

NVTI Podcast Series

# SERVING LGBTQ+ VETERANS

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[Upbeat intro music plays]

**NARRATOR:** Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss employment challenges and other pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

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**DAN:** Welcome! I'm Dan Griffiths. In this episode (Serving LGBTQ+ Veterans), we'll be speaking with a number of veterans who are part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (that's LGBTQ) community. We'll learn about their past experiences in the military and then discuss some best practices for serving LGBTQ+ veterans today.

I'm honored to be joined by four veterans' employment and training professionals who have a collective 25 years of experience serving veterans. Our first guest I'd like to introduce is Bradley Aune. Bradley is a Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (or DVOP) Specialist who has 12 years' experience joining us from Fargo, North Dakota. Hey, welcome, Bradley! What was your branch of service and how long did you serve for?

**BRADLEY:** I served 22 years in the Marines and the Army. I served combat tours in the Persian Gulf and Iraq.

**DAN:** Thank you, Bradley. We appreciate your service and dedication. And next, we have Nathaniel Boehme from Portland, Oregon. Nathaniel is with the USDA's Office of Civil Rights with almost a decade of experience in the nonprofit realm in addition to service, state, and federal governments. Nathaniel, same question. What was your branch of service and how long did you serve for?

**NATHANIEL:** So, I'm 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Air Force and I've served in various components since a week before 9/11. This September I actually hit 20 years, and I'm still serving with the Air National Guard here in Portland.

**DAN:** Perfect. We also have Matthew Freeman with us today. Matthew comes from Seattle, Washington and has 3 months' experience as an Intensive Services Coordinator for Washington State Employment Security Department. Matthew, what was your branch of service and how long did you serve for?

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**MATTHEW:** I served 10 and a half years in the world's finest Navy!

**DAN:** Well, there you go [chuckles]. Welcome to the podcast, Matthew! And our final guest today is Joanna Michaels from Sacramento, California. Joanna has 6 years' experience as a housing intake specialist for the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (we call that SSVF), that is a homeless veterans housing program. Joanna is a transgender female who does outreach to the VA and other groups for LGBTQ+ veterans. Joanna, what was your branch of service and how long did you serve for?

**JOANNA:** Well, thank you, Dan. I'm a Vietnam Era Air Force Survival instructor. I taught for 7 years in the Global survival school at Fairchild Air Force Base (AFB) in Washington, and also Clark Air Base (AB) in the Philippines at PACAF Jungle Survival school. It was a privilege and a gift to serve.

**DAN:** It's truly an honor to have you all on this podcast. Thank you for joining us today to help us better understand this incredibly nuanced and critical topic! I'm sure there will be some terms and acronyms that our audience might not be familiar with when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. We'll try to elaborate on any of these throughout the course of our discussions. So, for now, however, let's start off by having you all share some of your past experiences with our audience.

First, we want to know what brought you all here today. Why did you join the service? And what was your experience like both serving in the military as well as separating? Bradley, can you talk about this for our listening audience out there?

**BRADLEY:** Yeah. Sure, Dan. I always wanted to be a Marine; I enlisted infantry as I wanted to do crazy stuff and see the world. I couldn't let the Marines know that I was a cross-dresser and was very careful to never tell anyone. At this time during the 80's and prior to Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), I basically had to suppress my gender expression and there wasn't really any chance as I was deployed a lot. There were lots of times that I would have to laugh at homophobic jokes as to not blow my cover. It was a very hostile and oppressive environment for the LGBTQ+ service members at that time.

**DAN:** Yeah, I'm curious to hear if anyone else had a similar experience. How about you, Joanna?

**JOANNA:** Sure, Dan. I joined because I was out of money for tuition in college and, at that time, if I wasn't enrolled, I would surely be drafted. So, I joined the Air Force and two weeks later I received my draft notice. My experience was fabulous. I learned how to write presentations and how to present information to students. When I separated, I went into the restaurant business and my survival training paid off; I knew how to endure the pressure and how to train the crew.

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**DAN:** Yeah, Joanna. It's incredible what a small world this is because those were the same incentives, I guess, that I had when I was joining as well. My draft number was in the single digits. So, I think we were all motivated at the time for those reasons. And we had different experiences prior to Don't Ask Don't Tell. Let's hear from Nathaniel next.

**NATHANIEL:** For the vast majority of my career, I served with my true self hidden, fearful that who I was would mean over a decade of blood, sweat, and tears would be lost or that I'd face harassment, discrimination, or even violence or worse. I identify as a gay, white, cisgender man. And until 2011, and well beyond, my identity always hung over my head.

**DAN:** Alright, so let me interrupt you for a second, Nathaniel. Can you explain to our audience what "cisgender" means?

**NATHANIEL:** Of course! You know, keep in mind I can only speak to my experiences as a cisgender person, but the term commonly refers to someone who has a gender identity congruent with that assigned at birth. For example, when I was born my gender identity was assigned male and I grew up and I identified as male. Transgender is widely used to refer to a diverse group of individuals who transcend culturally defined gender norms. Other identities include gender fluid, agender, and gender queer. Really, the important thing, though, is to remember that it's the person's experiences and their own identity that matters.

**DAN:** Thank you for that, Nathaniel. Please continue sharing your experience with us.

**NATHANIEL:** Sure, Dan. When I was deployed to Iraq in 05 and 06, I had to be careful about talking about my personal life, making sure I used gender-neutral pronouns for partners and working diligently to turn the conversation away from my home life. My letters and emails home were short, bereft of emotion, and often inauthentic. I faced death nearly daily knowing my loved ones may never have the ability to officially mourn my loss or celebrate my life.

In 2009 I was incredibly excited to be selected as the next Equal Opportunity (EO) officer at my Wing. But then one week before leaving for training, I was told by the new Wing Commander that I wasn't going, and multiple sources said it had to do with who I was. For nearly six months I was homeless, without health insurance, or any employment because of that decision. Now keep in mind, again, that this was 2 years before Don't Ask Don't Tell was repealed and it really changed the course of my life. The shadow of Don't Ask Don't Tell continued to hang over my career. During the repeal I recall overhearing multiple conversations like, "are they going to expect us to room with these f...ing faggots?" I didn't have the heart to tell them they had been, and it hasn't

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been an issue. And this was from someone who's now a Chief Master Sergeant and Superintendent of their section.

When I was outed at my unit after the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, our E-9 held a briefing where I was explicitly excluded, and the discussion was about LGBTQ+ people in the ranks. I learned very early on that I could not bring my true authentic self to work in the military, and that "that family" was not *my* family.

**DAN:** Wow, that's certainly a lot to deal with. Thank you for sharing, Nathaniel! It seems like everyone had very different experiences both inside and outside of the military.

This brings up a few additional questions I'd like to ask you all. How have views on being part of the LGBTQ+ community while serving in the military, how have those shifted over time? Would you say that the process of coming out as a veteran has changed? Matthew, would you be willing to give us your thoughts here?

**MATTHEW:** Absolutely, Dan. I know, for me, dating has been a much better factor now that I have been out of the Navy. Of course, during the time of Don't Ask Don't Tell, you know, you're living in constant fear of being with the one you love. Of course, when you are out to sea, there are plenty of romances because all you have is... each other so [laughs]. Now that the policy of Don't Ask Don't Tell has been lifted, you know, there's a lot more of those serving active right now, are getting more and more comfortable bringing their significant others to command parties, command functions, any of that nature now, so.

**DAN:** Right. Yeah, those are good observations, Matthew. And what do you think, Bradley?

**BRADLEY:** Well, I served before the Don't Ask Don't Tell and it was more of a seek-and-destroy culture; anything considered to be homosexual would be grounds for immediate discharge. Then, during Don't Ask Don't Tell, service members could be outed by others—Not much better if you ask me. You could serve, but no one better find out about your orientation. Now, however, you can serve in the open.

I was outed as a cross-dresser prior to Iraq. And if not for a very supportive commander, I would have been replaced. I went on to earn the Bronze Star Medal in Iraq for my leadership. Once back in North Dakota, and at the top of the E9 promotion list, I was pulled in and counseled by colonels from the state command and told that I would not be promoted to Sergeant Major (SGM) for being a cross-dresser. I retired because I would not sign a form stating that I would stop cross-dressing and had to prove my leadership.

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**DAN:** Wow, I'm sorry to hear that, Bradley. And while it seems like there's been some progress made in becoming more accepting of our LGBTQ+ service members, it's obvious that we've got a long way to go yet! So, based on your experience, Bradley, what unique obstacles do LGBTQ+ veterans face while in the service? And what about after they leave the service and start searching for employment opportunities?

**BRADLEY:** Many veterans have to live a lie. They cannot be their true self and must put in 100 percent to protect that lie. The mindset is conflicting as they're fighting for freedom but cannot freely express themselves. Once I left the service, I expected to be able to enjoy the freedoms that I had fought for but was discriminated against in employment and in life.

I am very involved with veteran's organizations. When I started going to them and presenting feminine at the meetings, I was met with resistance and talking behind my back. I stood up at one of the meetings and said "This is an organization that supports veterans and I am a veteran; I am asking for your support. We support all veterans, it's in our mission statements, we do not get to pick and choose." Most were very supportive after hearing those words.

**DAN:** Wow, what a powerful story! And it's absolutely true that we must support *all* of our veterans. Joanna, are there any other unique obstacles you would like to add?

**JOANNA:** I think the biggest obstacle is just trying to fit into your unit. And I was accepted as long as I was Jack. We, as transgender people, face potential isolation because of our differences. When one leaves the service, the main obstacle becomes fitting in and being accepted because the discrimination and hate are still out there in society. One has to find a way through the hatred and to ultimately persevere. I never came out while in service but would find ways to express my female gender through local programs that I would reach out to (and was scared to death somebody would find out [laughs]).

**DAN:** Yeah, yeah. Those are good points, Joanna! And there's a lot of adversity out there still to overcome. Nathaniel, I want to ask you and Matthew this next question. How do intersecting identities, like being part of the LGBTQ+ veteran community while simultaneously being a person of color or person with disabilities, how can we navigate society with those challenges? Nathaniel?

**NATHANIEL:** Sure. Yeah, you know. And while my experiences as a gay man in the military and our society certainly informed my understanding, I was always a cisgender *white* gay man. And this meant I was able to navigate spaces that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) folks often couldn't, or at least not without significant challenges. In fact, when I was in LA working on Skid Row, I was often the only white

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person of both the people we served and the providers I supported. I learned that my place was to work to strategically to use my privilege to engage with power structures and make efforts to amplify voices often unheard. Additionally, it was my duty as someone who benefits from this unearned privilege to actively work to dismantle systems of oppression that benefit me and people who look like me. I made and continue to make the commitment to practicing not just allyship, but active accompliceship.

**DAN:** Nathaniel, can you share a little bit more about accompliceship and how that relates back to the privilege and so forth that you were just speaking about?

**NATHANIEL:** Sure. And so, I (like many, many others), I stand on the shoulders of giants. You know, I'm a benefactor of systems of privilege which are the reverse side of systems of oppression. And so, it's a big difference between being non-racist versus being actively anti-racist. And so, engaging in not just talking about, you know, not just putting the Black Lives Matter sign in your yard, but really actively engaging, calling your Senators and your elected representatives about reparations bills for example, about things to declare racism a public health crisis and putting yourself on the front lines with those folks who have the most to lose and who have lost the most over time, being actively engaged in part of it and not just holding your hand up and saying "Yes, I appreciate these movements" but also "I'm willing to risk what it is that I have gained from these systems of oppression to make sure that everybody gets what they need."

**DAN:** Well, thank you for giving us this perspective, Nathaniel. Matthew let's have you answer the same question. Hey, Matthew!

**MATTHEW:** Hey, Dan! Yeah, for myself, I feel like I'm a unicorn because I grew up in a predominantly white area of Orange County, California where you had to adjust to certain things that most black kids just normally didn't do like swimming, skateboarding, you know, skiing. So, having those experiences makes myself stand out a lot more and I can adapt to any type of group setting, whatever it is.

**DAN:** So, what social support systems or outlets are there for LGBTQ+ veterans who want to be more open about their orientation or identity? I'll direct this question to Joanna, and then to Matthew and Bradley. Joanna?

**JOANNA:** Yeah, thanks, Dan. The outlet that I began with was PFLAG: Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), now commonly known as just as the initials PFLAG. It was the United States' first and largest organization uniting parents, families, and allies with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. I was one of the first in the Sacramento PFLAG organization that was transgender. This organization gave me an introduction into other lives and also parents that were coping

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with their child coming out as LGBTQ. They were caring, compassionate. I also found a veteran group that helped as well, that was during Don't Ask Don't Tell. One of the things in Sacramento is the Gender Health Center, I volunteered there for a year and met a lot of great people that were helping the community. There are other different support groups that exist as well.

**DAN:** I can second that as far as identifying with veteran groups and then actually volunteering and engaging with those groups, it really helps build a background and an understanding and some more support. So, I'm glad that you were able to find some supportive groups and outlets, Joanna. Let's hear from Matthew next.

**MATTHEW:** For me, I would say get involved in the LGBTQ+ community any way you can. I've been playing sports since I was 10 years old, so I'm part of an amazing group called Varsity Gay League (just a little plug-in there). If you're not athletic that's totally fine; use your artistic side! There's the Gay Men's Chorus and Gay Women's Chorus as well. Get involved.

**DAN:** That's spot on. Thank you for sharing these with us. And then, Bradley. What social support systems or outlets would you recommend or know about?

**BRADLEY:** Well, one group that's been very supportive to me is actually my PTSD group. And while in that group we made masks. The mask shows how I feel. On the mask I made the phrase is "You are a Hero, but you don't belong here" and the other side it says "Freedom, but not for you." On one side of the mask is the American flag with my Bronze Star Metal and on the other is the rainbow flag. Most of my life I have been told that I am a Hero and thanked for my service and that they love veterans, but I've also told many times that transgender people do not deserve to be part of the military and society. This has caused lots of stress in my life, so the mask represents this.

**DAN:** Well, that's awesome, Bradley. And kind of a different way of being able to symbolize how you feel, being able to make that more concrete if you will. So far, we've discussed some of the general support systems and outlets available. Now I want to ask what specific resources are there for LGBTQ+ veterans regarding healthcare, employment, etc.? What resources do you know about, Nathaniel?

**NATHANIEL:** Sure, and I first want to recognize what Bradley had said. I definitely echo the experiences with PTSD and specifically Impostor Syndrome; it's definitely very real. And as a social worker, you know, for five years I had the incredible honor and privilege to serve as the nation's first full-time LGBTQ veterans coordinator here in Oregon. One of my most important duties was to determine what those resources are and where they might exist. As you can imagine, there aren't many mainstream organizations or

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government entities really doing this work full-fledged. In fact, I found (and I count myself among them) that most LGBTQ+ veterans identify much more closely with the LGBTQ+ community than they do with the veteran community, for lots of reasons.

However, what I can say is there are so many organizations that are doing really good work trying to bridge those gaps. Minority Veterans of America for example is advocating in spaces to include the floors of Congress that were historically closed off to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, LGBTQ+ people, women, and religious minority veterans. There are also some incredible groups working to bring awareness around the needs of active trans troops and trans veterans like TAVA (or Transgender American Veterans Association) and SPART\*A (Servicemembers, Partners, and Allies for Respect and Tolerance for All). Overall, there's a huge need for visibility and integration of the LGBTQ+ veteran community in larger veteran spaces.

**BRADLEY:** I'd like to add something here, Dan.

**DAN:** Sure.

**BRADLEY:** I have taken almost every course that NVTI offers and I really appreciate this LGBTQ+ veterans being included in the podcast series and in their training. This is a very important group of veterans to focus on as we choose to serve our country and want to be treated the same as any other veteran while interacting with DOL or JVSG Staff at local workforce centers throughout the country.

**DAN:** Yeah, absolutely. And thank you both. These are definitely some great resources that Nathaniel and Bradley were mentioning that really help gain visibility and integration within our own communities but have a larger aspect and impact, maybe, on our government policies and so forth. And then to Bradley, the NVTI training and other resources that are out there that are really taking hold right now and adding to our understanding of this special population and this community. How about you, Joanna? How about some resources?

**JOANNA:** The Affordable Care Act was one area. Then Medicare, and, of course, the VA. My search was simple. I would call and ask for the policies for treating LGBTQ+ patients. I found a doctor at Sutter and another at the VA. I look for help and ask for help. If doctors seem reluctant, I move on; I don't want a reluctant doctor treating me. I of course follow up to find out why there is not a policy that addresses this type of negative behavior toward us. It's a not a win if you have to sue that doctor in order to have them treat you. You won't have very good relationships with them! My current status is that I primarily use the VA and I have terrific doctors. I am open and honest and so when I meet them, I let them know my expectations for care.

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**DAN:** Yeah. Very true, Joanna. Let me ask you a follow up question. What should veteran service providers understand about LGBTQ+ veterans? I mean, what do they need to know to provide the best support?

**JOANNA:** Well, the number one thing you need to provide is a safe space for the veteran to unpack their story. This is very often the first place where they're going to unpack it. And I've had that happen to me here at VOA because I have rainbows all over the room, so they understand that it's a safe space. We need them to listen. The caregivers need to listen, and I tell that to behavioral health, nurses, doctors. If you're not listening and you keep interrupting trying to solve the problem, all you do is just get a reaction from us that: "Oh, here we go again." So, listen, let them talk. And then a couple of sessions maybe later, you can react to it.

**DAN:** Yeah, I totally agree. Active listening is absolutely essential when we're working with any veteran. And thanks for mentioning safe spaces as well, not only for our LGBTQ+ veterans but for women veterans as well. You know, that's a critical component of providing supportive services to these special populations. Let's have Matthew go next.

**MATTHEW:** Yeah, definitely agree with Joanna about listening. But definitely have empathy. I mean, there are so many veterans that don't feel wanted or they feel pushed to the side because the providers just don't care, especially when it comes to our trans community and those that are HIV positive. I've heard so many stories of just how, they just get brushed to the side and we are human beings and deserve to be treated fairly like everyone else regardless of who we love and what are status is.

**DAN:** Yeah, those are some awesome suggestions. And as we've previously discussed, many organizations are becoming more aware of the LGBTQ+ community, but how can organizations go beyond simply creating a basic awareness in representing and supporting the LGBTQ+ community? What do you think, Nathaniel?

**NATHANIEL:** You know, visibility and representation are key. Make purposeful and intentional efforts at recruiting, retaining, and promoting people who don't look like the power majority. Make sure that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, LGBTQ people, women, etc., are shown in your Boardroom, your leadership teams, your marketing, and promotional materials. Celebrate and observe Thanksgiving and Veterans Day, yes, but also commemorate Trans Day of Remembrance, Pride, and Juneteenth. We have to normalize conversations about race and racism and transphobia and homophobia, because regardless of our desire to think they don't exist, people lose their lives to them every day.

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**DAN:** Yeah, thank you for those takeaways, Nathaniel. Visibility, representation and then being able to normalize those conversations about racism and homophobia. Thank you for that. Bradley, would you be willing to share your thoughts, as well?

**BRADLEY:** Yeah, well most communities have pride groups of some type. There are national groups like Out Serve as Nathaniel mentioned and Transgender American Veterans. The VA's become much more supportive to LGBTQ veterans. So, there's a lot of good things going, and we just got to keep the pressure on so to speak.

**DAN:** Yeah, and I've noticed the VA website is also becoming a little more aware of our LGBTQ+ veterans as well. So, thank you, Bradley. Before we end today's podcast, I wanted to ask everyone here if there were any final thoughts or important messages you all wanted to share with our audience? Joanna?

**JOANNA:** Yeah, sure, I'd love to. When you come out, find allies. That's what I did. Find allies and other LGBTQ people; I have found people ready to help and go to bat for me. It can take a while, but once you get to the point where you exude self-confidence, I have found that people feel more comfortable around me and they are more willing to help. Communication is the key. We have to be out and proud and let people know who we are.

**DAN:** Yeah, absolutely. What about you, Bradley?

**BRADLEY:** You know, I've seen a lot of progress in the rights for the LGBTQ community over my life, but I feel that we have to be on guard, as there are still many out there that would like to take those rights away. I've been involved in legislative testimony and Human rights advocacy for over 20 years. In June of 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that we have employment protections. I have been fighting with my State legislature and my State for over 20 years. And only after that ruling did my State allow me to express my authentic self at work.

**DAN:** And Nathaniel?

**NATHANIEL:** My recommendation to those wishing to honor LGBTQ+ veterans and all those who served is really to reflect on this concept of integration. The absence of integration or isolation is really a predictor for mental illness, suicidality, and more. When you talk about veterans, talk about us. Talk about our lives, our loves, our struggles. Talk about our history and our future. We are part of your community, and you are part of ours.

**DAN:** And Matthew.

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**MATTHEW:** I would say have training that extends beyond the month of June (which is officially pride month). I mean, once June is over, the LGBTQ+ community is usually forgotten about. And there should be continual awareness training about the LGBTQ+ community such as how are the holidays affecting our community, or becoming parents for the first time, or buying a home for the first time. You know, once again, treat us like human beings!

**DAN:** Outstanding. Thank you again for joining us for today's podcast, everyone. Remember to find this and other podcasts under Resources at NVTI.org. We invite you to continue the conversation at *Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice*. Thank you.

[Upbeat outro music plays]

**NARRATOR:** This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts.

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