation Nebraska reservation was ceded to the U.S. government and the Pawnee people relocated to Indian Territory in the 1870s. The boarding school closed in 1958 but the school's abusive history remains, and it is more commonly known for its student given name, “Gravy U,” a generous description of a “slop” that was served for most meals of the day and cruel substitute for the indigenous foods the children had known.

The school practiced the same cruel abuses and human rights violations committed at other Indian boarding schools and its curriculum and purpose reflected the same cultural and language assimilation. In 1968, the federal government returned the land to the Pawnee Nation and today the remaining functional school buildings are used as offices for the Pawnee Nation government, vital community public services provided by the Pawnee Nation, and the Pawnee Nation College, established in 2004.

Gardipe said, “after hearing testimony given by those directly forced into boarding schools, I find it unbearably difficult to fathom a time when it was a policy to remove our grandmothers,

grandfathers, dads and moms from their childhood homes in order to remove the "Indian" from them- to strip their language, religion and traditions.”

“This abuse has created a cycle that is continually repeating itself within our community. Alcohol abuse, drug abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse; they all began with these boarding schools... We need to recognize that [and] understand where it came from and make the decision that it stops with us. We are all walking around with patterns of behavior that we think are cultural, ‘not standing up for ourselves, don’t make eye contact, don’t speak up, just take it and move on.’ Our ancestors did not behave that way. It’s evidence of these destructive government policies, the biggest of which were these boarding schools,” said Reed about the generational trauma currently affecting the Pawnee people as a result of Indian boarding schools.

Atonement and healing

“President Echo-Hawk really summed up the best way for the US to atone for their policies, which continue to this day in some aspect,” said Reed about solutions to the U.S. policies that caused appalling child abuse that created generational trauma and loss of culture of language. “That path of atonement is support, financially or some other way, for tribes to strengthen and nourish their language programs. The destruction of tribal languages was a major assimilation objective for the [Bureau of Indian Affairs] for decades. Supporting tribal programs to reverse this destruction is the easiest and most direct way that the U.S. government can atone for their policies.”

During testimony, President Echo-Hawk addressed the more than 300 attendees, stating “concrete acts of atonement are required in any healing process and in this instance BIA language funding is needed to restore damage done to Tribal languages in boarding schools and the human rights of Native peoples need to be recognized to prevent culture and language destruction at the hands of the government from ever happening again,” said Echo-Hawk.

He also asked the United States to stand with Canada in adopting and announcing The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an international document that enshrines the rights and freedoms of all human beings so that the atrocities and cultural genocide will never happen again on U.S. soil.

Gardipe added, “as appalled as I was to listen to these difficult recollections, I am glad I was a witness to these atrocities- as I will never forget. As a tribal leader engaged in government-to-government relations, we cannot forget the struggles our ancestors endured in order for us to still be here today. This should affect every leader in Indian Country today- to the effect that we will stand strong in forging a greater path for our people in dealing with local, state, and federal governments in the future.”

Contact Executive Director, Jenifer Gover LittleSun at 918.762.3621 or jlittlesun@pawneenation.org for more information.



About the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma - The Pawnee Nation has a long and proud history spanning more than 700 years. Early in the 18th century, more than 60,000 members of the Pawnee Tribe inhabited the area along the North Platt River in Nebraska. The Tribe then, as it is now, was composed of four distinct bands: the Chaui “Grand,” the Kitkehahki “Republican,” the Pitahawirata “Tappage” and the Skidi “Wolf.”

Today, the number of Tribal enrolled members is over 3,200 and Pawnees can be found in all areas of the United States as well as foreign countries within many walks of life. Pawnees take much pride in their ancestral heritage. They are noted in history for their tribal religion rich in myth, symbolism, and elaborate rites.