*Nick Marulli**

I enlisted in the Navy right out of high school. As a son in a military family, it was the natural thing to do. I loved my country, and my parents taught me that freedom is something we do not take for granted.

Early in my career, I worked in the administrative field. I later changed my rating and transferred into military intelligence, which I found highly rewarding. I remained in that field for the rest of my career.

I loved the Navy. I worked hard and received a lot of encouragement and praise for my performance. Routinely earning high marks, I was twice selected "Sailor of the Quarter." I attended college at night and eventually was selected to participate in a program that allowed me to attend college full time while on active duty. I graduated summa cum laude from the University of Baltimore with a bachelor's degree in history.

I did not accept my homosexuality until my last tour. Those years were difficult. I couldn't seek counseling because I had to use military medical facilities and didn't know who I could trust. Before I retired, my best friend—an army officer who was also struggling to accept his homosexuality—committed suicide. I had to cope with the pain alone, in silence, lest I risk being discovered myself. After all I had given to the Navy, living in fear of losing my career or my pension seemed like an unjust reward.

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This essay first appeared as part of *Documenting Courage: Veteran Speak Out*. This project is designed to educate the Executive branch, members of Congress, and the public on the contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender veterans. *Documenting Courage: Veterans Speak Out*, Human Rights Campaign, *at* www.hrc.org/Content/ContentGroups/Documenting_Courage/Stories2/Documenting_Courage__Veterans_Speak_Out2.htm (last visited April 12, 2004).

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It is not easy to lead two lives. Under "don't ask, don't tell" I was forced to be distant and introverted at work, which is very much against my nature. During my early career, I bonded with my shipmates, establishing honest friendships based on trust and mutual respect. During the last years, I had to be a stranger to my shipmates—never discussing my personal life—while listening to them share stories about their families and friends. When they asked about my life, I had to hedge and change the subject.

After 20 years of honorable service, I retired. I have a new career and an honest life now, which I share with my partner, Tim. But unlike my straight veteran counterparts, Tim and I live as a second-class family. Because we do not have the right to marry, I cannot sponsor my partner for the benefits that the spouses of married retirees share, including medical care and use of on-base facilities like the commissary and the Navy Exchange.

It seems ironic that while much of corporate America offers equal benefits to gay and lesbian employees, my military benefits are still off limit to my partner. If I had worked for a private company for 20 years, Tim and I might be sharing a normal package of retirement benefits today. As it is, we are in a much less advantageous position. This inequity seems to me an unjust reward for 20 years of service to my country.