
“Family”: Surviving the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Years

8

Monica Ormeno

It turns out writing about yourself is not as easy as I had thought it was going to be. When I first heard about this project, I immediately fell in love with it. The idea of writing about the trials and tribulations I experienced while serving in the Navy as a lesbian during “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” sounded so appealing. I love talking about it at parties and gatherings, so writing about it should be a piece of cake.

The thing is, in order to write about it, I had to examine those first 13 years of my Navy career. Once I started doing that, I realized very quickly that I didn’t have it as hard as most of my fellow LGBT service members had it. I really didn’t. Yes, I had some shitty times. Yes, I was scared that my career could end any day, but I still remember those years fondly. Maybe, my brain has chosen to erase all the anxiety and anger I felt during those years, or maybe it really hadn’t been that bad for me.

Making Friends to Make Do

After several weeks of self-examination (I don’t like the word procrastination, it has a bad connotation), I still couldn’t come up with the reason why I now feel that the days of DADT weren’t that bad. And then, something reminded me of why my DADT days were not as hard as they could have been. I recently transferred from being stationed on shore in a hospital to being stationed on a ship. Anyone that has ever been stationed on a ship or any other operational command will tell you that when you’re operational, everything is about “the hookup.”

The “hookup” culture is universal to any time the military places people in the middle of nowhere with limited resources and supplies. You have to learn to make do with the little you have, and you have to learn to make friends who would give

M. Ormeno, DO (✉)
Naval Medical Center San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA
e-mail: mormeno2007@gmail.com

you supplies when you need them and no one else has them. On a ship, real estate and supplies are very limited.

I was starting a pilot program: a psychiatrist on a ship was something new in the Navy. I was one of four psychiatrists starting this program in the Navy. So, I needed a space to work, and I needed office stuff: a desk, a computer, computer access, a desk chair, a couch for patients, etc.

As part of this pilot program, I was assigned my own personal behavioral health technician. my own personal psych tech. He and I were team mental health for three ships and one Marine expeditionary unit. My psych tech had deployed several times before, and I had a couple of deployments under my belt. I was able to secure a space for us to work from, but we needed furniture.

I sent my psych tech on a quest to find everything we needed to set up our office. In a matter of hours, I had everything. I was surprised how quickly he had gotten everything set up. I asked him how he got things so quickly, and his answer reminded me of what kept me sane during the days of DADT. "I just find the gay sailors and I tell them my boss is family and they hook it up!" he said.

I busted out laughing when I heard his answer. I am completely out to everyone I work with and my psych tech had met my wife at command gatherings. I had never thought that being gay on a ship gave me an advantage. I guess 13 years of serving under DADT got me used to thinking about being gay as a burden. My psych tech reminded me of the importance of "family" and he's not the first one to do it. "Family" is the reason why all my memories from the DADT days are not so bad.

Early Years

Making friends during DADT was difficult. Imagine getting to know someone and not being able to discuss this huge part of being a person: your romantic life. I was "raised" in the fleet. My first duty station was a ship in Norfolk, VA. I was enlisted at the time and all I cared about was becoming an officer. So, during the first 5 years of my Navy career, I avoided people, I did my job, and I went to school.

I have few friends from those years because I was on a mission: I wanted to be a Naval medical officer. I didn't have time for friendships because making friends wasn't my priority. I think it also helped that during those years, I was a closeted bisexual. So, I hadn't admitted anything to myself to be shared with any friends I could make.

I graduated college in 2003 and was accepted into a commissioning program (Health Professions Scholarship Program). The 4 years of medical school are a total blur. I remember just being busy trying to survive (both financially and academically). By the end of medical school, I had come out to some friends and relatives about being bisexual. Just like in college, romantic relationships were not a priority for me during my medical school years. The internship year was a very busy year, but I had more time to date and I realized that I was just a lesbian hiding under the umbrella of bisexuality. Great! I finally had achieved my ultimate goal of being a Naval medical officer, and now it was all going to be gone because I was gay.

I had to protect my career, so I spoke little about my romantic life, which led to my coresidents believing that I was a very promiscuous person. I really wish I knew how people made that connection. I guess men are promiscuous when they talk about their conquests, and women are promiscuous when they don't.

I don't like labels, I think we have too many already. But, I do feel that the fact that I am a "lipstick" lesbian helped people believe the rumors of me enjoying the single gal life. I was actually happy that people thought I was sleeping around with guys all over town. Because as long as people felt that way about me, no one knew who I was really sleeping with.

Outing Myself

Eventually, it's almost impossible to keep a secret from everyone. A couple of months into my second year of residency, I accidentally "outed" myself to someone at work. My best friend from college was also in the military, and she was deploying to a combat zone. I would send her care packages every so often while she was out there. She is bisexual, so I wanted to send her movies and shows that she would enjoy.

I know what you're thinking and the answer is: no, I wasn't trying to send gay porn to my friend while she's in a combat zone. I was just afraid of sending her gay-themed movies and shows to a place where everything she got was strictly checked. One of my coresidents told me that one of our ward psych techs had helped her pass prohibited items to some of her friends who are deployed. So, I asked this psych tech for her help.

All I wanted was to send some DVDs of shows with gay content. I was expecting to pay for the services my psych tech was going to provide, but instead, she helped me and said: "No worries, ma'am. We're family." I just thought she was being nice, she's probably talking about all of us being a big Navy family who help each other. I knew what "family" meant in the LGBT community; I just didn't think that was the type of family she was referring to.

But within a couple of days, something strange started happening. I would walk around the hospital and different women (both enlisted and officers) who I had never met before would wave and smile at me in a caring way.

It's hard to explain. I have always been a big fan of female college basketball and had season tickets to the local female college basketball games. I started noticing the same women who were now acknowledging me in the hospital were also attending these games. Before I knew it, I was running into these women at games, bars, restaurants, having conversations with them, and making friends with them.

As I got to know them, I learned that some of them had been with their partners for their entire Naval career: some of these couples had hidden for decades. They are Navy nurses and doctors, Navy chiefs, and Navy and Coast Guard officers. They had deployed to combat zones and seen their friends get kicked out for being gay before DADT. They told me stories about witch hunts prior to DADT. I heard about all the sacrifices they had made while serving in silence.

It was thanks to my brand new family that I was introduced to clandestine organizations that were lobbying for the repeal of DADT and advocating for our families to be fully recognized and have benefits. I would have never thought that accidentally “outing” myself to a psych tech would have led to me finding my “family.”

Having family with me made me feel protected. I had a group of people who took care of me. Every department had them and we all knew who we were. I never asked how they found out about me. I was just so happy that I had finally found a group of people that I could relate to. Having family with me gave me courage to come out to others.

By the end of my third year of residency, I had come out to some of my straight friends. Coming out to someone who is also a service member during DADT was tricky. You had to trust that they were not going to turn you in. You were asking someone to lie for you. Naval officers don’t lie, cheat, or steal (or get caught).

My straight friends were all super supportive and understood the repercussions of knowing I was gay and stood by me. Some of them even contributed to the rumors of my heterosexual promiscuity to help me appear as straight as possible. Yes, my friends are great: they would make sure people thought I was a whore before they thought I was a lesbian.

It was good to have family around me because dating during DADT was not fun. Online dating was out of the question; I didn’t want to run the risk of someone else seeing me on a dating site looking for women to date. I had to meet women the old fashioned way. But when I met them, I couldn’t immediately tell them I was gay and interested in them. I had to play so many games in order to find out about if the women I was interested in would date me.

Of course, the other problem was that when dating someone during DADT, I had to ask them to be in the closet. Coming out is so hard: once you’re out, no one wants to go back in. So, my options were limited to women who would be willing to be in the closet with me. Everyone I dated during DADT was in the closet (to everyone: relatives, friends, sometimes even themselves). The problem with dating someone who is in the closet is that you can’t really imagine a future together. I always wanted to be a mom; how was that going to work out when all the girls I was dating didn’t even want to publicly admit they were in love with me: a woman?

Hanging out with other gay officers was not risk-free. I needed those rumors about sleeping around with guys, because going out to bars and restaurants with “family” meant that people could also spread rumors about me being gay.

The benefits of having family in the hospital by far outweigh the risks. Especially when under DADT, almost weekly I would hear a homophobic comment made by a colleague or a patient. I feel that DADT allowed service members to be openly homophobic.

Homophobic comments from patients are easier to handle; but they still hurt. They were easier to handle because patients are supposed to tell us their darkest thoughts. Homophobic comments from patients always confused me; it’s harder to care for someone who hates something about you that you can’t change. So, I handle them the same way I handle any hateful comment about something I can’t change.

I was born and raised in Peru; I look Hispanic, I have an accent; English is my second language. I've had several patients make comments against Hispanics, immigrants in general and nonnative English speakers. Each time, I dealt with them accordingly.

Homophobic comments are a bit different because patients can tell when they meet me that I am a Hispanic immigrant who learned English as a second language. People can't really tell that I am gay, just by looking at me. So, confronting patients as part of a therapeutic process about their homophobic comments was not an option. Plus, confronting a patient on a homophobic comment would have meant "outing" myself to the patient.

Homophobic comments from colleagues hurt me because I expect more from educated people. I want to believe that homophobia is based on ignorance and not hatred and that educated people are less ignorant about the world. I guess, in my heart, I want to believe things that I know, in my head, are not true.

The End of DADT

Before the Republican Presidential campaign of 2016, my colleagues wouldn't say racist things in front of me. But, during DADT, they had every right to make homophobic statements, and I couldn't confront them. Not everyone was an open homophobe during DADT; it was always a relief to find a heterosexual fellow officer, who didn't know I am gay, who would openly talk about the need to repeal DADT.

I wanted to be a child and adolescent psychiatrist since my third year of medical school when I shadowed a Navy captain who became my mentor. He was the Director of Mental Health at the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth when I worked for him. During my child and adolescent psychiatry rotation, I attended a resident case presentation with my mentor. The case was about a gay sailor.

During the Q and A part of the presentation, the topic of what to do if we found out that a patient is gay came up. Some of the active duty psychiatrists argued that as Naval officers, we were required to report gay patients to their chain of commands. My mentor emphatically disagreed. He then was questioned on what he would do if he found out that one of the officers under him was gay. His answer was priceless: "Can he or she still see patients?", he asked. The audience chuckled and answered: "Of course." He then proceeded to say that if being gay doesn't preclude the officer from doing his work, he didn't care. "You're here, you're queer, get to work!" was how he ended his answer. A Navy captain, a Naval Academy alumnus with 20+ years in the Navy, a Christian man from the South, didn't care if his sailors were gay; he only cared that they were able to do their job. Hearing his answer gave me hope that, one day, DADT would be repealed because the repeal wasn't just good for gay sailors; it was also good for all service members.

For most of the world, December 2010 was just another month. I don't think I slept for that whole month. It was the last month of a democratic majority senate, and the Obama administration was trying to pass the defense budget, which included

the repeal of DADT. I was glued to C-SPAN, CNN, and Facebook, constantly trying to get updates on the latest news.

I wanted DADT to be repealed, I needed DADT to be repealed. I needed to be able to date someone who I didn't have to hide with and I wanted to have a family one day. Finally, on December 22, 2010, DADT got repealed. I felt that all the anxiety, all the fear, or the uncertainty that I had felt at different times in my career was gone. I no longer had to live thinking that any day I could lose my career. It was really a feeling that I can't describe with words.

I cried, I called my relatives, I celebrated with my family. My friends who knew I was gay congratulated me for the repeal of DADT as if I had won the lottery. And it felt like I had won something: I was ecstatic. I didn't care that I still had to wait until September 2011 to be completely open about being gay. But, the wait for the implementation dragged. It was my last year of residency, and while waiting I still couldn't be open about who I was, but there was light at the end of the tunnel.

I met the woman who is now my wife in my intern year. She doesn't remember meeting me. I remember everything about that day. I remember who introduced us, what she was wearing, who she was sitting next to. I remember she had a drink in her hand, and I remember thinking she was stunning. I also remember that every time we would run into each other at the hospital after we met, she always smiled at me and waved. Each time I saw her, I always thought she was so beautiful.

My wife and I went to the same medical school. She finished 2 years ahead of me; we had some common friends in medical school and we were often at the same parties, but we weren't formally introduced to each other until my intern year (even if she doesn't remember). We did our residency (she's ob-gyn) in the same hospital. Again, during residency, just like in medical school, we shared common friends and found ourselves hanging out in the same places. Because of DADT, neither of us knew the other person was gay.

I arrived in Guam, my first duty station after residency, in July 2011. My wife's best friend and I arrived together. Once again, I was introduced to my future wife, this time in Guam, while we were both staff attending Physicians. Yes, I also remember every detail of meeting my wife for a second time and this time she remembers meeting me.

Shortly after we meet, we all started hanging out; as I got to know her, I learned she was gay and about a week after the DADT repeal was officially implemented, we started dating. My wife was the first person I dated openly in the military and it's been awesome! Of course, we have challenges, just like every relationship. But, through all our challenges, we have continued to have our "family" by our side.

The word "family" for me has now so many meanings. I am blessed with wonderful, loving, and supportive blood relatives. I adore my parents and their 10 siblings who produced over 40 first cousins for my only child self. I don't want to bore you with how close I am to my mom's second cousins' kids (we grew up together spending our summers running around chasing cows and rabbits in the Andes). I have an incredibly large group of people distributed all over the world that I am related to by blood. These people have been amazingly supportive and loving to me, to my wife, and to our daughter and son. My wife went from having 3 first cousins

in America to having over 100 people in Peru, Australia, Italy, and Germany who now call her "Prima." My blood relatives are part of my family. But my family is so much bigger than just the people I share some DNA with.

My wife and I dedicated our wedding toast to our guests. Our guests were the people that hid our secret during DADT and called us super excited to congratulate us after DOMA got repealed. They were the people who sent me care packages when I was in Afghanistan or took my wife out drinking while I was in Afghanistan. Our wedding guests were our "family." Our "family" helped us survive two deployments, my fellowship, three moves, having our first child in the middle of a move, and expecting our second child while I was deployed.

This family has grown exponentially since DADT was repealed. All the clandestine organizations we were part of during DADT are now nationally recognized. Organizations like the American Military Partner Association (AMPA) and OutServe now have chapters in every duty station where soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines serve. New organizations, like Gay, Lesbian, and Supporting Sailors (GLASS) and Sparta, are also recognized and supported by the military. My family members are not only gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; they're heterosexual people who have been fighting by our side for years.

As I finish writing this chapter, I find myself thinking about how much better my life is after the repeal of DADT. However, as I finish writing this chapter, I am reminded that there's still a lot of work to be done. I was recently flown to evaluate patients on one of the ships I serve. One of the patients I saw was a young gay Marine who was struggling with depressive and anxiety symptoms due to being physically and verbally abused by his peers for being gay. How could this be? Didn't this all end after DADT got repealed? Once again, in my heart, I want to believe things that I know, in my head, are not true. And as I try to help this patient, I am navigating (literally and figuratively) through several parts of the military legal system. Numerous e-mails exchanged trying to help this patient, multiple meetings with senior enlisted and officers in charge of making things happen in order to stop this patient from being bullied for being gay. I am finishing writing this chapter when I got an e-mail from one of the senior enlisted females who was helping me coordinate care for the gay Marine. She ended her e-mail telling me how nice it was to have a family onboard. I've been walking around with a huge smile in my face since I read that e-mail. I trust my gay patient will be cared for after I leave the ship; he has family onboard who will make sure he's safe.

My family is the reason why I felt safe during the DADT years. I am so glad I accidentally "outed" myself to a psych tech 10 years ago. An accident that could have ended my career turned out to be a path to meeting amazing, caring people who I now call family. And with my family, I feel stronger to continue to fight for acceptance and respect.