

Reflecting on the ‘cultural annihilation’ of Indigenous youth

‘Away from Home’ brings a personalized touch to history

BY KATHERINE LACAZE

It’s a tragic part of American history that many people are familiar with: the forced removal of Indigenous children from their homes only to be placed in boarding schools where they were subjected to intense conditioning intended to erase their cultural identity.

If You Go

‘Away From Home: Native American Boarding School Stories’

Clatsop County Heritage Museum, 1618 Exchange St.

10 a.m. to 4 p.m., daily until May 25

\$5 per person

However, “Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Stories,” a temporary exhibition at the Clatsop County Historical Society’s Heritage Museum, personalizes the complicated narrative of atrocity, trauma, resistance and transformation in a way that is poignant and educational.

“It very much humanizes it,” said Chelsea Vaughn, the museum’s curator.

“Away from Home,” which opened at the Heritage Museum on April 6 and runs through May 25, is a traveling exhibition developed by the National Endowment of the Humanities, Mid-America Arts Alliance and NEH on the Road. The Heritage Museum applied to be a seven-week host for the exhibition during its five-year tour to different locations throughout the U.S. This will be the only appearance of the exhibition in the Pacific Northwest in 2021.

Featuring the exhibit is a unique opportunity for the Heritage Museum, Vaughn said, adding, “We are a smaller, rural museum that often doesn’t house exhibits of this stature.”

‘Cultural annihilation’

In 2000, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, opened “Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience,” an exhibit which centered on the same subject. “Away from Home” is an update and expansion of that original work, with a focus on representing different perspectives and the varying experi-



Cumberland County Historical Society

The student body of Carlisle Indian School in March 1892.

ences of Indigenous children.

The boarding school system originated in the early 1800s in the form of mission schools — run by religious denominations with support from the federal government — that were typically located in or near tribal communities.

By the late 1800s, then-Commissioner of Indian Affairs Carl Schurz determined it was more cost-effective to enroll a child for eight years of schooling than to kill them in warfare. The boarding school system became an impetus to shift from “actual annihilation to cultural annihilation,” Vaughn said.

The first school was established in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. By 1902, there were 25 federally operated facilities, including Chenawa Indian School in Salem.

Thousands of children were taken from their families and communities through a variety of methods, from coercion to actual kidnapping, and placed in faraway boarding schools, where they were assigned an Anglo-Saxon name and a number.

“Away from Home” combines the voices and personal stories of multiple people affected by this violent ethnocentric practice. Students often had no familial



National Archives and Record Administration

Children pray before bedtime at Phoenix Indian School in June 1900. Students were forced to convert to Christianity at the boarding schools.

See Page 5