

MiSustainable Holland

About this series

The MiSustainable Holland column is a collection of community voices sharing updates about local sustainability initiatives.

This Week's Sustainability Framework Theme:

Community Knowledge: The collective knowledge and energy of the community is an incredible resource that must be channeled to where it is needed.

Month of reflection includes look at voices silenced by Indian boarding schools

By Lily Shergill
Hope Advocates for Sustainability

At the beginning of October, Indigenous Peoples' Day on Oct. 9 was a time to recognize, celebrate, and honor the culture and history of Indigenous American peoples. But the recognition has gone on throughout the month.

Here in West Michigan, that day offers much to think about. The region was once the home of the Peoria, Bodewadmi, Ojibwa, and Odawa (what most of us know today as Ottawa) tribes until the 1600s and 1700s, when settlers came and took much of the land.

In Holland, tensions with the Dutch immigrants who began arriving in the 1840s led the Odawa to sell the land they still possessed and relocate north to the Leelanau Peninsula rather than have the situation become worse.

Many people view this as history, something in our past. However, a guest lecture at Hope College on Thursday, Oct. 19, showcased a different narrative.

Levi Rickert is the founder of Native News, editor and publisher of Tribal Business News, and citizen of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. Rickert's visit was sponsored by the college's GROW Advocacy Council, Pan-Indigenous Student Organization and the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. He shared stories that illustrated how that Native history is still relevant today.

Rickert spoke to Hope students and members of the Holland community about the reality of Indian boarding schools. He pointed out that from 1819 to 1969, there were 408 federal boarding schools where the U.S. government took Native American children from their homes and forced them to attend, to "kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

This was done to assimilate these children into white culture and get rid of Native American culture and norms across the country, Rickert said. And he wanted to make the Holland community realize that this is our history as a community, because it still has effects today.

Rickert told of individuals alive today who speak of their time at an Indian boarding school, along with the trauma and harm that lives with them until they die. This year, a report came out about 64 Native American students who died while attending two federal Indian boarding schools in Colorado between 1880 and 1920.

Rickert described how this history is not just in the past because it keeps coming up in reports and stories across the country. His news company, Native News, has over 200 articles written about individuals who tell their stories regarding their time at the boarding schools.

Today, an initiative called The Road to Healing is taking place across the country as Native American survivors of the federal boarding schools speak of their stories and experiences.

During the month of October, people at Hope College and in the Holland community have reflected on our collective history and how we can contribute to sharing the narrative but also to changing the narrative for a better future. Throughout this month, we are recognizing the Native American tribes that were on this land before us and honoring that history to create a brighter future in the beautiful city that we call Holland.

- *Lily Shergill is an environmental justice intern for Hope Advocates for Sustainability and a part of the Social Justice Team through Campus Ministries at Hope College. She has a Christian History & Theology major and Political Science and Ministry minors.*