*Sharon E. Debbage Alexander**

When I accepted an Army ROTC scholarship and started college in 1989, I didn't really understand what it meant to be gay, or that people suffered any kind of discrimination on the basis of being gay. I am straight, came from a small town, and didn't really understand the politics of sexual discrimination back then.

Within a couple of years of starting school, the campus bisexual, gay, and lesbian alliance ("BiGayLA") began protesting to get ROTC removed from campus. I remember being stunned at the prospect of losing my scholarship, and therefore, given my economic situation, my chance to earn a college degree. I decided to take action, and made a lunch date with one of the women behind the anti-ROTC protests from BiGayLA.

I explained to her that we cadets weren't such a bad bunch of kids, and asked why she would want to get us kicked off campus. She replied that the scholarship I enjoyed was unavailable to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. I remember naively telling her she was crazy—"we've got plenty of lesbians in my cadet battalion—what are you talking about?" I asked. My ignorance of the real impact of the ban at that time aside, the bottom line was that this woman was right. The rules said no gay people were allowed in the military, and technically, anyone who broke that rule and got caught would lose their scholarship and their opportunity to serve. I had to agree that this seemed really unfair and arbitrary.

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I was commissioned in 1993 as a second lieutenant, just in time for the advent of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Like many of my colleagues at that time, I believed that this was at least a step in the right direction. I figured that the new policy represented some sort of an intermediate stage between a ban and no ban, and that after a few years of this policy the ban would be lifted and gay people would be able to serve openly. I could not have been more wrong.

I served in Third Infantry Division in Germany and the Southern European Task Force Infantry Brigade (Airborne) in Vicenza, Italy and spent five years on active duty, over three years of that time as a platoon leader. I spent three more years in the National Guard while attending law school. During that time I saw the negative effects of the ban and the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy first hand. Harassment and discrimination were rampant and in many cases infused with violent rhetoric and real hatred, and this problem was made much worse by the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy itself. If the Army says you can serve if you're gay as long as no one ever finds out about it, the average soldier translates this to mean that being gay is definitely wrong. If the Army says you have to hide it otherwise you'll be discharged, the implicit message is that being gay is shameful. The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy buttresses pre-existing prejudices and gives them new life by legitimizing them with an official stamp of military approval. Far from a step in the right direction, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" took us from a time when an ROTC cadet like myself didn't even really understand that there was a ban on gay people serving in the military to an era where institutional discrimination against gay people in the military rises to the level of sport in some segments of the military. Anti-gay language and rhetoric is part of the every day experience of many people in the military nowadays, and it was not always like that.

In my eight years of service I knew a number of gay and lesbian officers, NCO's, and junior enlisted personnel. The only way I could know they were gay was to put two and two together, because, unfortunately, none of them could ever share that part of their lives with me because it could have cost them their careers. These folks were soldiers just like anyone else—no better, no worse—but carrying a heavier burden than I can even imagine in having to hide who they were. While I could—and in fact, was expected—to bring my husband to company and battalion social events, for example, a gay officer has to come up with a million excuses at every turn as to why he or she still hasn't married or

showed up to any social events with a person of the opposite sex. The policy forces people to be deceptive as a means of survival. As company grade officers, both my husband and I lost soldiers to the ban, and I think that was the final straw in my decision to leave active duty. I loved the Army and enjoyed many, many aspects of military life, but I found it difficult to work inside an institution whose core values—values like integrity, loyalty, and respect—sometimes stand in stark contrast to the everyday experience of soldiers. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was perhaps the most shining example of this kind of contradiction.

Since I left the Army, I have become very involved in the struggle for equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ("GLBT)" Americans, in large part as a result of what I saw in the military. I worked for the Human Rights Campaign for two years and currently work as an attorney with the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. I am an officer in DC's chapter of American Veterans for Equal Rights. Through this work, I have come to know dozens of GLBT veterans who have served our nation honorably and in many cases with great distinction, and I believe very strongly that one's sexual orientation has nothing to do with one's ability to serve in the military. My GLBT veteran friends represent more talent lost to our armed forces that I could ever even begin to describe, and there are thousands of others like them around the country. I also know that American service members of the heterosexual persuasion are perfectly capable of bonding with their gay brothers and sisters in uniform. The only thing stopping the successful integration of open gay and lesbian service members is the ban itself.