

**Testimony of Corinna Sohappy before the
United States Senate Finance Committee
September 21, 2004**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Corinna Sohappy. I am here this morning to talk about the death of my niece, Cindy Gilbert Sohappy, in a jail operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

First, I would like to tell you about Cindy. Cindy was 16 years old when she passed away. She was a tall, beautiful, popular, and smart young lady. She was not afraid to go off on her own and take a chance.

Unfortunately, she was born into a very chaotic family environment. Cindy's mother was plagued with a variety of personal issues. I was given legal custody of Cindy by the court in August 2003 after her mother was placed in an alcohol treatment program in California.

Cindy attended the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon. Although it was more than a three-hour drive from our home in Warm Springs, Chemawa offered her many more educational opportunities than our local high school.

Cindy was doing very well at Chemawa and had many big dreams about what she wanted to do with her life. At the time of her death, she was only two credits short of becoming the first person in her family to graduate from high school.

She planned to go to college after graduation. She was learning to drum and sing; she also jingle-dress danced, a tradition in our tribe that you may know of as a "pow-wow." She dreamed of traveling, and she hoped that by joining the Army or the Marines someday, she would have that opportunity.

Given the unstable environment in which Cindy grew up, and the many challenges that she faced, our family took great pride in Cindy's success.

In the evening of December 6, 2003, after attending our local Christmas lights parade, I received a message that changed my family forever. I was told to call Chemawa because Cindy was not breathing.

When I called them, I was told that they "lost her." I asked them what they meant; did she get up and walk away? They told me that she had passed away.

I asked if they were sure it was Cindy. The man on the phone told me that he knew Cindy, and that he knew this was her. I was so devastated that I dropped the phone on the floor.

My cousin picked up the phone and was told that the FBI and the Oregon State Police wanted to know what to do with Cindy's body. We told them to leave it where it was.

We left immediately and arrived at Chemawa around 6:00 in the morning. A security guard escorted us to what looked like a facilities or maintenance shack located well away from the school building.

As we entered the building, we walked through a small office that looked like a booking room. As the daughter of a patrolman and a police dispatcher, I had grown up around a jail and I knew what a booking room looked like.

As we continued, we entered the jail. There were four cells, all made of cement blocks with heavy steel doors on each of them. We continued walking to the last cell, where Cindy was lying on the floor. The cell was about 4 or 5 feet wide and about 10 feet long. There was a mattress lying near the door, with blood splattered on the mattress.

Cindy was lying with her right hand extended upward. She had blood around her mouth and nose, and on her shirt.

The staff could not explain to me why she was bleeding. I tried to move her arm to rest it across her chest, but she was already cold and her arm very stiff.

Throughout her life, Cindy had rarely gotten herself into trouble. We were told that on this evening, however, Cindy had been provided with alcohol by an older friend and was caught drinking near the school.

She was placed in the cell to sober up at about 8:15 pm. When the staff next checked on her nearly three hours later, she was not breathing. We were told that she had stopped breathing because of the amount of alcohol in her body.

My nephew, who also attended Chemawa at the time, had followed Cindy to the jail that evening to make sure that the staff gave her the supervision she needed. He had seen how intoxicated she was, and warned the jail staff that it was not safe to leave her alone.

My nephew told me that while Cindy was being carried into the cell – since she was too drunk to walk on her own -- the jail staff made jokes about her.

Until that morning, I did not know that this dreadful jail even existed at Chemawa. I have since learned about many prior incidences in which high school students had been locked up with poor supervision.

My youngest brother, who also attended Chemawa for a time, told me that he was once locked in this jail without supervision after drinking -- nearly 20 years ago.

Other relatives of Chemawa students told me about the annual homecoming celebration at the school, when as many as 92 students have been locked into these 4 small cells at one time.

This is a dreadful tragedy that simply did not have to happen. If the staff at Chemawa had provided even the least amount of supervision in the jail, Cindy would be with us today.

The loss of Cindy has left my family in a fragile state. I worry about the effects of her death on my parents and on Cindy two younger siblings, who I also care for.

I would like to thank the Committee for considering this important issue. It is my sincere hope that by coming to Washington this morning, and by sharing Cindy's story with you, that no one else will have to die unnecessarily.