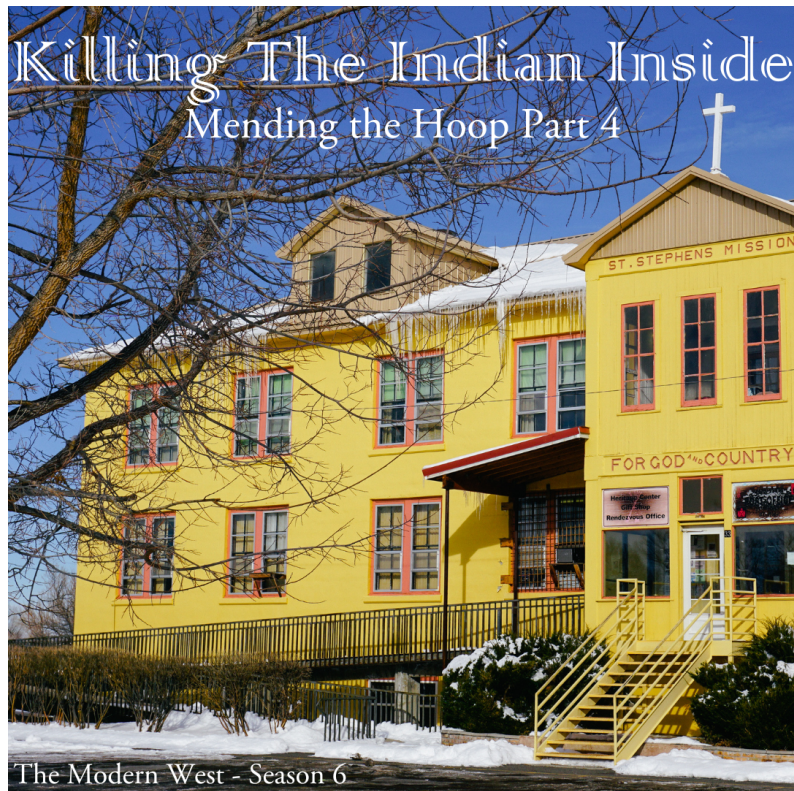


Killing The Indian Inside



I first became aware of the chilling history of U.S. Indian boarding schools when I lived in Flagstaff, Arizona. I remember visiting some friends on Third Mesa on the Hopi Reservation. Diana was my coworker at a local preschool. She taught the two year olds, I taught the four year olds. She told me, growing up, she didn't get to spend much time living in her family's village. When she was very young, government officials came and took her away to a boarding school 265 miles away in Albuquerque, New Mexico and that's where she spent most of her childhood.

Diana was a quiet person and she didn't say much about how this affected her, just that she was sorry she didn't get to learn a lot of her community's traditions. But I also got to be friends with her partner Donald. He was a jewelry maker – I still have a pair of his traditional silver-on-black earrings that I cherish. And he told me the story of why he never went to boarding school. When the government officials came to take him, his parents told him to run and hide in the rocks on the cliffs of Third Mesa. So Donald was able to stay and learn the language and farming techniques and ceremonies passed down in his village since time immemorial. He grew up in the 1960's.

Recently I realized just how incredible it is that Donald's parents risked hiding him. Because in 1894, a group of Hopi parents also refused to let their children go to boarding schools and they were actually put in prison for it for years on Alcatraz Island off the coast of California.

I found out about these 19 parents in a zoom call with Deirdre Whiteman.

She tells me, “I’m Meskwaki/Dakota/Ojibwe/Hidatsa and I’m enrolled in the three Affiliated Tribes of North Dakota. I’m currently the Director of Research and Education at the National Native American boarding school healing coalition.”

Deidre emailed me a photograph of these parents, standing and sitting against a stone wall in prison fatigues, their hair still cut in traditional bobs.



Photo of Hopi prisoners on Alcatraz was sent back home to prove that none of them had died.

Credit: National Park Service

“And if you just look at that,” she says, “it’s all black and white. And if you just look at them, they’re very like, stoic looking. But once you read more into the reason why they’re there, it just breaks your heart. Because the large American public just thinks, oh, they’re just savages, and they’re not really educated. But these were very intelligent people, they knew what they were fighting for, and what they were about to lose.”

Here’s what the army said about keeping the parents:

“[They will be] held in confinement, at hard labor, until . . . they shall show . . . they fully realize the error of their evil ways . . . until they shall evince, in an unmistakable manner, a desire to cease interference with the plans of the government for the civilization and education of its Indian wards.”

“And so they gave everything they had to not send their children to the schools, and some paid the ultimate sacrifice,” says Deidre. “You know, some died, just trying to protect their children from not going to the schools.”

Maybe you’re thinking, but why? Why wouldn’t parents want their children to attend school? In our modern minds, attending school is synonymous with a stable society. When we hear about war-torn countries where children can’t go to school, it’s a sign that things have really deteriorated. So why would Indigenous parents die to keep their children from going?

Well, actually, Deidre says, at first they *did* willingly send them. When Europeans first started schools for Indigenous children in the 1700's, they weren't boarding schools...they were day schools, like our public schools today. Their parents took them in the morning and picked them up at the end of the day.

She says, "In a lot of the research that we've done, these so-called schools or missions or day schools, they all started with first contact. Praying towns."

She says in her research, one of the first schools was started by Spanish Jesuits in Florida. She says their goal wasn't to assimilate the children.

"At first they weren't to convert, but more to understand and kind of get in with the communities, the Indian people. It was more trying to Christianize the people, and then communicate. Communication was key, because the people, the Europeans who were coming over didn't know the land, didn't know where they were. So they needed a way to communicate."

And Deidre says most of the time, Native Americans were happy to share their knowledge with the newcomers. That is, until these Europeans started reverting to the old ways they'd left behind. Old ways of hoarding resources.

"It was all about land – land and resources," she says. "And they saw and there's documentation, they saw how precious and how we valued our children, and we held them up to a high regard. And so in their minds, they saw that, well, what better way to get access to all of these resources than to start teaching these children English, to start taking them from them? And the missionaries were like, we're getting tired of teaching these children, but they're not listening, and they're going home to their families."

These newcomers started laying claim to everything: land, water, gold and the most precious resource of all, children. And this resource became especially valuable at the end of Plains Indian Wars.

Thousands of Miles from Home

In 1877, the Northern Arapaho Chief Black Coal traveled with a delegation of tribal leaders to Washington DC to plead their case to President Rutherford Hayes. The thing was, the Northern Arapaho still didn't have a reservation. Their preference was to live with their old enemies the Shoshone on their reservation in what's now central Wyoming because it lay at the foot of the majestic Wind River Range. The U.S. army didn't know what to do with the Arapaho and so they started marching 950 people south toward Oklahoma. All that marching had left the Arapaho in bad shape. So the Eastern Shoshone's Chief Washakie agreed to let them finish out the winter there with the understanding that they'd leave in the spring. Now the army saw they had the Arapaho between a hammer and an anvil.

Jordan Dresser is a documentary filmmaker who knows this history well. He's a handsome, clean cut guy with a quick smile, a mover and shaker I've interviewed a lot of times over the years. In fact, when we sat down to talk, Jordan was just wrapping up a term as the chairman of the Northern Arapaho tribe. He's only 38.



Jordan Dresser was just wrapping up a term as the chairman of the Northern Arapaho tribe.

Credit: Ana Castro

“Well, I mean, for me, being a leader was tough,” he says. “But nothing takes the cake like those leaders, like Chief Black Coal, Chief Sharp Nose. They're in war times, and they had to make tough, tough, tough decisions.”

And the toughest decision was when the U.S. army came to Chiefs Black Coal and Sharp Nose and said, okay, sure, your tribe can stay here on the Wind River. Make your home here forever. No prob. But on one condition. You gotta give up your own children.

Jordan says, “At the end of the day, some of them had to part with their children. Just imagine that.”

Jordan got his start working at the tribal historic preservation office. That was back when Yufna Soldier Wolf was the director. She’s a descendant of Chief Sharp Nose. I’ve known Yufna a lot of years. She’s a petite woman, eternally youthful and a bit shy...she doesn’t necessarily look like what she is – one of the biggest go-getters I’ve ever known. She says this demand for tribal leaders to give up their children shows this was an act of war.

“Our kids were being held hostage,” says Yufna. “How do you break a family? How do you break a tribe is you take their kids away. That's their future, their language, their culture, everything because you're passing on that legacy of who you are through these children. And so the government knew that.”

Jordan says, “The idea was to take these sons from these chiefs and almost chopping off and ending that lineage. And basically saying, like, we're going to take them, we're going to change them. And at the end of the day, some of them had to part with their children. You know, just imagine that, but it was a way to change a whole culture.”

Yufna says both Black Coal and Sharp Nose were forced to put their children on a train headed to Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania.

“This wasn't like the luxury train,” she says. “These were boxcar cattle cars that they were taken out on. They didn't stop to let you use the restroom or eat anything. So when the kids got there, they were really just dirty. They were sitting in the dark for so long. I mean, that experience is something that even myself, I'm like, no way, you know, no way. But at that time, the men and the women chiefs at that time their hands were tied. And so their experience as children. The youngest at that time in 1881, was five years old. So two years later, he passed away, and I think he was eight in 1883.”

Yufna Soldier Wolf spearheaded the effort to repatriate the remains of three children buried at Carlisle Industrial Boarding School in Pennsylvania.

Credit: Ana Castro



Fourteen children got on the cattle train that day in 1881, all of them the children of tribal leaders. Yufna says they were taken as punishment since it was just two years after warriors had soundly defeated the U.S. army at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Some of these kids had even been among those splashing in the river when the army attacked. The parents sent their children off in good faith... each with a gift for their new teachers. But only a few years later, all but six of these children would be dead, three of them

buried in a school graveyard at Carlisle. The school was started by General Richard Henry Pratt who ran the Fort Marion Prison in St. Augustine, Florida where Native Americans were kept. He experimented on these prisoners to see if he could teach them to assimilate and came up with a new philosophy about educating Indigenous children.

Here's Deidre:

“He saw that through military style training or whatever, that they could really, they were teachable. And so through that process came the idea of well, because it's more expensive to exterminate people, how about we just educate them, and we start with their children. What his most famous quote was, let's kill all the Indian that's in them, but save the man that's in them.”

Here's another way Pratt expressed it:

“In Indian civilization, I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indian in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.”

And so this military style approach to kill the Indian and save the man was set in motion. It had the full support of the U.S. government. In 1867, President Ulysses S. Grant convinced Congress to pass his so-called Peace Policy that put Christian churches in charge of assimilation policies like boarding schools. So Pratt started Carlisle Industrial School, and the government started rounding up children. Attendance was mandatory.

Deidre says, “As soon as those trains came in, students were taken off these trains, they were taken into these certain rooms, where their hair was cut, they were scrubbed with lye or gasoline. I mean, my own grandpa, he went to school in the 1930s. And he, I remember, a story my mom telling me, like, they cleaned their hair with gasoline. And so these practices still continued up until the 1930s. But they would then either cut their hair or shave their hair. As a young kid, you know, we were taught our hair was sacred.”

Jordan says, “So if you think about it, it's way across the country, and they were taking kids from the Plains area, and the Southwest, just kind of everywhere. So that was strategic, because it removed them from a place that, like, if they ran away, where would they go? They're thousands of miles away from home. It was strategic on their part. It really isolated them.”

Yufna says, “Once you get there, and you're getting pulled off a train, and they're like, I don't like those pants, I don't like that shirt, take all of that off and just getting it yanked off, thrown in a wagon, being shackled, and taken to the guard house, which is actually a jail. Imagine a five year old, being put in jail. We went and one of my nieces went and pulled up the floor. And there's actually a dungeon in there.”

The goal was to scrub away every memory of their former lives. Deidre says these schools put children to work learning trades so they could be useful in U.S. society – blacksmithing, farming, cooking, laundry.

“If you stepped out a line, if you spoke your language, you were hit,” she says. “Again, and this was not done. This is something new, they’ve never in their families, they weren’t hit. We didn’t hit our children. There goes that, like psychological abuse and physical abuse, just because of being who you are.”

Yufna says this cultural shaming must have been extremely confusing for the children.

“You’re thinking, like, Why didn’t our parents keep us here? What’s going on with that? And one of the biggest things that I learned with elders talking about this was that they saw their parents were like, go ahead, sure, take them. But they didn’t know that their parents were receiving punishment for hiding them, getting the rations taken away. A lot of women go into jail, losing their their next babies in jail or being raped or tortured in jail, getting their food taken away. So their parents were not only they weren’t the only ones suffering, their parents are going through that same systemic assimilation. And so these children, when they grew up, thought, I have nothing to go back to. I’ve been abandoned, they allowed us to be abused, they allowed us to let all this stuff happen to us, and have that resentment.”

And Carlisle was just the test case. This approach to turning Indigenous children into white children was adopted nationwide. Soon there were 357 Indian boarding schools in 30 states. And over 60-thousand children were forced to attend.

Here’s Deidre again:

“It was these techniques, the psychological warfare that they did on these children, this conditioning to make them hate themselves, train them to think that everything about them, who they are as a Native person, as a Native young person, it’s bad. It’s bad, their skin is bad, their hair is bad, their language is bad, the food they eat is bad, the clothing they wear is bad, nothing about them is right.”

The medical care in these schools wasn’t great and diseases spread rapidly. Measles and tuberculosis epidemics killed lots of children. But parents were rarely informed their child had died. The children themselves often dug the graves of their classmates without the benefit of their own cultural grieving traditions. Not only that, they were required to convert to Christianity. Jordan says that created its own confusion.

Jordan says, “Just imagine these kids and the mixed messages they will get sent, you know, like, God loves you, but then yet, here’s somebody from the church doing something to you that’s already, hitting you or sexually abusing you. Like, that had been a very big mind trip that you’d be like, it would throw off your perception of reality, like, what’s up? What’s down? What’s right, what’s wrong? But most of all, is just discarding them and using them as basically objects.”

Indigenous children experienced sexual abuse and even pedophile rings at the boarding schools. That kind of psychological warfare, as Deidre called it, got baked into the Indian boarding school system. Several years back, Yufna introduced me to Betty Friday, a Northern Arapaho woman who attended boarding schools in the 1950’s. Betty shared her story with me. She has since passed away, but her daughter Fawn gave me permission to share it here. I remember Betty as warm and easy to laugh, a careful storyteller.

“I’m 70 years old now,” Betty said. “But when I was a little girl, probably four or five years old, my parents divorced. Consequently, alcohol was involved. So they put me in a boarding school. For the first time I was at St. Stephen’s over here. I wasn’t there very long, because I got sick, and they had to take me out.”



Betty Friday attended the St. Stephens boarding school when she was four years old.

Credit: Ana Castro

Even though she was very young, she remembered living in fear there.

She told me, “I just remember the nuns being so mean. They always had this big stick, they would be walking around with it if you did something wrong, you know, they tap you with that.”

After she recovered, Betty and her brothers were sent to a new boarding school, St. Michaels, an Episcopal Indian Board School near the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota. This school was in operation from 1886 until 1967...almost the full span of the boarding school era.

Betty said, “I remember it took us two days to get there. My grandfather took us in his pickup. And we had to ride in the back, you know. Of course, it was like in August, and I remember we went when we got

to Wakpala and this boarding school was up on a little knoll like, and there was just grassland all the way around. And there was a little stream that ran down at the bottom of this knoll. There was a big red building, three story building, and half it was for the boys and half of it was for the girls.”

Her grandfather dropped her off there and drove away.

“I’m sure that if my grandfather had his way, we would have just stayed there with him. But it was really overwhelming, because it was so isolated. I mean, it’s isolated here. But up in South Dakota, it’s more so. You know, and so you didn’t see a house for miles. So even if you ran away, you wouldn’t know where to run.”

She was immediately taken away from her brothers and put into an area filled with Indigenous girls of all ages. If she saw her brothers in the halls or in class, she wasn’t allowed to sit by them or talk to them.

“I couldn’t associate with my twin brother, but they wouldn’t let us talk to them,” said Betty. “So him and I would have to sneak to talk to each other. He was real good friends with the cook. And she would give him extras like an orange or apple. So he’d find me and he give me an apple or orange. You know, we didn’t have that much to eat. And we would go down to this little stream and there was trees. And we would go down there and sit and talk but we only had a certain amount of time.”

Betty saw up close General Pratt’s military approach to assimilating Indigenous children. Even though the Plains Indian Wars were over, now the government was fighting a cultural war. She never learned Arapaho but she said, she “understood it. I never spoke it but I know that the other kids couldn’t talk it. And my husband said that when he went to boarding school down at St. Michael’s. He couldn’t talk it and he’s real fluent. And they told him if we catch you then you get extra duties and he said that’s why I can wash dishes. It doesn’t bother me because he said I’d get caught all the time.”

Other cultural traditions like music were also banned.

Betty said, “In my household, my grandfather sang to us all the time. He would sing to us in the morning to wake us up. And he would sing during the day and he would sing at night. He always had his little drum above his bed. And so I missed that. And there was a girl that had some, she had a little record so we would try to play and they wouldn’t let us play it.”

“Because the record was like, it had traditional songs?” I asked her.

“Yeah, it had the Indian songs, and you miss that because that was something that you were used to all your life. And even now, to this day, when I play that music, I’ll just go right to sleep at night.”

Even though attendance was mandatory, Congress didn’t allocate these schools enough funds to run them. Instead, they relied on the children’s manual labor. Even though she was only six years old, that included Betty.

“We had certain jobs we had to do,” she said. “And I would do the stairs from the top floor down to the bottom, I would have to sweep and mop it and wax it. Every day, I had to do this.”

But it was at night that the worst abuses happened at St. Elizabeth’s.

“Was there abuse of kids?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said, “There was there was some sexual abuse. It didn’t happen to me, but the other girls, the older girls would tell me, you would hear them talk about it. And some of them would cry.”

“Was that from the instructors or who was it?”

“Well, it was from the priests,” she said. “We had a priest there. They had a little house over away from the school. You know it was going on because you all stayed in the same room. One time, I remember for some reason I woke up in the middle of the night. And I could hear her crying. And then I saw and I couldn’t figure out why he was there. And that’s alright, go back sleep, he told me. That was my first rude awakening. When I think about it, and I think, oh my god, how many? How many other girls? And boys. You know the boys had to go through it too.”

In fact, Betty believed her older brother was a victim of sexual abuse by the priest as well.

“All through his life, he was troubled. To the end, he was a very angry, a very angry person. And it finally dawned on me one day, this is what happened to him. But he never talked about it. But he did go to drug and alcohol treatment. And that did stop his drinking. But he was still angry. But I’m still to this day thinking that he was probably molested at the boarding school.”

Betty believed that’s why her older brother ended up leaving the school early. She and her twin brother stayed through the school year and after that they went to public schools where they experienced plenty of discrimination. But her time at St. Elizabeth’s left an indelible mark on her that lasted a lifetime.

“My brother and I have always been close, we grew up together and not to be able to talk to him when I wanted to was real hard for me,” said Betty. “And we talked about this one day. It was a couple of years ago. And he said, Sis, what’s the unhappiest time of your life? I said, when I went to boarding school, St. Elizabeth, that was the hardest.”

And because of that pain and shame few boarding school survivors talk about their experiences. But when Yufna started collecting these stories, she realized, if we want to heal this history as a community, we’ve got to get the remains of our ancestors back from Carlisle.

“Our Histories Matter”

Yufna grew up with a very strong message: whatever you do, don’t forget the kids we lost. Especially the little boy named Little Chief who the school renamed Dickens.

Yufna says, “I was like growing up, I could relate to this kid, not wanting to go to school or getting all his things taken away or whatnot. Those stories are really prominent, because I was always like, sitting at the table like this, people would come visit my dad and talk, but they would always cry at the end. Like, why did this happen? You know, and they themselves being boarding school survivors. And so they always talk about let's not forget that he's there. Little Chief's little brother, and my dad's dad had went to school at Carlisle – he came home. So he would always say, don't forget, my brother's there. Don't forget, don't forget. So generation after generation it was just that shared information about who this boy was, how he got there, and those roles that they played.”

But it took Yufna a while to realize what it was that needed to be remembered.

She says, “My grandpa, my dad's dad played football with Jim Thorpe there. And so it was always good, happy, athletic stuff. But it was never actually about the healing that needed to take place, the abuse, the atrocities, the horrific things that these children are going through. We want to celebrate these kids as athletes, but let's not acknowledge the fact that what we've done to their families in their homes. And so within that time of sitting with elders and tribal leaders and relatives, we would talk about that process. Like we need to do this, or it needs to happen. But then it would be full of traumatic stories that, like, I was literally sitting in elders homes crying, literally listening to men and women tell their stories of like, man, I thought I had it hard in school, you know, you guys had it way bad.”

Sitting at those kitchen tables, Yufna knew a time would come when she would need to act. But she also knew she had to wait for just the right moment.

“And so that process was bringing our community together and making sure our tribal leadership and our representatives and everybody was healthy enough, our self preservation was there. And we were strong enough – mentally, physically, financially to go forward. Because nobody set the precedent to bring these kids home. We need to do that. And if we could do that, other tribes will be able to benefit from that.”

I covered one of Yufna's meetings way back in 2016 and, I'll tell you, it was standing room only. I sat in back next to Yufna's father, Mark Soldier Wolf, an esteemed elder. [ambi from meeting?] The community was definitely ready. Yufna started sending letters to the U.S. Army that now runs a college on the property, requesting to exhume the graves of the three children buried there...and she started getting their rejection letters. At that meeting, she read one of these aloud:

“The conditions of the graves are fragile and movement would be extremely difficult to move and would affect other inhabitants of the graveyard.”

But Yufna wouldn't take no for an answer. She demanded next steps. The army reluctantly told her they needed notarized affidavits from family members.

She says, “So I went to each Arapaho community hall and was like, I'm here today, if you're related to these people, come and enrollment will notarize every affidavit. I need to have them done by this week, because by the end of the month, I need to have traveled to Spokane, Washington to see the army and submit them. And I think the army was like, jump through these hoops, right?”

She scraped together the gas and hotel money to make the drive to Washington to meet with the army. Their officials sat in a giant conference room at the end of a very long table.

She remembers, “And they were like, Okay, well, who's here to claim their kids today? And I was like, all I had was my backpack. And that's everything. I was living out of my backpack for that whole week. And I was like, me, and they were looking at me, like, I felt like, looking down on me honestly, like, what's this little girl wanting to, you know, have a, say? I was sitting there with my two elders. And I was like, can we come up? And they were like, Yeah. And they were like, all looking at each other. And I was like, well, a month ago, you guys asked that I bring these affidavits. I have them. They're all notarized. And we're ready to go, what is your next process? And they were like, Hold on here, you know. And so I pull everything out of my backpack and give it to them. And they all sit down at their table and go through each one of them. And they're like, she has everything ready to go. And they were like, we're gonna have to get back to you on that next step.”

The army had never done this before, given permission for a tribe to reclaim their ancestors' remains. They had no idea what the protocol was. But Yufna knew.

“And so they had to come together and be like, we need to figure out a process,” she says. “And I was like, You repatriate from other countries all the time. You repatriate other soldiers who pass away in other countries fighting for this country. These kids don't leave this country, these kids are here on American soil. And it's hard for you to tell us that you have to figure that out. So in the end, they figure it out that process, and then they have already processes for NAGPRA, in Section 106.”

You're probably wondering, what's NAGPRA?

Let me get Jordan to explain that one:

“NAGPRA is a federal law that was passed in 1990 and is called the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. And it is a tool that tribes can utilize to reclaim their items from institutions, federal institutions that receive federal funds.”

One of the hard facts about war is that there's a lot of plundering. Jordan says that was especially true for U.S. wars with tribes:

“When America became America, there was just us here. And I think that the early museums wanted to model themselves off the museums in Europe, but they didn't have the cultural material to fill up their spaces because they might have wanted the Mona Lisa over here, but they didn't, they couldn't do it, you know? So therefore they're like, wait, here's these people, and they're gonna die out. Let's collect all their stuff, even them, you know, collect people.”

And their stuff was often intentionally hidden away from view. Just recently, Harvard Museum revealed large archives full of Native American items. That includes hair samples kept after boarding schools

chopped off Indigenous children's hair. The museum called up Jordan and informed him that some of them were Arapaho.

Jordan says, "At the time, anthropologists and everybody was just collecting wild things. So it makes sense it ended up at the museum. I actually saw that museum. Years ago, I was at this, I was working at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. And we took a day trip over to Harvard, and I got to see the museum there and the collection. And I don't know why – normally when I go to museums, I can kind of like center myself. I felt like a real heaviness there because we went to the back and I was just like, it was intense."

Numerous tribes across the U.S. have been demanding to learn more about the Harvard Museum's collection and there's lots of frustration with the lack of transparency. Jordan isn't surprised though. He says NAGPRA needs an update. First of all, it only applies to institutions that receive federal funds...not to private collectors.

Jordan says, "I think the biggest problem is the fact that NAGPRA really never had any teeth in it. So therefore, you can say, well, you're out of compliance, but then who do you report it to? You know, and what happens to them? And the thing about NAGPRA that's difficult is that it always puts the burden on the tribe. It puts the burden on the tribe to say, those items belong to us."

But Jordan has successfully retrieved numerous items for his tribe. And lately, more private collectors are volunteering to return items. A couple years back, they received a really big donation.

He tells me, "This individual in Massachusetts, he was like, Hey, I have Chief Black Coal's headdress. Would you all want it back? You hear things like that sometimes they're too good, too good to be true. So I wasn't like, okay, yes, yes. Let's do a little bit more research before we jump in to it. And then we did, and it was legit. And most of all, he was willing to give it back."

Black Coal's headdress had been given to a dentist for payment generations before. It was sitting in an attic of the dentist's grandson ever since. But Chief Yellow Calf's headdress is in the British Museum and Jordan says they've been very reluctant to do repatriations because they have so many items from around the globe, they're afraid to open Pandora's Box. Jordan has been so active in repatriations that he even made a documentary about his work called "What Was Ours." And that's why it was a natural fit for him to document the journey to Carlisle to retrieve the three children's remains. Yufna says just traveling there was difficult. They took several elders – Betty Friday went along and so did Yufna's dad Mark– and some kids as well.

Yufna says, "I had oxygen tanks I was pulling through, you know, making sure all the elders are healthy and ready to do this. So preparing to get to even travel, there was a huge feat. Getting through the airport getting through TSA, when you have beadwork or anything sacred or traditional. TSA will go through it like they have no regard for a native anything. TSA don't have the ability or the cultural sensitivity, nor the cultural competence to understand what that means when tribal people travel. And so the elders were like, You are not looking at this stuff. You know, no, you cannot open that."

Jordan documented it all in his film “Home From School.” Since then almost two dozen children have been disinterred from Carlisle by several other tribes. But this was the first time—for everybody. And it didn’t always go so smoothly, Yufna says.

She says, “The excavation was traumatic for me, I still have nightmares about it. Even though I went to school and took forensics and whatnot there in school, the videos in crime scenes. I couldn't ever watch or have children, dog eating the little kids faces off and bullet wounds and all these different things. Those are traumatic. So for me to be there watching the whole excavation was traumatic. It wasn't something of like joyfulness or enjoyment or whatnot. It was traumatic.”

The school itself felt like a horror movie to Yufna, children shackled in dungeons and all. But then, to make things harder, when they dug up the graves, one of the boys’ remains was missing.

“Little Plume was not in his grave,” says Yufna. “Little Chief was. So was Horse. Little Plume was not in his grave because his headstone was switched out when something may have gone wrong in the past where the headstone had broken or whatnot.”

And notifying the family about this major disappointment didn’t happen properly.

Yufna says, “Somehow, the media found out before I could tell the direct family what had happened. And so they were reading it on Facebook before actually getting me to be there to tell them in person. So that was heartbreaking. Like when media have ethics and values they need to follow, especially cultural sensitive information like that, they should be able to follow through with it because there's so much that these families are already dealing with. So having to deal with that was really difficult.”

The military personnel struggled to see all this through the eyes of the families as well.

Yufna says, “I had to keep reminding them, the experiences you guys are having is different than what our elders and youth are experiencing, because this is that lifetime thing that they've wanted and look forward to their whole lives. So I know you have to act like a military person right now. But understand that we're all people and we're all human, and that we're hoping to take this experience away, walk away with it feeling good.”

Lots of times, they had to go to their rooms and just cry together, Yufna says. And they were grateful for the number of East Coast tribes that turned out in solidarity with food and blankets and hot drinks. Later, they made a second trip back to retrieve Little Plume’s remains. It wasn’t easy but in the end, the Northern Arapaho performed traditional funerals for all three children buried at Carlisle. Horse, Little Chief, and Little Plume.



It wasn't easy but in the end, the Northern Arapaho performed traditional funerals for all three children buried at Carlisle. Horse, Little Chief, and Little Plume.

Credit: Ana Castro

Yufna says, "They never got their real rites of passage the first time. When they were buried, it was in the way that the church felt like they should be buried, and it wasn't in the way that they learned as Arapaho children. We're going to do it right this time. You're going to come home and we're going to bury you the way you should have been buried the first time."

Yufna says her whole life she's seen the trauma of boarding schools eating away at her community from the inside. And burying the three boys moved the dial toward healing that pain.

"Growing up was like, seeing so much addiction on the reservation seeing kids I went to school with pass away – not just suicides, but like, accidents or whatnot, where it was like, this isn't normal," says Yufna. "You can't tell me this is a normal life, I already know it's not. And so how do we fix what's happened 100 years, 150 years ago, to make sure we have healthy communities, that the young people that we have today are going out, they have a strong cultural identity, but they understand their connections with the land and what that looks like."

Working as the chairman of his tribe, Jordan saw how hard it is to fix the past.

“I think what I've come to learn about the Native experience is that we're constantly going through the different stages of grief,” he says. “But some people stay in certain stages, some are stuck in denial, some are stuck in anger. So they're just mad at the world, you know, anything and everything will erupt them. There's some people who are stuck at the most dangerous stage, I think, is apathy, where they just don't feel nothing. And so therefore, that's where the drugs and alcohol play a very dangerous role, because they just don't feel anything. And eventually, I think there's a larger majority who are stuck in acceptance, but they just haven't healed yet. And that's the ultimate goal, in the end is being able to have hope.”

The pain that the Northern Arapaho have been going through? Let's be clear that it's not just them. Indigenous communities across the country are struggling with the same trauma left behind by the experiences of Indian boarding schools. Earlier generations experienced physical genocide. Between 1870 and 1972, the U.S. made a conscious effort with the full force of the federal government to inflict cultural genocide. Now, finding ways to bring all these survivors hope is Deidre's job at the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. She says it would help Indigenous communities complete that process of grief if there was a national recognition of this history and resources to mend it. But the clock is ticking, she says.

“A lot of our boarding school survivors are 60,” says Deidre. “And we only have so much time to record and hear their stories, and see what they want for the future.”

So her organization is working with lawmakers in Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Act. It would establish a commission to investigate the impacts of the Indian boarding school era and make recommendations for how to address it.

They hope to see the U.S. step up and apologize for this history the way Canada's prime minister Stephen Harper did for its residential school program back in 2008.

“The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly,” said Harper.

Here's how Inuit President Mary Simon responded:

“Mr. Prime Minister, I have to face you to say this, because it comes from the bottom of my heart. It took great courage for you to express your sorrow and apology to our people, to the Inuit, to first nations, and to Métis, and we thank you for it. I am one of these people that have dreamed for this day and there have been times in this long journey when I despaired that this would never happen.”

For the many hundreds of tribes of the United States, such a day still hasn't happened. Deidre says the U.S. should follow Canada's lead and allocate funds for direct payments to survivors: commemorate boarding schools as historic sites, collect the oral histories of survivors, and develop mental health programs specifically geared toward survivors. In Canada, every September 30th, people wear an orange shirt to acknowledge the wrong of their residential school era. The U.S. could adopt that practice as well.

Deidre says, the time has come to put a halt to the continuing march of an ugly history.

“Even if we're a smaller population, we still exist, and we still matter, and our histories matter,” she says. “And it's important to remember because a lot of these atrocities are still occurring across the United States, unfortunately. And I feel like the American people have to remember that this history, the United States was founded on genocide. And if we don't remember that we're going to keep continuing that.”

Music

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