Letter to the editor May 28, 2016

The tragic assault and murder of Ashlynn Mike is a great sadness. As a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner I know this is only the tip of an iceberg of suffering on tribal lands. Precise numbers are not available but across the Navajo Nation patrol officers take reports of rapes almost everyday. They receive 4,000 calls a year for domestic violence. These are only the reported cases.

The crime of sexual violence is done to shame the victim and have power over them. Sexual violence is a problem around the world but its effects are worst on communities of poverty. Some sexual violence is done by outsiders to shame and feel power over native people. But patterns of violence and trauma echo through native communities. Patterns of harsh treatment in boarding schools are perpetuated in Navajo Housing Authority’s policy of automatic eviction of victims of domestic violence since a crime was committed in their home.

Many adults living on the Navajo Nation have been victims of sexual violence. They have tried to put it out of their minds and go on with their lives. But the pain burns pathways in the brain. Without healing work sights, touch, sounds, smells, and taste may bring the pain back. A relative might find it so hard to hear about the assault of a family member they will say That’s the way it is here.’ or ‘Get used to it. To stop this pain we must begin by listening and taking seriously what the victim is saying. Start by Believing.

Sexual violence is not necessary. It can be reduced and then eliminated. The Navajo taskforce of the Navajo Apache Hopi Zuni Coalition against sexual assault and family violence recommends the following actions:

A division of sex crimes be developed

The Navajo Division of health establish a sexual assault response team to follow all reports of sexual assault and encourage their investigation and prosecution.

Each tribal employee needs to look into their heart and make a plan to heal the pain so they can do their jobs strongly.

The Council delegates are commended for taking this issue seriously and establishing a Sexual Assault prevention subcommittee.