

Transgender veteran speaks at NAVAIR's annual LGBT event

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"I'm visible because I can be, because I want to be, but it wasn't always that way. If I can make one trans person's journey a little easier, then it will be a success," retired U.S. Army Col. Sheri Swokowski told NAVAIR employees at the second annual LGBT Pride Month event in Patuxent River, Md., June 7. She is the highest ranking openly transgender veteran. (U.S. Navy photo)

PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — When retired U.S. Army Col. Sheri Swokowski transitioned from male to female in 2006, she chose a name to reflect her new identity: Sheri. She. Her. I.

Swokowski, the highest ranking openly transgender veteran, shared her life story with 250 employees at NAVAIR's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Pride Month observance June 7. Her military service includes 22 years active and 34 years total service, and she is the first woman to wear the Army infantry uniform legitimately in U.S. history.

"Trans people come in all sizes, shapes and colors," she said. "When you strip away society's biases, we are all human beings deserving of acceptance. We are all well worth getting to know. We are just people: We love, we cry, we laugh, we dream and we fear, just like everyone else. In the end, we are optimistic — we are hopeful — that empathy will win out, as it has in other civil rights issues."

Swokowski grew up in a small, conservative town in Wisconsin, serving as an altar boy at her local Catholic church and attending Catholic grade school. At the age of 5, she said she knew she was different.

"I often felt that I was the one who should be wearing my sister's clothes, and at times, when I found myself home alone, I did," she said.

To cope with her feelings, she buried herself in schoolwork and part-time jobs, but the feeling that something wasn't right never left. She even joined the county sheriff's department and Wisconsin National Guard, hoping working in a male-dominated profession would help her deal with her feelings.

"When you live the Army values, you place the organization and your soldiers above your own interests," she said, "but that feeling of being female was still there." She would sometimes buy female clothing, wear it and then "purge it when the guilt set in."

It took five decades for Swokowski to admit her secret — first to her wife of 10 years and, later, to the rest of her family. As with the 57 percent of transgender people who come out to their families and get rejected, acceptance was not easy to come by for Swokowski. She is still estranged from her brothers and said she was fired from her job after taking six weeks of leave to transition. She admitted, however, that her experience was more fortunate than that of other transgender people, who lack healthcare, a home, a job or any support from family and friends.

After undergoing hormone replacement therapy and going to counseling, living authentically for the first time in her life was a revelation.

"The most important thing about me is I am a proud transgender woman," she said. "The past dozen years have been the happiest and proudest moments of my life."

There are differing views on the percent of LGBT adults in the U.S. The Williams Institute/Gallop says 3.5 percent, Harris Interactive/Witeck Communications says 6.8 percent and other estimates are up to 10 percent. Swokowski cited 14,000 transgender military members and 134,000 transgender veterans.

The Department of Defense is reviewing transgender policy for the armed forces and repealed the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, barring openly gay, lesbian or bisexual people from military service, in 2011.

"While we have achieved marriage equality, there is still work to be done," Swokowski said, citing statistics from a 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey that 90 percent of transgender adults are harassed or discriminated at work, 61 percent are physically harmed, 64 percent are sexually assaulted and 41 percent have attempted suicide.

"Pride was not born out of a need to celebrate being gay or lesbian; it was born out of the right to exist without persecution," she said. "The transgender community deals with it on a daily basis."

The event, with a theme of "Equality, Dignity and Respect for All," was sponsored by NAVAIR's Equal Employment Opportunity/Diversity Office and LGBT employees and allies.

"Understanding, dignity, respect for all contributions and ideas: This is what LGBT Pride Month is all about," said NAVAIR Vice Commander Rear Adm. select Frank Morley. "It's how we will work together every day to provide our warfighters the capability and readiness they need to fight and win. NAVAIR seeks out and attracts talent in all forms. Due to the competitiveness of our environment, it's absolutely essential."

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