

## 'I had to be prayed home'

*Thousands of Native children were adopted in the 1960s as a government plan of forced assimilation. This woman was one of them.*

**By Charles Fox**

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While visiting the Tekakwitha Nursing Home to sing for residents, 13-year-old Denise Owen was led away from the rest of her boarding school group by a nun. A special surprise awaited her.

There, in another room in the Sisseton, S.D., facility, was her newborn sister, Rose Anne. Denise got only a glimpse of the infant, lying in a bassinet in a long-sleeve shirt and a diaper, before another nun ordered her to leave. Denise was not supposed to see her sibling, soon to be adopted.



*Kelley Bashew was adopted at the age of 3 months and taken from South Dakota to Glenside. She is shown on a hillside near her Meadowbrook home in April 2021.*

It would be 50 years before they saw each other again.

Rose Anne, who would be raised by a Glenside dentist and his wife, became a child of the country's American Indian adoption era, a decades-long forced assimilation of Native children first established under the Indian Adoption Project, which started in 1958 and evolved to include 50 private and public placement agencies across the United States and Canada, where the so-called Sixties Scoop was coined to describe the mass removal of children from Native homes. During the next 20 years, almost 13,000 Native children would be adopted.

According to a 1969 report by the Association on American Indian Affairs, between 25% and 35% of all Native children were placed in adoptive homes, foster homes, or institutions; and about 90% of those children were being raised by non-Natives.

That was the case for Rose Anne, who, at the age of 3 months, was handed over to Salvatore and André Petrilli. The white couple of Italian and Irish descent had struggled to have their own biological children, and it was André's interest in American history and a phone conversation with a priest from St. Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, S.D., that led her to seek a Native adoption through Catholic Charities.



*Bashew experienced a loving childhood. But she always knew she was different, and felt isolated in white suburbia. Here, a series of photos from those times.*

Eventually, a new birth certificate reflected the new name of Kelley Elizabeth Petrilli, the child of two Caucasian parents. Her American Indian heritage was wiped away on paper. A Montgomery County Orphans Court clerk with the last name of Custer gave the final stamp of approval to the adoption.

Just as boarding schools that began in the late 1870s were meant to assimilate Native children, so was the goal of the 1960s and '70s adoptions. Rather than dealing with government-induced

problems developing on reservations — including crushing poverty and lack of working utilities and sustainable quality childcare — government programs focused on adoption for the growing Native population. It was a strategy that redirected the financial responsibility to the private sector and created a savings of approximately \$100,000 per child compared with what it would cost to send them to boarding school, according to researcher David Fanshel in a study for the Child Welfare League of America.

“It was cheaper to send us to boarding school than to engage us in battle and kill us. And then it became cheaper to have the children adopted than to send them to a boarding school,” said Sandy White Hawk, a Sicangu Lakota from Rosebud, S.D.,



*Kirk Crow Shoe, 57, a Blackfoot from Canada, holds a photo of his twin sister Kim, who died in a car accident in her 20s. He said she struggled with the effects of her adoption for years.*



*“It is the shame of being part of a system where everything was taken away from us,” said Lenny Hayes, 52, a Dakota from Sisseton, S.D. Hayes spent his childhood in foster homes and said he was raped by older male students in a Native boarding school as a 10-year-old. He is now a mental health therapist helping those, especially in the Native LGBTQ community, who suffered similar traumas.*

adopted at 18 months. She later founded the First Nations Repatriations Institute and currently works at the Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center in Minneapolis.

Adoptions of Native children were proselytized in magazine articles and ads, and by social workers, churches, and adoption agencies as a mission to rescue children from poverty and poor living conditions on the reservation.

Instead, the adoptions created another nightmare for Indigenous people: Children were removed from their communities and taken thousands of miles away to be immersed in white culture. And unlike boarding schools, these new families lacked the community and support of fellow Natives.



*Sandy White Hawk, a Sicangu Lakota from Rosebud, S.D., who was adopted at the age of 18 months. She later founded the First Nations Repatriations Institute and currently works at the Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center in Minneapolis. "Because through adoption, we are living away from our homelands, away from our communities, away from our families, we don't have a sense of who we are as an Indian person. We only have a sense of survival and making it work and trying to fit in."*

It was the beginning of us becoming a commodity for the adoption industry. Some of the adoptions were the result of extreme pressure placed on mothers at their most vulnerable time, shaming them into believing white parents could better care and provide for their children. In other cases, social workers seemed to grasp at any reason — a parent's busy work schedule, lack of indoor plumbing, even failing to come to a complete stop at a stop sign — to take children away. But more unscrupulous methods were sometimes used: Women were told their babies had died at birth and then they were stolen for adoption.

Others were coerced to make unimaginable decisions. Violet Blake, an Oneida from Green Bay, Wis., had two aunts, both single mothers, who told about how they were forced by social workers to give up infants in order to keep their older children.

"For our young Indian women, it was an exceptionally hard time where they were really taken advantage of," White Hawk said. "It was the beginning of us becoming a commodity for the adoption industry."

Some children were physically and sexually abused. Kirk Crow Shoe, 57, a Blackfoot from Canada, refers to his adoptive father, now deceased, as a "serial pedophile." For the parents whose children were taken away, it increased problems such as alcoholism.

A grassroots movement was initiated in the late 1960s in the Fort Totten Reservation of Spirit Lake (then known as Devils Lake), N.D., to stop Native adoptions. Its years of efforts would ultimately lead Congress to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. While many view that as the end of the adoption era, Native children are still three times more likely to be placed in foster care than white children, according to a 2017 report by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

## **‘Love doesn’t provide identity’**

Kelley Petrilli, now Kelley Bashew, did not suffer a childhood of abuse. The Petrillis provided a loving, middle-class home with summer vacations, Phillies season tickets, a backyard treehouse, and private schools. Eventually, the couple would have five biological children, but Bashew was always told she was “the chosen one.” However, she always knew she was different, and felt isolated in white suburbia.

“You’re an Indian! You’re an Indian!” one of her cousins would taunt. “No, I’m not!” Bashew would scream back, a denial that still embarrasses her and causes her pain.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be white. I still feel guilt about that,” said Bashew, who lives in Meadowbrook. “I just wanted to fit in and be like my sisters. ... I did not like being tall and brown and different.”

Bashew’s adoptive parents never hid her Native American heritage. She was taken to powwows in the Philadelphia region, and books of Native American history and folktales were in the home. Yet at school, in the predominantly Irish and Italian Catholic Melrose Academy in Elkins Park and later at Germantown Academy, Bashew’s image wasn’t reflected in anything in her environment.

“Even in loving families, Native adoptees live without a sense of who they are,” White Hawk explained. “Love doesn’t provide identity. Because through adoption, we are living away from our homelands, away from our communities, away from our families. We don’t have a sense of who we are as an Indian person. We only have a sense of survival and making it work and trying to fit in.”

That impulse for survival made Kirk Crow Shoe rub toothpaste on his arms and face before school to



*Kelley Bashew was born Rose Anne Owen in Sisseton, S.D., but was adopted by Salvatore and André Petrilli, a suburban Philadelphia dentist and his wife.*

look white. Others had their bodies scrubbed regularly, sometimes using bleach, by adoptive parents to make them appear paler.

For Bashew, that feeling of isolation led to what she calls her “dark years” after high school. She was an accomplished swimmer at Germantown Academy but turned down college scholarships.

“I never thought I deserved it. ... Deep down when you are adopted, you have a wound inside yourself. If your parents gave you up, how lovable can you be?” Instead, Bashew tried to fill the void she felt in different ways. “I did drugs, I slept around, drinking. ...”

Crow Shoe, who was adopted along with his twin sister, Kimberly, suffered those same dark years.

“And as I entered my adolescence, of course, alcohol and drugs became part of the equation,” he said. “The further I felt disassociated from the world and from my peers and from people who loved me and the greater the shame became, the more I needed alcohol and drugs to numb that pain. It was like there was a hole in my middle and I couldn’t fill it.”

## A homecoming

When Bashew turned 50 in 2013, her friend Robert Graham encouraged her to explore her Native roots and biological family. She expected arduous research and hiring a private investigator, but with the help of Graham and fellow Dakota adoptee Adrian Grey Buffalo, she quickly found and was soon put in touch with her mother — Lillian Owen, then 87 years old — and eight living siblings.



*Bashew pushes Owen in her wheelchair. Behind them is the Tekakwitha Nursing Home where her sister, Denise, briefly saw her as an infant.*



*Bashew hugs her biological mother, Lillian Owen, during a visit to celebrate her 96th birthday. The mother and daughter were reunited eight years ago.*

## **‘I just want you to know that I never ever, ever had any anger towards you.’**

Bashew made her first return to Sisseton in the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation that July. The journey was without qualms or nervous apprehension for Bashew. However, most of the siblings did not know about their youngest sister, as Lillian, now 96, continues to keep the details of that painful chapter to herself. That meant for one of her older sisters, Crystal Owen, the discovery was “shocking.”

Her mother’s house was filled with 20 relatives when Bashew walked in.

“I was just drawn to [my mother]. ... I knew I was supposed to be there,” she recalled.

The two hugged and cried.

Upon meeting her brother Jody, he said it was “like looking into a mirror.” In her mother, she discovered a person similar in personality and temperament. The connection was immediate and very different, she said, from the relationship she has with her adoptive mother.

At the end of her stay in South Dakota, Bashew recalled, the family was in the kitchen saying goodbye when she pulled her mother aside: “And I said, ‘I just want you to know that I never, ever, ever had any anger toward you. I’ve never said, Why did you do this? ... I’m just happy that we found each other.’”



*Kelley Bashew, 2nd from left, and some of her biological siblings sing happy birthday to their mother.*

## **Forgiveness and healing**

Lenny Hayes, 52, who like Bashew is a Dakota from Sisseton, spent a childhood in foster homes. He was raped by older male students in a Native boarding school as a 10-year-old. He is now a mental health therapist helping those, especially in the Native LGBTQ community, who suffered similar traumas.

When he dies, Hayes says, he wants to have a sit-down with the Creator and ask him why he had to experience such hardships. He still carries the scars of

his childhood, and the healing process continues. He has learned, however, how to cope in a way that is not self-destructive.

“I don’t hate the people who have hurt me. Because if I hate them, it also prevents me from healing. ... I’ve also had to learn to forgive myself,” Hayes said. “Forgiveness is about you. It’s not about the person who did the harm to you.”

Many adoptees have found healing and strength from one another. Today, Crow Shoe sees his life path as a blessing.

“I’ve had the opportunity to touch the lives of a lot of other adoptees and to touch their souls,” he said. “And they touch mine and we heal. I know that I’m part of their coming home, their journey back to who they are as Indian people.”

## Prayed home

In Native cultures, each generation prays for the generation yet to come.

*Right: Bashew’s path was very similar to the first students at the Carlisle Indian School who were uprooted from South Dakota and brought to a Pennsylvania town. The government’s approach to assimilate Native children had not changed much in the 84 years that separated them. Bashew later said, “It just made me cry, you know, because it’s like, we’ve made the same exact journey.”*



*Above: Bashew during her first visit to the Indian Cemetery on May 29.*

*Right: Here, Bashew is comforted by A’lice Myers-Hall, a descendant of a Carlisle boarding student.*



“It gives us the sense that we were prayed for, before we were born, before we even put our feet on Earth,” said White Hawk.

In that tradition, Bashew was prayed for before she was taken to Pennsylvania, before she felt the isolation in white culture. And she said she had long felt and experienced the guidance and protection of the ancestors who had preceded her. In Native philosophy, life is a circle and not linear. It had taken decades, but now she said her circle was complete.

When Bashew went to the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation in 2013, her visit coincided with the final day of their Sundance, the annual ceremony of sacrifice and healing.

Hearing the Dakota language for the first time brought her to tears. Sitting beside her mother and seeing her sister Crystal dance brought a healing as it stirred something deep in her soul. She now had the desire to absorb and learn about her culture and to be part of her people, the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate.

“I think that’s the peace I’ve been looking for my whole life,” Bashew said. “I have given so much to the wasichu [white man’s] world. Now it’s time for me to go back there to learn who we are and all the things I missed.”

“I had to be prayed home.”



*Kelley Bashew was adopted at the age of 3 months and taken from South Dakota to Glenside. She is shown on a hillside near her Meadowbrook home in April 2021.*

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