

FAWN ELIZABETH POCHEL

The dark history of the Education system and Indigenous people of Turtle Island (North America) is a relationship characterized by genocide and resiliency. Horror stories of residential and boarding schools continue to haunt our Indigenous communities. The historical trauma caused in the name of education is where my story begins. My story starts well before my birth; my story is a continuation of my Father's. My Father is what some call a "[Scoopie](#)", just one of thousands of First Nation Children who were forcibly removed in masses from their families, communities and Bands.

My Father recalls stories of his Grandparents, sisters and brothers but never relives his experiences at [Residential Schools](#), boys homes, or foster care. He tells stories about his life as he cracks jokes and often begins from the time he last saw his sister and his adoption into his white middle class family in Central Illinois. The legacy of removing children from their families through the residential schools and the child protection system continues to impact the lives of those affected years later. It is being felt by the generations born in the wake of all the pain. Me, my sisters, and our Indigenous communities are left to overcome the effects of the [Historical Traumas](#) of our ancestors.

My Father was removed from his family in the name of education and has never returned "home." He was adopted under the pretense that it was better to "[Kill the Indian Save the Man.](#)" A motto that Canada and the United States still seems to uphold to this day because only "Assimilated Indians" can pull themselves out of poverty and contribute to society. My Father left his adoptive family's home when he was 18 years old on a voyage of self-discovery. He made it as far as Chicago. Here he found a community of Indigenous people and my Mother. A short year after, my oldest sister was

conceived and our Father found his new home. My parents raised all four of their children within the Indigenous community here in Chicago, centralized in the Uptown neighborhood.

Cultural and Familial Heritage

I grew up dancing and learning stories and songs from my intertribal community. My parents would take my sisters and I out to the lakefront and forest preserve and we would talk about our plant and animal relatives. My sisters and I were forced by our mother to join a youth group that took us traveling to meet other Indigenous youth from across the country. There was never a time I felt like I was disadvantaged growing up an “Urban Indian.” I attribute this feeling in large part due to being part of the Urban Natives of Chicago Youth Council, Shki Bmaadzi and New Beginnings Dance Troupe. Growing up there was always a community event or gathering to go to. My Mother and Grandmother were quick to help those in need and in return there was often an Auntie or Uncle to help when we needed it.

Yet my Father was weary of my sisters and I heading off to school. We never understood why we just knew that Dad was the cool parent who would take us out of class to have a family fun day just because. Thinking back we never knew that our Father’s fear was us heading off to school and never returning home. Dad was not the one we would go to when we had issues in school because he would simply say, “keep your head down and tell them what they want to hear.” That was the only advice he had when it came to school and more times than I would like to admit it is that advice that got me through school.

(Mis)education

Growing up in the Chicago Public School system allowed me to see the amazing diversity within Chicago and exposed me to a wide range of cultures. However, the beauty of that diversity was not represented within the classroom and curriculum. Our home lives and school lives were two separate existences. The first time I felt marginalized I was in kindergarten and we colored in our worksheet I is for Indian. I remember hiding the paper so I did not have to show my family. As I got older I realized that the way Indigenous peoples and cultures were addressed was always historicized and primitive. The ways in which my ancestors and relatives were discussed and taught in school made me feel invisible.

I was really young when I was called on to be the “Indian Expert.” Being the “Indian Expert” I found out is not an unique experience of my own, but a role that is given to most Indigenous students. More times than not teachers would only allow you to share your lived experiences and knowledge if it fit in their lesson plans. Being the “Indian Expert” becomes an overwhelming role that leaves you all too vulnerable to racist remarks and people questioning your culture and cultural knowledge. I find that this happen because they have been taught (or not) using books published by non-native peoples, which often takes away the Indigenous Community’s ability to properly represent ourselves. When things got bad I could always rely on my Mother and Community Uncles and Aunts to go to my school and sit down with the teachers.

However, these experiences got worse as I got older. When I was about 12 years old my family moved from Chicago to Lake Village, Indiana and I started to attend an almost all white school. I have never experienced a bigger culture shock in my life. We were no longer covered by the protection of our community. My experience with the

public education during this time left me with a feeling of anguish that I cannot describe fully except to compare it to post traumatic stress disorder.

I was isolated and angry and about a year after moving to Indiana my Mother died. I was 13 years old and my Father did not have the coping mechanisms to navigate himself let alone his four girls through the pain and loss. It took almost everything out of my Father but he signed his parental rights over to our Mother's Mom; our rock, my Grandmother. She cared for us as we watched our Father spiral toward rock bottom. My Grandmother was a social worker for over 25 years at [St. Augustine's Center for American Indians](#) in Chicago. She did her best to keep us connected to our community through our teenage years, but after our Mother's passing we all cut our hair and stopped dancing. As amazing as my Grandmother was at her job she could not see the pain and anger I bottled up inside of myself. At the time I did not understand the underlying cause of my anguish or how to put my feelings and anger into words. I did not realize how dancing, telling our stories and simply visiting the lakefront kept me grounded.

Aside from being Cree and Lakota I also identified as being Irish since my Mother had predominantly Irish ancestry. I was never as aware of my brownness as I was attending school in the North Newton School System. It felt as if I was sitting in class after class filled with subject matter that continually bastardized People of Color (Culture) while whitewashing colonization and American History. I was caught in a system that isolated me and wanted me to cast aside the culture that my family fought so hard to instill in me. I was the loser in the battle that was fought long before I was born. I did not have the words to speak out about what I was feeling and at the time I had no safe place to shield me for even a moment from the hardship and ignorance of the world around me.

Channeling Pain to Fight for Community Change

During my teenage years and spilling over into my twenties I did not think about the impact of microaggressions on my everyday life. From the age of about 15 to 22 years old I was abusing prescription medication to disconnect myself from the world around me. I was a functioning addict. Yet, I was still able to navigate my way through high school with average to above average grades with little effort. After High School I was able to maintain jobs. I could easily mask this portion of my life, chalk it up to high jinx and exploration of youth, but the problem with masks is nobody will ever get the chance to see you. I would often take part in high-risk behaviors with little to no consequences. At one time blackouts were a normal part of my party routine.

It was not until I decided to take a larger role in the lives of my nephews and nieces that I realized the gravity of my actions. There was a point of realization that I needed to do better and be better for them. They were being raised to be proud Indigenous people, but were lacking the community that my sisters and I had during our formative years. They were not dancing, singing or being exposed to our stories the way that we had been.

In 2011, I left the life I was living and moved back to Chicago. It was in the midst of turning my life around that I realized I wanted to work with Indigenous youth because they are now facing the same struggles I tried so hard to mask. I wanted all of the Indigenous youth of Chicago to have a safe place to make relationships like I did. With the help of my sisters and community friends and youth we started [Chi-Nations Youth Council](#) to create a safe place for our youth so they could find their own voices.

Through the years Chi-Nations Youth Council has far exceeded any expectations of what this group could be and do. They have spoken in front of thousands at different conventions, conferences and rallies. They have been asked to speak on many topics from

environmental issues to reproductive justice. They have been working hard to get their voices heard and have been diligently working on their Representation Matters Campaign hoping to educate the masses about the harmful effects of “Indian” Mascots and invisibility of modern day Indigenous people. As individuals we have ambassadors for [Chicago’s Title Seven Indian Education Program](#), [Generation Indigenous](#), and Louder than a Bomb groups.

Aside from Chi-Nations, I started working within Chicago’s Indigenous Community in 2012 on a NSF funded research grant [Living in Relationships](#), which bought back the all too real pain and historical trauma inflicted on my people by the education system. For the entirety of the grant I questioned whether or not research was in my best interest because historically the education system and research has never favored the perspectives or knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. Historically research and education has only divided and took away from our Indigenous Communities contributing to our systematic genocide. Over and over I questioned myself asking what is it that this research is doing for our community? I am not even sure if I can truthfully answer this question today in the wake of our broken and divided Indigenous Community here in Chicago.

I do know without Indigenous people in academia conducting research and applying innovative pedagogies to western education our voices go unheard and we continue to be invisible on our ancestral lands. During the time of the grant(s) our community had developed many amazing youth and family programs built from the intellectual and cultural strengths of our community. These programs have started to fade away since the grant cycle ended. This outcome is the result of funding issues statewide in Illinois and the inability of “our leaders” to see the worth in the Indigenous

Community in Chicago. However, the work done impacted hundreds of lives and will continue to be a model of incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into educational programming. Although the focus of the research may not have reached the full potential in my eyes, it did incorporate traditional knowledge from multiple tribes to develop better practices in teaching and learning with Indigenous children, especially our “Urban Indian” children who often times are invisible, through community based participatory action methodologies. The methodologies developed by my Chicago community have the ability to help thousands of Native students navigate through the trenches of our public education system if given a chance.

Taking the Lead: A Decision to Teach

It is during this time of questioning that I was approached about applying to become a Grow Your Own (GYO) candidate by a co-worker in the program. At the time I did not think that college was an option for two reasons: 1) I could not financially afford to take on the burden of college and 2) I was not sure if I was mentally prepared or willing to go into a system of institutionalized racism and commit to not only making it through but also working within. I was hesitant not because school is difficult, hard or demanding, but because I fought my whole life against colonization and assimilation, and at the root of these evils I faced growing up, the education system was used as a tool to aid in my cultural genocide.

Everyday I am confronted by microaggressions and I struggle to find the words to make them resonate in the hearts of people who uphold the systematic belief system of the American Dream that is fed to us. I have come to the point where I have internalized my civil unrest and the only way for others to know or see the injustices I see in my everyday life is to educate them. I can never undo my experiences, but I can work toward

a future that is safer and more inclusive of Indigenous people and all people of color; for not only my nieces and nephews, but the next generations to come. I applied to GYO because I believe that it embodies a movement of change within the education system that has failed so many. Education in America is not free, but I now believe it can be our freedom.

I am not ashamed to say that I am a broken person, a product of our society. I see it all to often hurt people hurting people not knowing how to fix the pain inside. I see people unable to mend themselves because we are raised in a society that force-fed us rhetoric that it is our communities and ourselves keeping us down. My response to that is my bootstraps were not made to pull me up. My moccasins, however, were made with care so that I could help continue the path of resiliency and resistance for the next generation. I refuse to fall in line with the credence that my situation, which is fueled by hundreds of years of systematic genocide, can be improved single handedly by myself. GYO understands the importance of communities overcoming the oppressive policies that keep its candidates and their communities captive within America's poverty cycle. GYO works with people across diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and identities to overcome certain myths about poverty and harmful stereotypes of marginalized groups, and strives to keep them working within their communities.

I now see myself not only working with youth in my community fighting for the right to represent us as Indigenous people, but working with black and brown youth within the classroom. Representation matters and as long as the teacher pool is not representative of our communities our voices and needs will continue to go unheard and

our children's children will continue to suffer through the same struggles our parents battled and we still battle today. We no longer have an excuse to stand idly by as our children become just as broken as we are.

In the face of gentrification our communities are being broken down and becoming fractions of a whole unable to pull themselves together because the cuts run generations deep. Our children go to school with the stress of home life and are met by teachers who can only empathize because they do not understand their students' struggles. Instead our diverse students with different abilities, thought processes, and attributes are still being forced into a system that wants to wash away our cultures. Our education system strives to separate the "best and brightest" of our people from our communities while leaving the rest of us to feel less than and defeated.

I ask myself why should our kids study under teachers who do not understand their plight nor fuel their drive? I will continue to face microaggressions, cultural divides and flat out racism in a classroom in the pursuit of my degree, but it is worth it. I am reminded of teachers who tried to reach out to me telling me I could succeed, but only at the cost of leaving my family and community behind. I cannot say whether or not they understood the gravity of their recommendations, but the result each time was me becoming more withdrawn and disconnected from what was happening within the classroom. I am reminded of every time I was told that the very people who give me strength are the ones holding me down from reaching my potential and succeeding in life. To me success and happiness is not measured by my ability to make money, but my ability to uphold the values and care for my family and community.

GYO has allowed me access to the education that I would have never gotten and connected me to a movement of change that is so badly needed not only here in Illinois,

but across our Nation. Too often we are told the only way to succeed is to leave our communities and reinvent ourselves. GYO pushes us to be ourselves and reinvent what it means to be a highly qualified teacher from and for communities. We are the voices education needs. The mentors our kids deserve. We are becoming the professionals we never thought possible.

The Will to Teach in Challenging Times

I have just finished my first year of college and I owe it all to the movement that GYO is pushing forward. This past year has been difficult for me as I sit in classes surrounded by triggers and pushing forward slowly getting closer to my own classroom. I can honestly say that I could not do it without the support of GYO financially and morally. I cannot count the times I sat down with my cohort leader to vent my frustrations and get the push to attack the hurdle directly in front of me. GYO has been a beckon of support and my guiding light.

Currently, myself along with every other GYO candidates, are struggling to find ways to return to classes next semester because our Governor has suspended GYO funding in the state of Illinois budget. The Governor's government shutdown strategy is causing pain in order to enact his political agenda. The economic cost and suffering is being felt across the state especially within our communities of color.

In the face of suffering there is no greater need than for our communities to stand up and represent themselves. In my lifetime there has never been a bigger spotlight on racial unrest with our youth crying out for guidance. We send our children to school for seven hours out of the day with the promise that they will be safe. Yet our education system is not a safe space; our kids still face the same prejudices and stereotypes that we

faced. GYO is the future of education because it dares to confront the myths about equal opportunities in the United States.