

## Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 22: LGBT

June 15, 2017

How was your weekend? Chances are, someone at work has asked you this question on a Monday morning. To many of us the answer is simple. You tell them about your kid's soccer game, an inspiring sermon from your preacher or a great movie you saw with your significant other. But we don't always take the time to see how these individual complex social identities intersect and work together from one context to another. Intersectionality was the theme of this year's intelligence community LGBT pride summit held at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. We spoke with three NGA team members who shared their stories of how they've navigated intersecting personal and professional lives. Welcome to Geointeresting.

**NGA:** Dave is an Air Force captain who deployed three times before coming to NGA. He describes the challenges of deployment, particularly the difficulties of hiding a part of his identity. But during his second deployment, something happened that he'll never forget.

**Dave:** I joined the military through ROTC at the very proud The Ohio State University. This is back in 2002. My memory of how it all went down is — in order to receive an ROTC scholarship, you obviously have to sign your life away to the government, which includes hundreds, it seems, of documents you have to sign. During one of those experiences, we had this tech sergeant, very old and crusty. He sat you down and told you to sign here, sign here, sign here, and he gets to one of the required things he has to say, and he says something like, "Do you know what 'don't ask, don't tell' is?" I stammered through a response, "Gays can't serve in the military." He said, "That's right. Can't be a fag. Sign here." That started it. That was kind of jarring. But I wanted to be in ROTC to join the military, so I signed it.

**NGA:** So you had to endure through it?

**Dave:** Yep. I endured it. Quick background on me — I went into the Air Force, went to Intel school, graduated from Intel school and went to Shaw Air Force Base; Shaw Air Force Base for a few years, a couple deployments there. We'll probably talk about that later. I always knew I wanted to come to Washington, D.C. I remember telling my mom when I was about 13. I finally made my way here. I was lucky to be selected to work at NGA where I was active duty and eventually Reserves.

**NGA:** And so your deployments; you briefly touched on that. You deployed quite a few times, correct?

**Dave:** That's right; twice to Iraq. Both of those deployments were under what is known as "don't ask, don't tell" or what technically was known as "don't ask, don't tell." Those two in Iraq, then I deployed to Afghanistan with NGA.

**NGA:** After "don't ask, don't tell" was repealed?

**Dave:** That's right.



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**NGA:** What was the difference between those deployments; the before and after?

**Dave:** When people think about “don’t ask, don’t tell,” they don’t really get it, unless they’ve lived it, really lived the negative aspects of it, of which one would argue there are only negative aspects. Living under “don’t ask, don’t tell” wasn’t just that you couldn’t tell everybody what you did over the weekend. It was oppressive to an untold degree, especially while deployed. Think about when you’re deployed, when one of your things you look forward to is calling home to speak with your family, your loved ones. You can’t even talk to your significant other, boyfriend, girlfriend, the way you would want to because all those conversations are recorded. Some people might be able to compartmentalize that and deal with that, but even some conversations with your parents, if you’ve come out to them and told them, you can’t even talk to them about it. Even today when Michelle was talking about it, it was so difficult. My first deployment, I had just broken up with my first boyfriend, and trying to cope with that was impossible.

**NGA:** And not really be able to talk about it.

**Dave:** Right. You’re stranded, you’re alone, so you have to work through that. I was lucky that we had an underground network while I was on my first and second deployment. Those networks were critical.

**NGA:** You were able to find a support system because you’re away from your regular support system.

**Dave:** That’s right, and we dealt together. It didn’t matter who you are, where you came from; you had that single bond. People endured together, and we fought together, they cry together; that was the coping system that we developed.

**NGA:** And you said you were actually deployed when President Obama announced he was going to work on a repeal for “don’t ask don’t tell.”

**Dave:** That was crazy. I was in Kirkuk, which is on the border between Kurdistan and Iraq, and obviously the bad areas of Iraq; it was a pretty intense area. We get rocketed something like every other day. [inaudible] was coming up. It was the 27th of January, which just so happens to be a couple days before my birthday, and there was rumors that gays would make their first appearance in his speech. It would be the first time that a Commander in Chief ever recognized gays were in the service. Often, folks would deny our existence, which was interesting in its own right. So I heard it was happening. Because of the time change, I can’t remember exactly. It was 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. I set my alarm. I got up and went to the TV we had in the office — it was the only one around, obviously, that early — and I turned it on and anxiously waited as he went through his speech. This is his first State of the Union, so he’s working through a lot of the economic stuff, which is what the country is going through, and he said it. It was just one short little line that said, “And I will work with Congress to repeal the harmful ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’” Just imagine, you’re lying about who you are to everybody, you’re making up fake email accounts so you can email your loved ones about when you’re going to see them, and then the president says it’s going to be over. It was amazing. It was obviously emotional. Again, you dealt with this alone, which is crazy. Something you’re still happy and proud about, but you are alone. It didn’t take away from it. I’ll remember it until the day I die. The other thing you have to realize is “don’t ask, don’t tell” didn’t just suppress gay and lesbian service members. It suppressed our friends

because we feared for them. We couldn't tell them things because we feared maybe they would be called in to testify, which happened. I don't know how much people know about the ramifications of this. Often friends/family members were called in to testify against a service member, and that drives wedges throughout, and often it was cited that "don't ask, don't tell" was there to ensure unit cohesion; it only drove a wedge, and let me really drive this wedge home. I think one of the most profound experiences I had as a wingman in the Air Force was just a few days after New Year's. One of my troops came to me and said, "Captain Blakesly, I need to pull you aside." Tyler wasn't that kind of person; he often just spoke in public. He pulled me aside and said, "I have to go to Georgia. I need to see my sister." I said, "It's the work week. What's going on? Is everything okay?" He said, "My father committed suicide." I'm 23 or 24 at this point, and I was just blown away. I'm like, "You're not going to Georgia alone; I'm going to drive you there." Because the idea of having a 19 year old drive a few hundred miles by himself after his father had committed suicide was never going to happen. He said, "Unfortunately, you can't drive me." "Well, of course I can. I'm your boss, and I'm driving you. This isn't up for discussion." He says, "I can't tell you why, but you can't drive me." I'm like, "I am driving you. This isn't up for discussion." He said, "The reason why you can't drive me is because my sister is a lesbian, and she's in the United States Army, and if you go down there and see her, you'll be required to report her." Now imagine this: a kid whose father just committed suicide; his biggest concern is his well-being or his sister's, I guess it's his sister's concern, that she'll be outed of the military.

**NGA:** Yes, that fear.

**Dave:** That's insane! That is a wedge that is of untold proportion. When you're in the midst of dealing with something like this, the last thing you should be concerned about is some archaic policy that people in Washington dropped. It was something that really drove home for me, that really wasn't about me at all, but really undermined the health of our services.

**NGA:** What is the atmosphere like now?

**Dave:** I think 180 isn't big enough of a term. As you mentioned, I'm the aid to the director of NGA, Robert Cardillo. It's night and day; I mean, it's almost a fantasy land. If you can imagine Cadet Blakesly back in 2002 to Captain Blakesly, aid to the director — it's just different; it's the opposite. The director is obviously one of our biggest supporters in the community. He is steadfast in that support; he has never wavered in that support, and I just think that it's an amazing environment to work in, in which you don't have to lie. You don't have those wedges. You don't have to worry about stuff like all of us had to deal with. It's honestly hard to believe sometimes.

**NGA:** Thanks, we appreciate you being with us today.

**Dave:** Yes, my pleasure.

**NGA:** Katherine has more than 45 years of civil service, and about 15 years ago, she decided to make some big life transitions and found out the strong community support she always had at NGA remained and still remains today. We were hoping you could give our listeners just a little about your background. I know you have an extensive career in civil service, some prior military

experience, and a history with NGA and some of its predecessor organizations. Can you tell us a little bit about that background?

**Katherine:** I joined the Marine Corps back a long time ago and spent 22 years with the Marine Corps. After that, I retired from the Marine Corps, got out, did a couple years working with DARPA and then came to what was pre-NIMA at that time. It was before NIMA was even stood up — went through the organization to become NIMA, to become NGA — and I've worked with NGA and its predecessor organizations for about 21 years now, so I've got quite a long history as working as a government person, as military, as well as a contractor now with NGA, and I've enjoyed every minute of it.

**NGA:** So you were at NGA, then you left, then you came back to NGA, correct?

**Katherine:** Right. I keep coming back to NGA. I go out to DIA, jumped back and forth between that and NRO for a while [and] came back here. It was while working at NRO that the largest, biggest transition of my life occurred. It was there that I finally actually took the steps necessary to become me. I was born a boy. I was about 10 years old when I knew something was different. I wrestled with that for many, many years. When I was about 40, I self-diagnosed myself, and I couldn't believe what I encountered, and I thought, this can't be right, this can't be right. Put it off for about 13 years and then actually started to get some psychological help and realized that I was indeed transgender. Once that started, it allowed me to move from a very introverted ISTJ to a very extroverted ENFP, which is something a lot of people have difficulty understanding, but when you're trapped inside yourself and trapped in the closet, it's really hard to be you.

**NGA:** Obviously, a lot has changed in your life. What are some of the things that haven't changed that have stayed consistent for you?

**Katherine:** The things that have stayed consistent for me are my service. I've been in service to my country as a Marine; I've been in service to the armed forces, working with NGA and the other intel agencies, but the biggest thing that has been always constant is my relationship with God. That has been the most constant thing through all of this. I was very afraid when I started my transition; it was scary, to say the least. But I spent about 2 years in prayer trying to discern if this was something that not only I could live with, but if God could live with me. It was revealed to me very clearly that, yes, God loves me for who I am, and he made me perfectly as a boy so I could be a girl. That has been probably the most constant thing that has been with me the entire time. In fact, right now I am in school, about halfway through school to be a vocational deacon. That's going to continue the service motif.

**NGA:** What about community? How have you relied on your community, and do you feel a sense of support and community here?

**Katherine:** NGA is a really special place. I have been at other places, and they have not been as accepting, as understanding, as NGA has been. I have had many people who even, when they were told I was transgender, did not believe it. I had one person I worked with; she asked me, "You don't seem like you're being challenged," and I said, "Well, I've worked on a lot tougher programs." She said, "Like what?" and I named about half a dozen. She goes, "No; don't know those." Then I named the right one, and she knew that. She said, "You didn't work

on that.” I said, “Oh yes, I did.” She goes, “No, no. I don’t remember you working on that.” I said, “How about this name?” and I gave her my old name. She looked at me and she said, “Huh?” I said, “Yes, I was born a boy. That used to be my name.” She goes, “They told me that when you were hired, but I never realized it.” She’s been a wonderful support. A couple years ago during the pride month, we had a session on “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Well, up to that point, if we wrote an article for Pride [Month], we were not allowed to use our names. Now, for “don’t ask, don’t tell,” they insisted we use our name.

**NGA:** Once it was repealed?

**Katherine:** Yes. That “don’t ask, don’t tell” was repealed. I prayed for about two and a half weeks over that because I’m not one who really advertises; although, I guess this is quite an advertisement right here. If someone asks me if I’m transgender, I’ll tell them that. It’s not a secret, obviously, not in this community, but this time we had to put our name on it. I had talked to one woman at a different building for three years, and I was talking to her that afternoon, and all of a sudden, she turns toward her computer and just starts typing. She says while she’s staring straight at the screen, “I read your article. It was wonderful.” Then she looks at me and says, “Was that the right thing to say?” and I said, “Yes it was,” and we both cried. It was wonderful.

**NGA:** That’s great. Is there anything else that you want to share?

**Katherine:** Oh, I want to thank NGA. In different places, I have not been treated nearly as well. Bathrooms are always an issue. Not here. I don’t know if a lot of people know that they have single-use restrooms here, and that’s for people who have difficulty using a public restroom with a transgender person. I’ve talked with and mentored several people. Some here, some at other places, some through church, and it’s a teaching; it’s an education, and that’s one of my passions as well, is teaching people. People are afraid of things, typically, because they don’t know anything about them. Once you learn, it’s not nearly as scary as it was to begin with. And I think that’s probably the biggest thing that I’m trying to do, is educate people; to have them understand that I’m a person just like you. I have my own feelings, and it doesn’t matter if I’m LGBTQIA, or whatever. It really doesn’t matter; it’s the person that matters. When I started this transition, I learned one very, very valuable lesson: don’t assume anything. There are so many times when you make an assumption that you end up being wrong.

**NGA:** I think that’s a great message.

**Katherine:** Thank you.

**NGA:** Thank you so much for talking to us.

**Katherine:** You’re welcome. I enjoyed it.

**NGA:** Jo came to NGA after graduating from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida. Although working in the IC requires you to be good at keeping secrets, Jo never wanted to feel like she needed to keep any secrets about who she is. Hey, Jo. Thanks for joining us today.

**Jo:** Thank you for having me.

**NGA:** We wanted to start by getting a little bit about your story, so we can give our audience a little bit about you.

**Jo:** In 2004 I was diagnosed with depression and what would eventually become PTSD. At the same time, a couple months later, my older sister came out as lesbian and eloped to Canada to marry her wife. I was told by my parents after I was in the hospital for my depression. I was told by my parents, “Don’t tell anyone about your depression. That’s a secret.” When my older sister came out, it was also, “Don’t tell anyone your sister’s a lesbian. You can’t tell anyone about this.” That put the two in the same box for me, where there was this really strong stigma against being mentally ill and being gay, and I thought, well, definitely not going to say anything anymore. I became frustrated as I got older. I had depression — it was on the books — and when I turned 18, they found out that the depression was caused by trauma, so I got the PTSD diagnosis. At that time I was really annoyed that I was keeping this a secret. I didn’t feel like PTSD should be a secret because there are so many soldiers, especially, who are coming home with PTSD, and they were suffering in silence, and I was suffering in silence. I was actually at a disability activist event; a disability activist had come to talk to the students at my school, and so many of the stories that he told I was like, that’s me; I feel that so hard. I went up to him afterwards, and I said, “Thank you for telling us your story. I have PTSD and I related a lot,” and he looked at me, and his eyes went wide, and he said, “No one with invisible disabilities ever talks about their disability.”

**NGA:** That was the first time you had said it out loud?

**Jo:** That was the first time I told a stranger that I had it, because I was in the process of telling my family that “Hey, my diagnosis has changed. I have PTSD,” so there were people who knew, but that was the first time I told a complete stranger. I said, “I have PTSD, and I really relate to what you said.” He said, “No one ever talks about that. You should talk about it.” So I started talking about PTSD and what it was like to have it and telling people I had it. It was nerve-racking. There were people who were like, “Oh, were you a soldier?” and I would have to say, “No, I was not. I actually developed it as a kid,” and explain what happened. As I started doing it more and more, more and more people were coming out with it. So more people were saying, “Hey, I have PTSD. This is what it’s like. This is how hard it is.” The movement was really growing towards understanding PTSD as mental illness.

**NGA:** It’s almost its own community, right?

**Jo:** It is. There is not as big a community in the civilian world for people with PTSD as there is in the military world, but we’re out there, and there’s quite a few of us. The community is growing; the support for it is growing. I joke that I have the most socially acceptable mental illness that there is because there are, unfortunately, people out there with mental illness that can’t come out of the closet because people are afraid of them and they’re afraid of themselves, so it’s really tragic. I was coming out of the closet with a mental illness around the same time I was dating my first girlfriend. I wanted to tell people about her because I wanted us to not be ashamed anymore, but at the same time, I remembered the kind of chaos that my sister coming out caused and how everything had to be kept a secret. After I broke up with my first girlfriend, I spoke to my older sister for the first time since she’d eloped. I did not want to tell her anything

that was going on with me. I'm not using the words; I'm not going to say anything, but I thought that this was really unfair. If I can talk about my sister now, I should be able to talk about me. I started telling people around me, and it was interesting the reactions I got. They were very similar to the reactions I got when people found out they had PTSD. They had questions; there were people [who] were asking me really personal and unnerving stuff, like, whoa, that's none of your business; stay out of there.' [There were] people who felt like they had this right to know more about me than what I was willing to share. I hadn't fully come out of the closet until after Pulse. It was when Pulse happened that I thought, this is not right at all. There's too many of us that are afraid, and it's not okay to be afraid anymore. It's not OK to be secrets. I think we're secret-keepers here — that's what we do — but our identities shouldn't be a secret. Who we are and how the different parts of ourselves and how we come together; that should not be a secret.

**NGA:** So do you feel comfortable being yourself here?

**Jo:** When I started in January, I kind of made a promise to myself. I went back and forth. Do I go back in the closet? Do I stay out? What can happen? I'm now in government service; what do I do? I made the choice back in January that I was going to not keep having PTSD a secret; not keep being panromantic a secret. I don't want to go back in that closet, so I tell people. I don't try to make it a big deal, but I tell people, "I am panromantic, I have PTSD; this is me, this is all of me; you're getting it all."

**NGA:** What would you say to someone who wants to be an ally to the LGBT community but maybe doesn't know how to get started or how to be best supportive?

**Jo:** That can be a difficult thing. I think the most important thing is that you listen, and you let people speak, and you never apply words to a person that they haven't chosen for themselves. When someone comes up to you and they say, "I'm gender queer," or, "I'm panromantic," or, "I'm asexual," it can be a little like, "OK, what the heck is that? You're just making words up," but they're not, and so it's important when they say, "Hey, this is me. These are the words I use to describe myself," that you use those words too. I think that's honestly one of the most important things you can do is to just listen to someone, take them at face value, and accept who they are.

**NGA:** These stories of intersectionality highlight our ability to find strength in ourselves and in our community and celebrate the differences that make up our agency. Thanks for listening to Geointeresting.

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