

Jennifer Dane
Interviewed by Jason A. Higgins
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Washington, D.C.

Jason Higgins

Today is **January 20, 2023**. My name is Dr. Jason A. Higgins. I am in Washington D.C. at the Library of Congress. Joining me today for an oral history interview is **Jennifer Dane**, a veteran of the US Air Force. May I call you Jennifer?

Jennifer Dane

[00:00:00] Or Jenn, either one. Just to clarify it for the record, it is 2023.

Jason Higgins

Did I say 2022? Thank you so much for that. I am still getting used to it, even though I have it written right in front of me. (LAUGHTER) This interview is part of a project entitled "Crossing The Military Civilian Divide." Before we get started, do I have your permission to record?

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

Excellent. To be sure, if I ask any questions that are too personal or anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer. Jennifer Dane is a veteran of the US Air Force, who served as an intelligence analyst focused on geopolitical relations, terrorism, and threat vulnerability issues. She – do you use she/her pronouns?

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

Okay. She serves as the CEO of the Modern Military Association of America, the nation's largest non-profit organization working to advance fairness and equality for the LGBTQ military and veteran community. She holds a masters degree in Criminal Justice, and a masters in Educational Policy as well. Quite the accomplishments with a double masters. So, I have a couple of biographical questions before we really get started. What was your highest rank?

Jennifer Dane

It was the E-5 Staff Sergeant.

Jason Higgins

Okay, any medals, or honors, citations?

Jennifer Dane

I had a military service medal, a good conduct, and a volunteer service medal.

Jason Higgins

Congratulations.

Jennifer Dane

Thank you. (LAUGHTER)

Jason Higgins

What years of service?

Jennifer Dane

I served March the 16th, 2010 to March 15th, 2016.

Jason Higgins

Okay, so six years. That is pretty common for the Air Force, right? Do you have a service connected disability?

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

Okay. And what is the status of your discharge?

Jennifer Dane

It is honorable.

Jason Higgins

Honorable. Do you identify as LGBTQ plus?

Jennifer Dane

Yes, I do.

Jason Higgins

Did you while serving?

Jennifer Dane

Partially.

Jason Higgins

[OVERLAPPING] Partially.

Jennifer Dane

Well, closeted and then openly yes.

Jason Higgins

Okay, thank you for that. And, now we are going to take a step back, and I just wanted to get to know where you are from in the world, who your parents are. When and where were you born?

Jennifer Dane

I was born in Lockney, Texas. [LAUGHTER] Small town. I was born September twelfth, 1987.

Jason Higgins

Now a small town is at 10,000 population, or 200?

Jennifer Dane

[OVERLAPPING] No. Maybe a couple of hundred.

Jason Higgins

Okay, I am from the South from rural Arkansas side. The difference between city folk [LAUGHTER} and country folk in that population, so this is pretty different when we say small town, right?

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

So, a couple of hundred people, that is very small. So everybody knew your business growing up I am sure.

Jennifer Dane

Yes. And then I lived like – I grew up about 15 minutes away from where I was born.

Jason Higgins

Okay, did you stay in that small town all through high school?

Jennifer Dane

I moved for – I was raised mostly in Plainview, Texas, and it was smaller, like 10,000. Then I moved to Lubbock, Texas, which is the big city [LAUGHTER] for that area.

Jason Higgins

[OVERLAPPING] Right, sure. Who were your parents? What did they do for a living?

Jennifer Dane

So my mom was a nurse, primarily. Her name is Rhonda Dane. My dad. He adopted me when I was in the third grade. He was an entrepreneur, and he also fixed wrecked cars. My mom and I also owned a coffee shop from when I was thirteen to seventeen, I believe that's the time period, called Jabba the Hutt.

Jason Higgins

Great name.

Jennifer Dane

Well, I can not take the credit for naming it, but we ran it, and so now they do not live there anymore.

Jason Higgins

Now you said your dad adopted you. Is this your biological mother and then he adopted you after marrying your mother?

Jennifer Dane

[OVERLAPPING] Correct. Then I have like a – then my biological father, I really did not know him very much, he was incarcerated most of my life.

Jason Higgins

Okay. That is difficult. Tell me a little bit more about your hometown. Like what do kids do for fun?

Jennifer Dane

We are from Texas, so everybody went to the football games. There is a lot. Everybody went to church. That is probably the biggest thing that people did. Not much more than that. Yeah, that is really what I remember mostly is being involved in sports and also band, those are huge thing for kids. Because we had like a 300 person band in Plainview, Texas, so we maybe took up the whole football field, or you played sports and I was never good at sports. I tried really hard, but I did speech and debate, and was very good at that, and went to state in debates, so.

[00:05:00]

Jason Higgins

What did you play? What instrument?

Jennifer Dane

Oh, I played the flute.

Jason Higgins

Oh, cool.

Jennifer Dane

So I was like in fifth grade I think, that is when we started. Fifth grade to whenever I was a sophomore in high school.

Jason Higgins

Did you have mentors or role models in high school, anyone that helped you see that there may be life beyond West Texas?

Jennifer Dane

Probably just my speech and debate coaches. I did not know that I would get out of West Texas. Besides that, I did not really have anyone that made it, or even left really.

Jason Higgins

What year did you graduate from high school?

Jennifer Dane

2006 from Coronado High School in Lubbock, Texas.

Jason Higgins

Okay. Do you recall September 11th?

Jennifer Dane

I do. I was in, I think the eighth grade at that time. And, you know, growing up in a small town in West Texas. [I] Had not even been to D.C. or never been to New York, and really did not understand what was going on. But I remember, for days and days, the one thing we did at school was watch the news. And I do remember like looking back it was probably the most connected I ever felt to our country.

Just the narratives that came out of what happened and how, you know, to stand up against terrorism. I had never had anybody in my family that I knew went to the military or did anything like that, so I was also first-generation military that I know of. I think my grandfather was but never really shared anything. I did not know that until just recently that he was in the military. But yes that was very bizarre, but I did feel like the most connected to the country as a whole with my identity. Or surrounding the idea of we were all kind of allied with this hate for terrorism.

Jason Higgins

I am curious, I know it was a nine-year gap between your decision to enlist, but did it have an influence on your decision to join the Air Force?

Jennifer Dane

I think that I just wanted to go and serve my country. That was a big thing. I do not think 9/11 had a direct impact, but we were still at war or too when I joined. So, I knew the likelihood of me going there was huge. I mean I did not, but an idea of what the likelihood would have been pretty large. But I still felt like whenever I joined, I still felt like pretty strongly about what we were doing in the mission at that time.

Jason Higgins

So, tell me about your path from high school to college. First off, was college expected from you with your family?

Jennifer Dane

No, I mean I am a first-generation student, so it was never really a thing we talked about.

I got into – after high school, I got into a program that was like first-generation starter program at West Texas A&M University, and I went for two semesters and just did horribly. It was the first time, and I also was struggling with like my identity as a person and just being out on my own. So after the second semester, I ended up going to a fellowship program. It was a Christian-based fellowship program in Branson, Missouri, and ended [up] finishing the program after nine weeks and just staying there and not returning to college. So, I lived in Branson, Missouri for a year.

Really, I took a lot of time – that was my time in my life where I – so let me backup a little bit. For a long time I really struggled with finding out like because I grew up in the church and I was very dedicated to my religion and being really connected to what that looked like.

And I – Whenever I had found out, or realized that I was gay whenever I was a junior in high school, my world came crashing down because I did not think that I could be a Christian and also be gay and what that looked like and [I] really struggled with that for a very long time. Going back in the closet and coming back out. My parents were not supportive and still are not.

[00:10:00]

My church wanted to send me to gay conversion therapy at one point. So, I mean, It was really challenging. Whenever I went to Branson it was with a church affiliated organization and I decided that I would take that year to really like dive in to say what, you know, “who am I”? I spent the entire year working and also reading through the bible and finding out that, you know, my true identity was being gay, and if that meant me not being a Christian or just realizing, you know, where my identity was with Christianity as a whole. That is what I realized that I had to just be true to myself. Then I ended up moving back to Lubbock, Texas after about a year. So about 2007 or eight and was working three jobs and decided that, you know, I really wanted to go to school. I had no money. My parents had not even filed their taxes, so I could not even apply for financial aid. But they did not really know how to do that. So it was so many limitations that – and I did not have the cultural competency to know or the competence to know what to do or who to turn to. So I went – I decided that I was going to go to the military. In high school I did do the process of applying to the Navy, and was set to go to the military exam processing station. But I ended up having a soccer game and so I never went. And so I had always had that in the back of my head that I wanted to join the military. I first went and talked to an army recruiter, and I said I would really like to be the intelligence analyst and they told me, “no, you can not”. [LAUGHTER] I kept on having this recurring dreams that I was in the Army and that I was getting killed. And I was like, I do not think that I want to do this. So, I went to the Air Force and he said, “We can get you in intel, “we can get you a slot, when you want to ship out?” That's what I did.

Jason Higgins

So, just slow down a little bit. That sounds like a really both a time of self-discovery and exploration of who you are as a person, but also traumatic. It sounds like your family did

not support who you were. How did you cope with that and or if did you cope with that at the time?

Jennifer Dane

I think just persevering and that is really the only thing. Just trying to be who I was. I never knew that later, like now, that I would lead any organization. I did not really – I have never been one to be super flamboyant about my sexual orientation or anything. And I just kept on going. I mean you just had to.

I mean that is really, you know – back then they did not support and, you know, continuing, so I think it has just gotten harder as life has continued with the relationship with my parents and even one of my siblings.

Jason Higgins

How do you reconcile your religious upbringing with who you are now? Are they compatible?

Jennifer Dane

Well, I think because I spent so long, you know, really studying the true intent of the Bible and studying historical documents from wherever passages were changed, versus, you know, political movements like the United States. Although I do not subscribe to like organized religion in the United States, I do think there is something so still as a – grounds me and who I am. But they also have to have an open mind because I do think that a lot of my upbringing – I was brought up in the Pentecostal Church. So it was very, very – I don't know what the right words to use – very evangelical.

It was not like the United Pentecostal Church, but it was just a Pentecostal based church. So there was a lot of rules and [I] kind of rebelled against them for a bit and then found myself back, just at an even kilter, but I think I still have, you know, an idea about religion in my life, but not organized religion.

Jason Higgins

Did you have a community of other people who were also identifying as queer, lesbian, or gay?

Jennifer Dane

No.

Jason Higgins

No. Were you dating before in college?

Jennifer Dane

[00:15:00] [OVERLAPPING] In high school I knew one person. The time – the first exposure that I really thought it was going to be okay. Which was silly – Her name was Aaron, she was my first crush girlfriend. Not really girlfriend – because I wanted her to be, but she was not. But she gave me two recorded VHS tapes of the show called The L Word. So The L Word – there was women that looked like what I wanted to look like,

very feminine presenting. One was a businesswoman, so who I wanted to be like her name is Bette Porter. It was the first time that media – I saw something in media that was like, "My gosh," they look like that and it is okay. It was all about exposure, but I did not really know anybody that was gay. I did not really even know it was a thing. Growing up, I wore and I still have a true love waits ring. So it was made in like a purity commitment. And I was like this is so easy. [LAUGHTER] This is the easiest thing. I'm not attracted to any guys, so like super easy. I'm like, I don't know why people are losing their virginity because this is super easy. [LAUGHTER] And then realized later on like, of course, this is why. Because it was no lesbians in my community besides my friend that I knew Aaron. It was not – like feel like I had opportunities to do anything either, but it makes me chuckle kind of now looking back.

Jason Higgins

Well, that must have been a really profound moment for you then, like seeing yourself represented on film.

Jennifer Dane

It was, and it is still – I think that is one of the biggest improvements we've made. Progress is seeing people that look like you and I think that that has opened my eyes to making sure that we include other narratives that are not just like my experiences and things.

Jason Higgins

So, as you are struggling with these issues of how you identify sexually while you are also struggling with your decision to enlist in the military under "Don't ask don't tell," like how did you come to that decision?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, so, whenever I enlisted – I mean I still have a paper at my desk, and it is like we had to sign this paper that said like if you were found out to be homosexual or have homosexual contact, you would be charged with – under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. And I didn't really know, "Don't ask, don't tell" before that paper. But I mean I am one to read like all the fine print – I remember being at – Because I inprocessed (sp?) it in Amarillo, Texas at the Military exam processes station or injury processing station. I remember reading that paper and I had almost like as this mini panic attack because I was like, "I am not dating anybody. But I know that I am gay, but I am signing this and I'm lying about it. But I also want to join the Air Force." And like how do I reconcile it? Because it says, you are affirming that this is like true in fact that you are not gay. And so I remember like struggling in signing that and just knowing that I was going to have to abide by that. At that time I mean I was not with anyone or so I was like it is going to be no problem. I have hid all throughout my life. It was not until a little bit later – a couple of years later that I really realized the impact of "Don't ask, don't tell" all my life.

Jason Higgins

And we can talk about this as you get to that moment in your journey but did you find other people in the Air Force who were struggling with the same questions and decisions and identity?

Jennifer Dane

I think after – me finding community I think was really difficult. But after “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” was overturned it was much easier.

Jason Higgins

Sure. Tell me about the training. Did you train at Langley?

Jennifer Dane

Lackland.

Jason Higgins

Lackland. That's right. Sorry, my mistake.

Jennifer Dane

So, this is one thing I usually do not leave out of everything but it is one that I think that I need to talk about more probably. So, I went to my basic military training and I had a drill instructor that was a female. For me, I went in, I was, I think I was, about 22 or 23. So I was a lot older and I had some more life experience. So I went in knowing that a lot of it was psychological and then the – most of it was psychological. Some of it was physical but you just really had to make it. But what I did not know at that time until later is that my drill instructor was not an ethical drill instructor. So, she would like prevent us from going to seek medical care, prevent us from – really restrict some of our eating habits, doing excessive physical training. And I mean we had at one point where we had somebody in our dorm that tried to commit suicide by taking medication – excessive medication.

I just thought that was how people were in basic training and that was not. I made it through, finished and it was hard. It was very difficult. Maybe just like living in this time and space. Like in 2010.

[00:20:00]

That may have been acceptable like years before but in 2010 that was not acceptable. Later on in my military service the Air Force would do a roundup of reports specifically about military sexual violence that occurred in the dorms primarily with male recruiters. But in the process they came to us and they asked us our experience and so my drill instructor ended up having to go to trial and I was one of the witnesses for her. Well, in the case. There was no military sexual trauma, just a lot of other maltreating and she ended up getting sentenced to nine months at a military prison.

Jason Higgins

I'm curious if you have formed opinions about where that abusive behavior stemmed from in her?

Jennifer Dane

It's funny. I just looked her up not too long ago and I found her under a different alias and I have no idea. And I think it is just maybe the power that she had – but I am not certain. She could have been an excellent trainer. We were – our flight won physical training excellence but it was at a cost, of course, but I do not know really. But there was other girls that went in my flight and they basically just wanted to burn her down. They were so angry and for me I just told the truth.

Jason Higgins

I have talked to a lot of women who served in the military who always felt like they had to prove how tough and hardcore they were because of perceptions of women in the military. That they had to be exceptional and then they had to prove all of the stereotypes about women as false. I'm curious if other women in your unit felt similarly, like they had to prove themselves against the men in the unit like they belong there?

Jennifer Dane

Frankly, yeah. It was still there in my Intel career for sure. They were not the nicest to be with. They were hard to work for.

Jason Higgins

Now, to circle back to the investigations on military sexual violence, do you know why they were investigating that within your unit?

Jennifer Dane

Well, they went and recalled everybody. Everybody that had went to basic training within a certain period and they basically said, you served during this time, it was almost like a class action sort of. But they went back and said, if you've served during this time, is there any information that you want to provide that you think is relevant? I think I wrote ten pages about what happened. Then they ended up calling people back and I was one of those that was called back and other girls in my flight ended up going as well.

Jason Higgins

Now, this is two separate topics but did you ever experience any retaliation for your willingness to sign your name and to testify before a court?

Jennifer Dane

No. Well, not that case and not the next one. The military sexual trauma.

Jason Higgins

That you personally experienced. Just so I have a sense of the chronology, when did that occur with you personally?

Jennifer Dane

Her trial? Or?

Jason Higgins

Yours.

Jennifer Dane

Mine was right after that. So in 2010 as well. I went basic training and then my Intel school.

Jason Higgins

The trauma happened at Intel school?

Jennifer Dane

My Intel school.

Jason Higgins

Okay, and before we get to that, is there anything else you want to talk about with training? I am curious how you adjusted to life in the military?

Jennifer Dane

I did so well. The structure was great. I think that I really thrived on knowing what I was doing, where I was going. But I did not like it. It was terrible but going into military life, it was like if I did this then this would happen and this would happen. That was the general progress and I liked having those ideals set.

Jason Higgins

I do not want to make a presumption here but what did you not like about the military?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) I just did not like the basic training. That was it. It was awful.

Jason Higgins

It sounds like you had an awful instructor as well.

[LAUGHTER]

Jennifer Dane

But I made it. A lot of it was a head game.

Jason Higgins

Did you form meaningful friendships during that time?

Jennifer Dane

[00:25:00] I still stay in contact with some folks but not generally because everybody was like she had people that were like writing reports about other people and trying to punish. So like there was a lot of instigation and even internal fighting and so almost not trusting anyone.

They said do not ever raise your hand and I was the first one to raise my hand, which I do not know why I did that but it is just me.

Jason Higgins

Maybe you are outspoken.

Jennifer Dane

Just a little bit.

(LAUGHTER)

Jason Higgins

Well, just out of curiosity, how long was the training process and the Air Force at that time?

Jennifer Dane

I think it was eight and a half weeks.

Jason Higgins

Okay, that is not long. And then you went to – where did you go after that?

Jennifer Dane

I went to Goodfellow Air Force Base in Texas.

Jason Higgins

Okay. A little closer to home. Okay. What was that like for you?

Jennifer Dane

Well overall, for the most part it was good.

It was school, and I loved school. I am a lifetime learner, so for me it was like stressful but not like too stressful, and I formed a lot of immune – at the time it was nice to be in a place where you have more freedom and less restriction and I was still in a place that was familiar with to me because it was what was considered West Texas ish. I was close enough to home to drive home whenever I wanted. But overall, it was not too bad.

Jason Higgins

What were you studying at that time?

Jennifer Dane

I was training to be an all source intelligence analyst so basically everything about everything. It was nine months of training.

Jason Higgins

Okay. Like what skills were you developing in that time?

Jennifer Dane

Well, we used to call ourselves PowerPoint rangers so (LAUGHTER) really a brief and how to do power points and knowing how to analyze. Like take a lot of information from multiple sources and consolidate that and say like these are the important factors because we knew that we were going either end up at a unit that does missions or a different type of unit. We were primarily the ones that went in and told the generals like these are our recommendations and this is probably the course of action you should be taking. So having to make sure that we knew and consolidated all the information and made sure that everything was accurate and correct.

Jason Higgins

I get a sense that you need to be really forthcoming, direct, and concise in those types of briefings.

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

Those are great skills to have.

Jennifer Dane

I still use them and they are great.

Jason Higgins

So after your nine months training, where did you go after that? Did you deploy?

Jennifer Dane

No I went to – I do not know if you want me to talk about my military sexual trauma there because that is what happened then or do you want to go to my service?

Jason Higgins

Feel free to share that experience as you like.

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, so when I was in military or Intel school at the time and my class was like from three to ten or something at night because we had two shifts. And one Friday night, my friends and I – because you got to move up and have the ability to get to go out and everything. So I had been there several months, I think at that point. But we went out to get drinks and I was over-served at a local establishment and came back and my friend was with me and we signed back in – there are only like chunks that I remember and there was people in the pavilion area that we were in the base.

My friend went back to her room and I had sat out there with them and there was an individual that was like come back to my room and I said “I will go with you, but I am not going to have sex with you.” And at that point, I was still a virgin with anyone. I had never slept with anyone in general. But I was like, “I will go back with you but I do not want to have sex with you.” I told him that three times and we ended up going back to his room and – I blacked out quite a bit during that moment, but that is when the sexual

violence occurred. He was married. I had never met him before and he was married, that I found out later. And I just remember waking up at certain moments and trying to get out of the situation.

[00:30:00]

Then I woke up the next day. I ended up making it back to my room not knowing what had happened really. I did what you are not supposed to do. I ended up taking a shower, doing my laundry and really felt that, you know, I did not know what to do because that just never occurred. Then later on that day, I went into the city of St. Angela, which is not really a city. It is like a small town I guess (LAUGHTER) and there was somebody on the bus because we take a bus because nobody had cars really and they were like, "Oh, we saw that you were with this guy last night." His name is this and I was like "I did not know because I was just collecting information" because I did not know even who he was or what happened. So that was the next day, Saturday, and the next day, Sunday I could not let the incident go so I ended up going and reporting it to the sexual assault office and ended up – did not open investigation which would have notified the chain of command because there are two reporting things you can do. We can do an open report or a close one. Restricted or unrestricted is the name of it. So I did an unrestricted report so I had to go to the hospital and get the rape kit exam and had to do a statement with the police and then I was out of my training for a couple of days while I recovered or whatnot.

Jason Higgins

Was this a senior ranking officer?

Jennifer Dane

It was somebody that was in the same [rank] as me. He was in intel school as well. Just doing different intel. But yes.

Jason Higgins

You did not know him before that?

Jennifer Dane

I did not know him before that.

Jason Higgins

Did you have to interact with them afterwards?

Jennifer Dane

Yes. So that happened and so it started the process and they investigated him and I was able to continue with my school. I graduated with honors and everything too while I was doing that. He was still there. And actually you can do volunteer activities to do while you are there and I was actually told that I could not participate in activities because I reported the incident. One of their friends – because there was people that were my same rank that were leading those activities.

Jason Higgins

Was that retaliation?

Jennifer Dane

It was. That was the retaliation but I went to a higher ranking person because I do not stand down very often and I was able to continue on. But no one really believed me. They thought that I was lying about it and he was married so why would he do this?

His security clearance had been suspended because of that – because there was an investigation and so he had to just do random duties that until the investigation ended. I really did not interact with them too much during the time where I was finishing school and leaving the base. Because you usually now if this happens, you can actually leave a base, but we were both at Intel school, so you can not really go anywhere to do intel school besides that.

So, we were in the process and I got a base that was selected, which was Cannon Air Force base in New Mexico and they ended up pulling my base because they were like, “you have got to stay here at the base until your trial happens.” And the Air Force Attorneys were like “we have no idea when the trials happened” and it actually happened like a year after. But I was like, I am not taking up the space with him. There is no reason for me not to continue. So they ended up reassigning me about a month later to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. Much better location for me.

Jason Higgins

I just want to say that I can not imagine how hard that must have been for you, but I am very impressed that you graduated with honors and you were able to just be the accomplished person that you are despite what happens when you are in the middle there.

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) I think what you were talking about with women, like I think that I had to be excellent. I had to strive to be better than everybody else to prove something. I was like I am going to do this, I am going to get there, I am going to graduate and then I was involved in everything and I did not let it stop me from that. He was still there and his wife ended up moving to the base too because he was stuck there with their child and she was not very friendly to me, which makes sense.

Jason Higgins

What about other people in your unit, did you experience any type of isolation or ostracism?

Jennifer Dane

I do not really remember too much, but I know that everyone took his side and said that that could not have happened and – later on now I had found out that he was under age drinking. He had not been 21 yet, but he was also under the influence. But during the process too, while I was there, the Office of Special Investigations came to me and said, “no, we really want to get more information about this. Could you go or could you call

him on the phone and see if he can confess?" I said, "no, I won't do that because I've never met him. I said but I will go talk to him in person." Because I thought that would just be easier for me. I was like I'm not going to call him. So they put a wire on me and I went and talked to him and he confessed to raping me on the wire.

[00:35:00]

Which for me it was like – that was great for me because I was like yeah, this will confirm this happened. This did happen. But later on, about a year later when the trial happened, that did not come out and I moved on to my next base. So kind of jumping chronology because – jumped to the trial of what happened. "Don't ask, don't tell" was in the process of it, I think it had been signed into law that it was going to pass, but still there is a period that you have to wait for. So, right before the trial there was like an Article 15 hearing – some type of hearing before they actually go to trial to make sure that there is enough evidence, there is enough cases.

Jason Higgins

(OVERLAPPING) Against him?

Jennifer Dane

Yes. So I had to go in and I had to meet with the defense attorneys because they wanted to interview me. And I ended up seeing my roommate that was in my room, was one of their defense witnesses. Which was so hard for me because I was like "I do not know why she's here defending him. Like I do not know what the problem is." So when his attorneys talked to me, they were like, "we have some questions for you and are you gay?" I was like, "well, you can not ask me that because we are serving a under Don't Ask, Don't Tell." I was like, "I do not know how to answer this." A side note too is that I could not share with the Air Force attorneys that I was gay and that would not happen because if the Air Force was not representing me and they made it very clear that they were not representing me, they were representing the Air Force and the Air Force's intentions. If I would have told them that, then I would have been discharged immediately. But the defense attorneys had to ask me that and I was like, "I can not say," "I can not share that." They're like, well, "Don't ask, don't tell" us about your appeal and I'm like, but it is not. Like it is not in place and I knew for some reason that until it was actually in place like I knew that I needed to be secured. So after that – I could not even tell my victim advocate that either because my victim advocate was also an Air Force officer at the time. She was really amazing. But I could not tell her that because she had the obligation to report that. Nobody really knew so it was super isolating to not be able to share my sexuality or my sexual orientation, even though at the time of the incident I was not with anyone. I had to call and get a defense attorney for myself in the representation of me and just saying, "what do I do?" Because they are going to ask this on this stand and I do not know what to say. And so they said just to plead the fifth and the whole case. I don't know if it would have made a difference or not in the hearing for him or not. But at least I know that the sexual assault in itself was bad. But I think that having to be like questioned about my sexual orientation and having to go out and get an attorney to represent me in the process of potentially discharging me was probably more traumatic than anything else that I experienced. Because I think that

there is a lot that I could heal for sexual violence, but with a sexual assault, but not so much from just being who I was.

Jason Higgins

(OVERLAPPING) Did you feel like you were put on trial?

Jennifer Dane

[00:40:00] I did. I felt like that. At that point, I had graduated with honors and then I went to my next base and I promoted early to the program, it's called Senior Below the Zone¹. I promoted early. I had already finished my associate's degree within a year of me going into my base. I was like excelling in every way that I could and now basically being told that you are going to have to get an attorney because of something that I really can not like – I really affirm that I think that you are born loving whomever you want to love. My theory was I was put on trial just for being me. We have done a lot of exploration post that and know that “Don't ask, don't tell” was conceived in 1993 as a compromise under Bill Clinton. It was very celebrated within the military community and the LGBTQ community, because it was a place that you can finally be gay, but you did not have to disclose it. But what we did not look at back then was really the unintended consequences of what this looked like, or like what terms especially for women during that time, even straight women, and trying to get them discharged for other reasons. But for me, the unintended consequence was I could not really tell the court like this is why. And so, from that experience like that is why I sit in the position I sit today is because I want to make sure that whenever we are making any policies of any sort, that we have looked at not only the historical value of it but we look at the present like the implications presently because, “Don't ask, don't tell” was like the policy that was very celebrated and it was a great policy for the time. But, no, many, many years later, it was not a good policy. That was still a thing that we haven't rectified and have not really, you know, in 2023, we haven't made reparations or even apologies for. But so going back to that is what happened with the trial is that he was found not guilty and was able to continue his service. He continued and I went back to my base, very disappointed.

I think if he would have got convicted, I do not think it would have made it any better either. But I think it would just end up the same. But maybe I would have felt a little bit better about it.

Jason Higgins

What would justice look like for you then in that moment?

Jennifer Dane

It would have been like he was held responsible or accountable for that because what I learned later on – several years later, his wife at the time that was with him, contacted me and asked me what happened. Like a couple of years after that and I explained exactly what happened. They were in the process of getting a divorce and I ended up

¹ The Below the Zone program is a competitive early program that is offered to enlisted U.S. Air Force personnel in the grade of Airman 1st Class or E-3.

finding out that he did it to two more people and he was also charged with providing alcohol to a minor at the next base and also, I think driving under the influence and ended up just getting a general discharge from the military. I actually, whenever I went back to my base, I mean I continued to be the same, I mean, performance. But because I was intel we have to do like security clearance investigations and since you know somebody, they always ask you like, "can I put you on this?" Some I always say yes. But one day they came to me and they asked me about his clearance and they asked me if I would recommend him for service, or for a top-secret security clearance and I felt like that was one of the biggest slaps in the face I had ever had. Because I was like, "no, he raped me like no, you don't need to give him the clearance he did all these things." But they granted him the clearance.

Jason Higgins

I know that you know this in the work that you do, but that experience is common. You know you are not the only one and I am curious, did you feel like you were the only one at the time and at what point did you realize that this was a problem that affected a lot of people in the military?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, I did not even realize it was like until just now. I thought I was like really the only one.

Jason Higgins

Wow.

Jennifer Dane

I mean I know that my military sexual trauma does impact many people, but I never heard anybody else have to go through the same process as me.

Jason Higgins

Well, not exactly in the same way, but oftentimes it's multiple offenders. They are not held accountable and then they continue to do that and then the people who actually testify against the attack are oftentimes punished whether it would be through administrative discharges or other routes toward the end which is discharge. I am curious, do you feel like the military or the chain of command or the system itself betrayed you?

Jennifer Dane

I do. I think that they did not uphold their commitment to protecting me.

For me it was really hard to reconcile that and continue. I still love the military and love, you know -. Obviously I still do work in the community, but it still – for me, the drive is to make sure that it does not happen to anybody else. That is probably my biggest goal – is that my life's goal right now, at least today, is to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else that – anything I experienced.

Jason Higgins

[00:45:00] Thank you for that. The work that you do, it must be difficult to relive that each time you have to advocate for others. But I am curious at the time, did you have a support system outside of the military? How did your family support – Did you tell your family?

Jennifer Dane

I did not tell them for a very long time.

Because I did not really want them to –I did not know how they would react. I did not tell them like the full story like that I was a virgin and they did not know. I did not think they still know really what happened to this day.

Jason Higgins

Beyond the court, what was the first time that you actually openly talked about that experience?

Jennifer Dane

Probably like having to do my VA disability claim, I think that is probably in like any other military, it was the first time I had shared that.

Jason Higgins

Do you feel comfortable talking about it today?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah. I do. I think it is part of the process of healing. And I also think that I have talked about it so many times. It kind of is just – I think that it is just easy for me to share because I have talked about it so much. And I know that many people – because especially during “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” that things—similar situations to me—I know they happen to others and I have to think of it, you know, that they may not have shared, but I need to because the story is not just me, it impacted lots of people.

Jason Higgins

Do you have access to VA counseling services if you need it?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) Yes.

Jason Higgins

Okay. I do not want us to get too far ahead, but I also do not want to dwell on it. Can you talk about your path beyond that moment and your path toward discharge?

Jennifer Dane

Finally, after that trial was over, I was able to continue my journey in the Air Force. Had a really good time. I worked and did a lot of Latin American intelligence work for most of my time in air Davis-Monthan. I do a lot of counter-narcotics, counter-drug trafficking, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief, which I had loved. That was, it was easy for me to support that mission and I – most time was the only woman and the

lowest ranking one in the room most of the time. Because I was able to move up to headquarters level and do as intel for our two-star or three-star general. Like personally. It was really nice. Yeah, I had a great experience beyond that.

Jason Higgins

Do you want to take a break for a moment?

Jennifer Dane

No, I'm good.

Jason Higgins

Okay, I just wanted to double-check and make sure.

So, how long did you serve beyond that experience?

Jennifer Dane

So I think that was two or so years, maybe two-and-a-half and that is over another four years.

Jason Higgins

Wow. What are some of the highlights of your military service in your career?

Jennifer Dane

Probably, well, number one was graduating basic training. Pretty like one of my life highlights because I did not think I could do it. [LAUGHTER] I do not know if you know this, well, you probably do because you do history, but you get coined and like having that coin represent that, I actually made it. Because I really do go to basic training thinking like I am not going to be able to make this. I do not know what or where I was going to go or do, but I made it. That was excellent. Then during my time of service in four-and-a-half years, I was able to get a associates, a bachelor's and a master's.

Did not really pay for any of it which was like – for me, education was one of the driving factors that I joined and upward mobility of course.

And also what I did not share too is also one of the reasons that I joined was, when I was thirteen years old, I had a vision that I wanted to run for Senate.

Jason Higgins

Wow.

Jennifer Dane

And so I knew that a good pathway to the Senate was military service, which I still think that number one should – that a lot of – there be more veterans in Congress. And so I thought, well, this is a great opportunity for me to serve the country and had I known about things like the Peace Corps or you know Teach for America or anything else, I think that I would have probably done any of those to fulfill that. But the only thing that I knew, like in my sphere, was the military.

Jason Higgins

It sounds like service is really important to you.

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) It is. (LAUGHTER) Yes.

Jason Higgins

(OVERLAPPING) Sorry. Do you still plan to run for political office?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) Yes.

Jason Higgins

Okay.

Jennifer Dane

Now, maybe in Arizona. I don't know because there's a spot and it probably opened up pretty soon.

Jason Higgins

[00:50:00] Well, that is Anita's spot. [LAUGHTER]

Jennifer Dane

Yes.

Jason Higgins

Sorry, I didn't mean to digress. We can always circle back to that.

So, you mentioned disaster relief was really rewarding for you. Can you talk more about that?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah so, about a year-and-a-half left in my service, my commitment, and at the time I was in very long term relation – well, it was going to be long term relationship looking back, and I was not planning on reenlisting and I knew that and I was at Davis-Monthan for my entire career and there was stuck there because they also call it “DM” for don't move, which is fine. I love Tucson. I think it is one of the most magical places on Earth, and I still want to live there. That's my goal.

But my time was up at my current job because were getting rid of the – I was working in the Threat Vulnerability Cell for Latin America, and they were about to like dissolve that and put it back in different offices. So they moved me to supporting a fighter wing, A-10s, which to this day I can say that I love A-10s. The aircraft – I think it is probably the best one that we have in the inventory. The Army and probably the Marines would probably agree with you on that too, because it does a lot of close air support for deployments, and it is just a cool aircraft. So I was put in that, and at that time I had just

finished my masters, and I had learned a lot, you know, and really, during the learning, I also developed these ideas about what the world was like. What also the military was like. Whenever I went in, I was very naive and did not really know that everything is a piece together but whenever I went to work for this intel unit that was supporting fighters, you know, I got kind of uncomfortable with like “are we actually fighting the right mission?” “Are we actually doing the right thing?” So my values congruence grew and grew. Not that I never – not that I stopped supporting the mission, because I would always do exactly that I needed to do. But I was getting to the point where, you know, every day we would have to watch these roll videos of what happened with the A-10s, and you would see people getting killed – we were killing people because you can see that they are like tiny. I personally, I made them a person in my mind and you probably should never do that because I was like this is probably somebody's dad or, you know, brother or son. A person, that individual, and it got very complicated, and I just was like, “I can not do this.” I can not. Not in good faith, because I did not know if – we even went to some in those schools and like counter-terrorism schools and one of the phrases that I always remember them saying is “One person's terrorist, is another person's freedom fighter,” and just thinking like, “Am I on the right side of history on this?” Maybe I am not. But maybe I am. Obviously like there is a lot to be said about the 20-year war post inception of it. But I got to the point where I did not know if I was doing good or harm, and then I knew that for me, I was indirectly supporting the killing of individuals, and that was very difficult.

Jason Higgins

I was going to say, on the other hand, maybe that should always happen, that the person on the other end humanizes people on the receiving end, you know, even though that must have been really difficult on you personally. Did it affect your mental health at the time?

Jennifer Dane

It did. I even went, and I mean, I remember telling a counselor, I said “Hey,” because I was also in a very toxic work environment, like super toxic.”

I had a male boss who did not care for me (LAUGHTER) at all because I was a high performer, and he had lost his rank and just a lot of trying to be machismo and everything and I knew that I was getting out, so I had also got accepted to do a doctoral program and the time and everything and my home life was excellent. So, I went to the counselor, and I said, “From 7:30 to 5:00, I really just want to kill myself.” That is all I want to do. It is fine afterwards. It is fine wherever I like leave because in my job, you could basically leave it because you had to leave it because you were in – it is called a SCIF², a secure facility, but in that time and they were like, “well, we can not do anything for you.” I'm like, “what? I am telling you like, “I have all these feelings,” and I am like, “can you not do anything?” And they did not do anything.

[00:55:00]

² A SCIF is a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, a Department of Defense term to mean a secure room.

Jason Higgins

This is a military counselor? Did that feel like a safe environment, did you fear any kind of repercussions for reporting those mental health problems?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) I was hoping that it would have repercussions like (OVERLAPPING) taking away like suspending my security clearance so I would not have to be in that situation, in that job, because I wanted to be removed from it. But I did not know it was like – not that I wanted to ever taken away forever, but I wanted to not be in that same job that I was performing. That was not the case.

Jason Higgins

You phrase this really well because I always ask a question, nearly usually at the end, but I wanted to ask it now, did your experiences in the military affect your ideological understanding of the United States and its role in the world?

Jennifer Dane

I do. Yeah, very much so.

Jason Higgins

Can you talk more about that?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, so whenever I – that kind of transition, so whenever I left the military, you know because I finished – completed my job, actually my supervisor, well, you are supposed to get – I guess I do have a commendation medal, and I said a military service, but that was not it. I had an accommodation medal, which was never awarded to people with my rank because it was like a higher rank that you got. So I was supposed to be awarded a commendation medal for my job at the previous and this one and they denied that from me and then on my performance report the very end, they were like, “hey,” on my school section, which I do not understand still to this day, they gave me a below average on because I did not meet expectations even though I had finished my master's and then gotten into four doctoral programs at the time. And I really wanted to like – I should have put in a complaint about it, but at the time I just wanted to get out and just be done. But whenever I left the military, I did not want anything to do with it. Nothing. I did not want to tell anybody I was in the service. I was so put off by the military that I did not even want to engage in any way.

Jason Higgins

That must have been heartbreaking for you to have accomplished so much and to be recognized so little?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah. It was. I think there is probably a lot of resentment that I have also for that supervisor, but overall it was really, I mean I knew that my career would come to an end and then I would be replaced. I mean, I knew that I was replaceable you know, of course,

but instead of championing my idea of like, yeah, you are going off, like you can still continue to work in this space. Or going off and doing anything else. Whatever it is. Instead of saying like, "that is a great thing," like they basically punished me for wanting to get out and not continue my service and I was even told "do not tell anybody that you're getting out." Like, "Do not tell anyone," which I understand to a point because you want the retention. Yes, I get it. But it also frames away and as a boss, that I'm like, if we can give you any steps to your next career, good. Because I do not want you to have to stay – like if you can go anywhere, do it. And if that is not here today, that's great. But if you want to leave, I want to make sure you have the tools right now that I can get you to where you need to be or want to be, and I think that was not done for me, so that I think is why I so heavily focus on it and what I do now. But yes, so whenever I got out, I did not want anybody to know. And in grad school, I did not tell anyone for a long time.

Jason Higgins

If you could wave a magic wand and reform the military to prevent experiences like what happened to you to other people, what would you change?

Jennifer Dane

Well, probably (LAUGHTER) to really look at leadership – like about the promotion rates, like of women specifically in leadership roles. Which I think they are doing. I mean, I think that they are trying to do that. But I also know for my case and for many others that experienced military sexual trauma, almost every time it involves alcohol. And we do all these programs on military sexual trauma and bystander intervention and reporting and everything. But we never do alcohol awareness training. We never do that because it's such – so embedded in the culture of what the military was at the point. But we never do anything like that. But that also goes back, you know, even far beyond the military because back into education and starting consent education for kindergarteners to say like "no, it's not okay to touch me," like saying that. But yeah, I think it just is going even back as far as performing many things besides the military, because I do not think that I mean it even said on the independent review committee for the Pentagon and I made the same recommendation. I was like, "You have got to focus on preventative measures instead of after-action items because it is still happening and it looks like there are more people reported, but where people are just being more vocal about it."

[01:00:00]

Jason Higgins

Well, I am sure that you have followed congressional debates about reforming the chain of command in cases of military sexual violence. Certainly from the Military Justice Improvement Act, which I think was introduced by Kristin Gillibrand in 2012 to the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act, which was recently introduced. We can maybe come back to your advocacy in the aftermath of Guillen's death. But do you support those efforts?

Jennifer Dane

I do, yes, very much so.

Some of the efforts especially victim advocates and just getting more resources. Because at that time, you know, looking back like whatever I asked – because I was going to take the stand and I was like, “can you tell me what are you going to say? What do I need to say?” I mean I was young. I did not know. I had never been. I mean I had been to the one with my drill sergeant, I do not know when that was. I think it was after that. They were like, “well, we can not tell you.” Then they reformed it to make sure that you have somebody to talk to and then now taking it up the chain of commands’ hands, I think that really, really matters. It also separates responsibilities and everything. We have – and I have championed that and talked to Vanessa Guillen’s sister. There are more things that, you know, there is still to work on, but probably the Pentagon and also the Pentagon, they did that independent review committee, not sure this year, I think this past year. I felt like it was the first time that, you know, they actually – that I was able to share my story. I have shared it many times, but that review committee was a first time that I could share truly, authentically, and felt they listened because there is a lot of my suggestions that made it into the final report. Which was very affirming. Whether they take it, or not I do not know, but at least it was finally heard.

Jason Higgins

It must have been validating for you. I want to go back and transition out of the military and I have a question I'm interested in. What – did you identify as a veteran and if not, how long did it take for you to start identifying as a veteran?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, I think pretty much immediately I had identified. Whenever I got out, I was the person that – we had to go to these TAPs³. They are called TAPs briefing transition programs. I do not know what they stand for, I should because I testified not too long ago (LAUGHTER), but I should know what it stands for. But I was super prepared. Like or I thought I was at least. I think there, you know, there was so many resources that it was too many resources and I did not know where to go or what to do. I still think that because there are so many things offered. But I was already enrolled in VA health care. The one thing for me is that I started my disability rating process pretty early because they are like “you need to do it before so you will have it pretty immediately after you get out,” and so I did it, I started it, but what I found was that I tried to go and work with the veteran's service officer, but I felt I could not really share my experience because it was this older, white man. I am like, “you are not going to understand my time.” And at that time I had not processed “Don't ask, don't tell” as much as I have now, but I am like, “you are not going to understand military sexual trauma,” and so I ended up not using him and actually did it myself. The whole process.

Whenever I – you know there are all these veterans service organizations and military service organizations, I never felt that I could be a part of any of those either because I was gay. And I was like I did not feel like I had a place to be a veteran. I did not want to tell anybody else I was a veteran, but I also did not feel there was any place for me to be a veteran.

³ TAP is the Transition Assistance Program that provides information, support, and tools to service members and their families when they move from military to civilian life.

[01:05:00]

To pause that and say go back to my military service because the organization I lead, I was involved in during my service. Whenever I joined the military, there was an organization called OutServe which was for an organization that was basically dedicated for folks living under “Don't ask, don't tell” over active duty. This was good for like history purposes, but OutServe at the time, you could not be out. So they had all these Facebook groups and they were all private. What happened was that you met, I do not know how I found this person, but you found somebody else that was gay in your unit, I do not know how, but you did. And you said “can you verify me to join this group?” So it was kind of like this club that you have joined and they had socials occasionally. I only went to one. But I ended up becoming the chapter leader for Arizona for a very long time, while I was there. But that was about – that was like 2011 or so. But I will give you some organizational history for my role too still today. But in about 2012, the organization took a lot of changes and they decided to not support transgender, like not support the fight for transgender individuals to be recognized in the military. It was a huge thing. Like a lot of miscommunication. And I am still good friends with both sides and it was really hard to navigate the hurt so that still exists. I thought, you know, I do not know the experience of somebody with trans. I do not know that. But if I know that I am gay, there is no telling me that somebody else can not feel they are not the sex that they were not assigned at birth. And so I always like “yes, we are going to of course fight for them too.” Trans folks ended up leaving OutServe at the time and that is the predecessor organization of the one I lead today.

And so another organization called Sparta was created. There was a lot of riff between the communities and a lot of transphobia in the sense. But then I started volunteering with another organization called The American Military Partner Association that was formed basically for families. Although I did not have a family at the time that I joined it, I wanted to be involved in some sort of something because I have always really valued volunteer work and just supporting a cause of service. I joined them and like had them in my back pocket for my entire time in service. And then whenever I got out I still wanted to be a part of it. That was probably my only military connection. I was like, “I want to be,” like I said, “can I be the diversity and inclusion policy analyst to help?”

And so, I did. I got that. I was doing that while I was in grad school. Then that was my only connection back to the military. And something that was probably really crucial for me really, truly going back to my identity as a veteran, was that I went to Ohio State, which is super friendly for veterans. I did find that my doctoral program did not really understand where to put me. They were like, “you are fully funded.” But I wanted to be a professor at that point. I could not be a research assistant, but I could not be a teaching assistant because I was already fully funded so there was this weird – they – I just existed in the program. They were like, “we can not let you teach without paying you a stipend. But you would also need to be on like the scholarship.” So there was a lot that I felt being a veteran disenfranchised me more because I did not have the opportunities of my colleagues in that program. I was a lot older than most people in my cohort and had many different experiences. There was no other veteran that I knew in the program. It

was kind of odd. There was my advisor also, she was a lesbian, but I do not think that she – I think she's a pacifist. So it was really like this odd relationship and so I felt really – I felt like very not connected and I felt I was the other again, very othered. But then the veteran service organization or the veteran office had this opportunity to be a veteran – I think it was a veteran community advocate is what they called it. They still have the program today and I think it is at 12 campuses now. They took veterans, they embedded them into student affairs offices, and gave them a stipend. They said, “go and share everything there is to know about a veteran and see if you can help.” So I chose the sexual violence and civility office and so I embedded into there and created this program and really got back into finding out, like yeah, I am still valued and people need to know about this. Then I was continuing my grad program. I also worked with the Ohio Department of Ed. I always thought that I also wanted to work at the Department of Education. After doing the Ohio Department of Ed, I was like “no, I never want to work there.”

[01:10:00]

Jason Higgins

Working with victims of sexual violence, did that help you reclaim your own agency in some way?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah. I mean I did not work directly with them. I worked with the staff, but I felt like I was able to be, at least, seen in that I identity that I held. If I was able to share this maybe somebody was experiencing. It was really, really awesome. It just was empowering. Now looking back at the statistics of military sexual trauma violence survivors versus that of higher ed. They are very similar. There are so much similarities. It felt like I was more seen in that identity as a survivor during that time.

Jason Higgins

You mentioned struggling to reconnect with civilian society. I might have saved this question for the end, but it seems like a good time to ask now because part of this project is really trying to help civilians understand veteran experiences. Because in the media and political discourse, veterans are often represented as a monolithic group. Like they all share the same beliefs, the same views, the same values, and the same experiences, and opinions, right? But my question is, what would you want civilians to understand about veterans based on your experiences?

Jennifer Dane

I think that we are all different.

We are all not – we all come from – we are probably more open-minded than anybody thinks, for the most part, at least the recent era of veterans.

Probably one of the things also is like it is really hard whenever someone says thank you for your service because I also did not deploy, so I do not feel like I am able to reclaim that like I am a veteran of a foreign war or anything. I feel like an imposter saying that I

am a veteran because they assume that you have deployed and you have saw combat, and I mean I saw combat from a computer screen.

Jason Higgins

Which can be equally damaging, right?

Jennifer Dane

But it was just different, and I also think, you know, although I am a survivor of military sexual trauma, not everybody is.

Although I do have PTSD, not everybody else, so we are not all the crazy PTSD person that people think. We are very high functioning, and we are very open-minded. I felt like also one thing that I struggled with whenever I got out was I did think that there was no veteran that were more progressive like me. I was like everybody is not, even me, personally thinking "I am never going to find veteran friends like me," and I found that soon was not the case, and is not the case now. Even if they are, if they are not present, I think it is cool that we get to all share this common bond of service, and very committed to that. We have a lot of respect for the country.

Jason Higgins

Do you feel a sense of guilt about not deploying?

Jennifer Dane

I do.

Jason Higgins

To go back to the comment about PTSD, is that connected to the MST, the military sexual trauma, is it a combination of other things?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) Yes. That, and I think "Don't ask, don't tell," and probably those two things.

Jason Higgins

Do you feel a vicarious trauma from witnessing the after-effects of war from the video screen as well?

Jennifer Dane

Probably, but something that I probably would never admit to my provider or anything.

Jason Higgins

Why not?

Jennifer Dane

I do not know. It is probably because that was just the job.

Jason Higgins

Does it seem like there's a hierarchy of trauma as it relates to veterans like combat trauma then – ?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING). Yeah. I would say probably. That is definitely the services that are offered. A good example of this is caregiving, you have to have a loss of limb.

[01:15:00]

Psychological harm is not, at least [as] of today, psychological harm is not considered with caregiving services at the VA, it may be with other organizations. But as long as you have your limbs, you are fine with caregivers.

Jason Higgins

To transition slightly, can you talk about your path toward your involvement with the Modern Military Association of America?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah.

Jason Higgins

Did I get that right?

Jennifer Dane

You did. Good job. I ensured that I was a part of what is called the AMPA, American Military Partners Association. I had previously been with OutServe-SLDN, which OutServe was created because of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” They merged with another organization called Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, SLDN, which was started in 1993 because of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” So as a legal law firm, they really fought for “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” to be repealed. And many years later, they got it repealed.

Whenever I was going to grad school, I really struggled through grad school. I loved – I did well in the school portion. But just connecting with my advisors and stuff, it was not the easiest. But I also was doing education policy, and I wanted to say, if you are going to make large policies or large anything that have repercussions on a population, you actually need to go and be a part of that. Especially veterans, if you are going to make policies on veterans, you probably need to be at least a little veteran experienced.

I had finished all my coursework, and I was going onto my exams and stuff, but I had a couple of – a little time in-between. I was like, I am going to go and teach and then see what teaching is in communities. Because I want to know exactly like, if I'm making a policy recommendation and you can not even go to the bathroom, like as a teacher, then these policies are not going to work, and we are going to have the same problems over and over again. So I went and became a teacher for two year and I loved it. I taught Kindergarten at a very elite private school in California. And learned a lot about policies and education, that is for sure and limitations. But during that time, I also transitioned. In 2019, OutServe-SLDN and the American Military Partner Association decided to

merge. It became this huge conglomerate of all these organizations, all this history into one, and it became the Modern Military Association of America, which it is still today. I took on the role as Education Director doing some trainings about – we saw that these trainings are called Rainbow Shield, just doing some cultural competencies on the experience of LGBTQ veterans and military members.

Then I got a call one day. Then they were like, “Jenn, do you want to be the interim executive director?” I was like, “I guess so. Yes, I do.” So I ended up taking the role in the same week that the world shut down during the pandemic.

Jason Higgins

Wow.

Jennifer Dane

It was really difficult. What I did not know going back is that they also assigned my contract, and they had negative money in the bank. And so I had the salary. I went from this great job that could continue. Had I known what I know now, I do not know if I would have taken that role. But I have been able to build the organization back to where it was and where it is now and very thriving. But it has taken a long time and I think in the process too, because we do so many services, just a passion for righting the wrongs of the past and trying to advocate. Also, because I wear many hats in this organization because we only have a small staff. I think I'm doing it very strategically. I came in also during a time where the presidency like really banned us from – not really banned, but never invited us to the White House where we had access previously to more resources. All of our money, because of the past presidential administration, was drained. Because there was no corporations that really wanted to fund those issues because they are not the hot topics. I even jokingly said this, whenever the current administration came into office, we had a lot of phone calls that were like, “can we fund you?” I was like, “well, it's cool to be gay now.” [LAUGHTER] That is really what it is. I mean, we had a long time when one organization and corporations a longtime supporter that – so you really know who your allies are.

Jason Higgins

It sounds like you are saying that the Obama administration, there was some support. The Trump administration, there was not, and that with the Biden administration, there is again?

Jennifer Dane

[01:20:00] Yes. Just having, you know, and also undoing everything that was before. It has been really difficult, and this year is probably going to be my last year as the CEO and executive director because it has just been really hard. There are times where our organization gets threats. The past couple of weeks, at the beginning of this year, I had to report a couple of people to the FBI.

I know it is not directed at me, not directly, at least, when it could be. But it is just really hard to know that there is so much hate that exists still on our community, and that we served, and we did our duty. We supported, and yet you think that we are traitors.

Jason Higgins

That must be hard after everything that you have endured to be like the public face of your organization.

Jennifer Dane

It is. It very much is. Also, there is another organization that is very similar to what we do. We do our work quite differently. I am one that really believes in incrementalism and small changes. There is time for revolution, of course, but you have got to build bridges instead of burning them completely down. You have to make pathways. I am probably more moderate on – as far as political beliefs. I think that there is a lot that we can support. My philosophy too, for the most part, with most congressional people is I do not care which party you are, for most of them, as long as you are dedicated to the veteran or the service member, I do not really care who you are. There are a few individuals I will not work with, but at the end of it, it is for veterans.

Also, not too long ago, there was [a] policy that was about to come out. I expressed a little bit concerns about the unintended consequences of creating a special class just for our community. I was like, “you have got to remember the minorities, you have got to remember everyone else because we need to make sure these encompass everybody in.” This person told me, he's like, “when did you ever start caring about minorities?” I was like, “always.” I have always operated in the belief that, you know, I am not only advocating for our community, but if we can bring anybody else up, do that. And so that has been my philosophy. It has been easier to get into the military and veteran service organization space as a woman operating that way.

Jason Higgins

That sounds like a very pragmatic approach. Could you talk about some of the victories that you have had in that position?

Jennifer Dane

We were able to – well, Trump did a ban on transgender service, and we were the organization plaintiff, and we actually settled the lawsuit with that because when the new administration came in, they just dissolved it at their executive order.

And with a win also comes a non-win is that if any presidency comes in, they can also overturn it with an executive order. So trying to go to Congress and lobby – well not lobby – advocate for the passage of that has not been easy.

But I mean still a win and I tell everyone that I work with us and a win is a win, even if it is small, like just take it because there is a lot of days where you do not get any, but take those wins. The next one is, we were able to – for many years we have worked on this lawsuit to ensure that people living with HIV could commission into the military, or could like go from enlisted to commissioned. And we won that lawsuit like the past year and they can now commission, and they can now deploy.

[01:25:00]

You still can not enlist if you are a person living with HIV, but we are still working on that. Just small steps of progress. Also just getting more exposure on kids of military families. We know that there is a growing number of kids that are LGBTQ and how do we make sure that they are safe especially in states that are like a military member has to go there and if there is Anti LGBTQ laws in those states, and we know that last year there was over 200. They were introduced targeting kids – mostly kids. You can not really move. So what do you do? The wins are trying to advocate and bring more exposure to what it looks like to be, maybe not the parents are LGBTQ, but the kid is and making sure that, you know, the parent could have signed up for the military, but the kids sure did not and making sure that they are safe. It has been really neat to work with the Pentagon and the DOD and different services to try to figure out and hopefully make some inroads.

I think that we are doing that and probably the biggest win overall is the changes in the VA healthcare system. So we have been able to talk to the electronic health records management system and share some insight on like LGBTQ health, specifically trans health and making sure that people that are transgender or maybe they have transitioned from female to male, but they still have like preventative screenings for breast cancer or other things that traditionally get left behind because or denied because you just do not think about that. It is only through conversations and hearing people's experiences that we are able to do that.

Another win and probably the biggest win that I think as a researcher or as once somebody that loves research is, that because of “Don't ask, don't tell,” and I think some more policies even before that, there was a ban on data collection for LGB individuals, and T too, but there is still a ban on that. But last year we were able to challenge the general counsel's ruling on that and now the DOD and the VA can collect that on LGB individuals so we can do some sexual orientation data collection for the first time, officially. So those are some wins.

Jason Higgins

It sounds like you are getting ready to pass the baton, but like what are the ongoing struggles and what would you like to see carried forward into the future?

Jennifer Dane

Yeah so, I mean I always said that my big goal that I wanted to achieve while I was in this role is that we know since World War II until the repeal, “Don't ask, don't tell” in 2011, that there was 100 of – roughly based on data that was collected – since this data and everything else, there was 114,000 discharges that are still dishonorable rather than honorable. They have never been rectified and, you know, the pandemic really like put a toll on that – is trying to upgrade any discharges. The archives were closed, and then the office or the Board of Corrections were closed too, and so many people that were basically died and they could not get their records corrupted or – you know record corrections means everything. Not only can you not access the suite of VA things, but if you look at like any program that has offered veterans services or any program that does scholarships, any business is looking for specific military talent, your application gets

flagged as a no-go if you have a dishonorable discharge. You are literally like strategically marginalizing those populations even more because they can not access any of those services and there is no opportunity to have like an explanation to say like, my DD214⁴ was coded as homosexual conduct and that was it. I mean, that does not always happen, but we know that it would be rectified if that was the only thing on your DD214.

I hope that that gets corrected at some point. That we actually go back and we at least upgrade them to general if nothing else. That is also – that also goes back to blue discharges too. That I would like to see those – I mean they were general. Theoretically general, but going back and upgrading those at least like some sort of a special designation that says we have progressed as a society. So that is one thing that I would like to see and then just creating – my pie in the sky ideal would be reparations for those communities. Maybe very similar to what we did with the Agent Orange. You have served on “Don't ask don't tell,” like and if you had any trauma, you should have this much disability or whatnot. Or whatever the reparations look like because we did put people in jail too.

Jason Higgins

I know that the Black Veterans Project has recently sued the VA for the wrongful discrimination against Black veterans with disabilities and that they have done a lot of work with Yale⁵ to be able to try to upgrade discharges. Is there any type of collaboration going on between your organization and that one?

Jennifer Dane

No, but that is a great idea. [LAUGHTER] We are working with a law firm to do a class action lawsuit against the DOD and all branches right now.

Jason Higgins

I will introduce you.

Jennifer Dane

Yeah, that would be great. Because like with the discharges, the VA is different but because the DOD still controls the records correction. But yeah, that is a great idea.

Jason Higgins

(OVERLAPPING) And just for the record, blue discharges affected not only gay and lesbian bisexual veterans, but also Black veterans as well throughout the 20th century.

{01:30:00}

Jennifer Dane

⁴ A DD214 is a U.S. Department of Defense document given to military service members when they exit the military. It is frequently used as a proof of service.

⁵ The Yale Veterans Legal Service Clinic was established in 2010 where students represent Connecticut veterans in litigation in front of administrative agencies and courts regarding benefits, upgrading discharges, immigration, and pardon matters. The students also represent local and national organizations in non-legal matters relating to other legal needs of veterans.

Yeah, mostly Black.

Jason Higgins

I am curious about the shoulder's upon which you stand. Are there people that you want to name and shout out?

Jennifer Dane

I mean, I stand on a lot of shoulders, so, the founders of the organizations definitely, like, I think it is Dixon Osbourne.

I do not know his last name. Josh. He founded Outserve. His friend. You know like Sean Skelly is another – mean she's a first transgender person in like the administration. She works in the Pentagon.

Nancy Pelosi, (LAUGHTER) I mean that is huge. Anyone that voted for the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," how could I say like, Patrick Murphy was not a LGBTQ person, but really lost his congressional seat because – maybe not just because of that, but one of his biggest advocates was for "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and standing up for that. I mean there are so many more like Ashley Borroway Mac, Stephen Peters, they organize some of the organizations. General Tammy Smith and her partner Margaret Kim Meyer. I mean, there are so many people like that. And there are also those people that are just ordinary, they just survived and we do not have their names, but they are just as important in allies in the families that supported it.

I think we go all the way back to the Revolutionary War, where the first person who was drummed out of the camp, in like the 1800s, yeah, I think it is 1874 or something like that. Then Allan Schindler, which was the sailor that unfortunately lost his life and it was the reason that we have done "Don't Ask Don't Tell" today. There are so many but mostly – but if anybody out of all those people, probably those allies listed with us because without that, you would not have that. Similar to what we saw with the Respect for Marriage Act. I truly think that if it was not for interracial marriage, it would not have been signed into law. There are all these systems that are working around and just yeah – there are so many people that do not get recognized, it is those ordinary voices that probably matter more than those that we know.

Jason Higgins

Right on. I am curious about like how did the fear of the Supreme Court being able to overturn your marriage? Are you married?

Jennifer Dane

I am not married yet.

Jason Higgins

(OVERLAPPING) No marriage, but your potential marriage one day. How did that affect you?

Jennifer Dane

Well, so give you some more context about me as a person, so during the pandemic I ended a seven-and-a-half year relationship. For many reasons, but one of them was because she did not want to get married. Marriage is super important to me. When this ruling came down, well, first I did not think that *Roe v. Wade* would ever be overturned.

Jason Higgins

And just for the record there is a pro-life anti-abortion march going on outside today in Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Dane

Yes. And although I have different – not sure really my true feelings on *Roe v. Wade*. There is a lot of complexities like I think that the idea of, you know, my marriage and me knowing personally Jim Obergefell⁶ and ED Windsor⁷, whenever she was living, like knowing them personally and knowing their struggle. Like the day that I found out that that happened I texted Jim and was like, "Are you available so that you can come and be an officiant in my wedding?" He's like, "Yeah, just let me know and I will be there." So I think that for me it was not just the marriage.

It was also – I thought about everything else. I thought about what does this mean whenever a family has to go through a second-parent adoption when they have a kid and they may not even get to that process because it is so costly and it takes so long. It's sometimes so intrusive, what does it mean whenever I am sitting in the hospital and my partner can not come and make those decisions that I have to have this stupid piece of paper that says, "you are the power of attorney," or any other taxes on my life that even come just from being gay or anything else like any other under-served population. I have thought about not just the act of marriage, but I thought about everything else that came after that. Like the implications of everything that I have to do extra to literally just exist. Even today, like this morning, I was filling out this paper for my son to go to this art camp and it was a school form, and it said, "Mother slash guardian or father slash guardian."

[01:35:00]

And I was like – you know it is like those things that like – I did email the school and say "can you please update it to be more inclusive of everyone," because most people in my town usually have a grandmother or grandfather taking care of them as well. But I mean it is just those things that continue. I also thought about interracial marriage because I was also next. Like what does this mean for my friends too? I was able to bring my former colleague, that was my teacher – my teacher colleague at my previous school because she was in interracial marriage. And I got to bring her to the signing at the White House of the Respect for Marriage Act. I mean it was just, you know – I thought about all of those things and all the impact that hate has, just because you are scared.

⁶ Jim Obergefell was the plaintiff named in the 2105 Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, affirming that same-sex couples have a right to marry in all states.

⁷ Edith Windsor was the plaintiff in the 2013 Supreme Court case, *Windsor v. United States*, that ruled the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional and allowed same-sex couples to be treated as married for tax purposes as long as the marriage was legal in their state.

And everyone, I do have to say that same-sex marriage or what ED Windsor would say just marriage, stimulated the marriage economy by like significantly, so there was economic consequences in a good way of securing gay marriage.

And also just, like I may never – we still have not planned a wedding or anything, but if you want to get married you should be able to marry whomever really. Or if you want to have 16 partners, that is fine. Just have one that is designated as your tax benefit person.

Jason Higgins

Mutually consenting adults, right?

Jennifer Dane

(OVERLAPPING) Exactly. Or if you would just, you know, just – even if you are not – we have got to think beyond this idea that we have had forever. And I also thought about like ED Windsor's legacy, like do not let it be in vain because she was such a wonderful person and individual. There was also others that, you know, their names are not as spread as broadly, but it impacted them and then also just the next-generation. They really do not care. They want to get married or not, like it has got implications on them and their kids, and their kids after that and we should not discriminate.

Jason Higgins

Right on. Can you talk about your recent invitation to the White House?

Jennifer Dane

Yes. Well, I have been to many. But the most recent one was the Respect for Marriage Act and being a part of that and going and being there. [I] also got to witness some bill signings for the most recent one was the Pact Act, which was a huge, probably the biggest legislation we have had in a long time for veterans on toxic exposure. There is also another bill that was named after one of my friends, Dr. Kate Hendrix Thomas, because she was an early mammogram detection bill and she was one of my really good friends and she passed away because of toxic exposure that was – that she didn't get. I mean It said that a bill was signed in her honor after her death. And it should not have taken literally an act of Congress to make sure that like mammograms were accessible to veterans.

I am just really had the pleasure, like I never thought that a girl from small town, west Texas, will ever make it to the White House. I still go out every time and I am just in awe of everything and, you know, whenever, for me whenever, the last election and whenever there was a woman that was elected to the vice presidency, I remember – I don't really think that it mattered who is an office, what party or anything. But I remember, “oh my gosh, this is the first time that I could actually see myself as potentially vice president.” Not that I want to, I do not want to be president. Now, for the record. No president. Maybe Vice President, probably not, but it was the first time I could see myself like how there are women, in the United States specifically, because you have seen many representation across the world. But [OVERLAPPING] It has been amazing.

Jason Higgins

To be honest, I get the same impression every time I come to the Library of Congress now. About just being astonished by this place and Carrie, you have been so patient and quiet and I am sure that you have thoughts. I want to open the opportunity for you to ask a question if you would like.

Kerry Ward

To be honest, I think you have done a wonderful job with the questions. (OVERLAPPING) It has been fascinating to hear how your story has taken you from here, there, everywhere and to where you are today. Such inspiring work. So, thank you for all that you do and for sharing and helping to inspire the next generation.

Jennifer Dane

Thank you for this opportunity. I mean, it is amazing.

Jason Higgins

[01:40:00] It is certainly an honor to speak with you and to learn from you. I am curious what's next for you.

Jennifer Dane

It is a great question. I know potentially leaving this job, you know, it's maybe really reconsider when do I want to run for office? Do I even need to do in the next cycle? I mean, also being very strategic about where I am. Because I do want to go back to Arizona and just but I do not really know. I mean, it has made me think a lot about what I want to do and continue to do.

I mean I know eventually I want to run for Congress. I know that for a fact, but I am not sure if it is going back to school, which is – I am a lifetime learner. Or if it is, you know, doing something else in this space, I am wondering a different skill or what it really is, or maybe even continuing because I still do not really know if I will – maybe I do continue with this role as CEO, but I feel like my time is coming pretty soon to an end. But I know that it is going to still be in the same sphere of advocacy, working with the military and veteran space. Whatever that looks like. I mean, really I am open to anything. I mean, I would do anything. I know whenever I transitioned out of the military, I went and worked for Starbucks for a couple of years for like, yeah, I think two years maybe. I loved it. I mean, I do not have to have to – I am very humble about – you can make an impact wherever you are at. Whatever that looks like I am just – I am just along for the journey of life. (LAUGHTER)

Jason Higgins

I usually ask this type of question to people who are elderly that you have accomplished so much in so little time that I want to know, what legacy would you like to leave behind?

Jennifer Dane

I mean I always say I want at least change one person's life and if I have done that and it is good. But I also say that I want to be the leader that I wish I had whenever I was a kid.

I hope that maybe not so much look up to me, but like present figures that are representative of people's experiences and making sure that I am as inclusive as I can. I always say this in my speaking engagements, but like I told you, I operate with the idea that, you know, like we raise up everyone and in the process, and I say you know, I am fortunate enough to be invited to this proverbial table we have. If you are not and you need a voice, like make room at the table and if there is not room, then let me give up my space at the table and if they still do not want you, like let's just figure out and turn over the table and start over and making sure that there is a voice. I think that we have got to get to a place where we care and are just very kind. Because really it is just as all, I feel like their life is just about kindness and caring and making sure that we are remembering that everybody is their own experience, and just being as accepting as we can to its process.

Jason Higgins

I feel like I could talk to you for hours and learn so much more from you. But I have at least one final question. Is there anything throughout this interview that you wanted to talk about that I did not think to ask or anything you wanted to go back to?

Jennifer Dane

Probably like the only thing that probably is a recent struggle with me is that, you know, from the outward, it seems everything – I mean, obviously it has been challenging and life has been hard and I have been able to do post-traumatic growth and everything. But you know at the end of the day my parents are still not supportive and they still use the word f***** all the time. My brother is, you know, still very much like an extremist. On the right. One of them is, specifically, and that I live in – that my family is not accepting. I think a lot of people forget that, or like do not see that because I do not really talk about it as often. But that is okay. You know, you can still – like it does not – it is hard, yes. But chosen family is important, too. And making sure that, you know, we teach other parents about what it really means to be affirming and, you know, and my parents have still never met my current partner and do not recognize our son has their grandchild and they did not do that with my former partner either. They really did not like her either. But even through all that, there is still a drive for compassion and being better than that.

[01:45:00]

Because I think a lot of people think that in my family life is perfect and that I have had supportive people always and that is not the case. That is okay. They miss out. They miss out on everything. And so that is where we are. [OVERLAPPING] That [is] I would add to that.

Jason Higgins

It does sound like they are missing out on a lot. I have only known you for a couple of hours, so I feel like I have grown in the process of getting to know you. I will ask a final question if I may? If you had a final message to give to your family, whether it be your parents or your son or both. You can choose which one audience you want to speak to. What would that be?

Jennifer Dane

I mean, just be kind and humble and care about others. Because not everybody always had the same rights and the same justice and privileges as you all, or you have had. So it is important that we continue to fight for everyone else. Because you just never know what is going to happen. Just be true to yourself and just really be kind. Because then, I mean, that is really all that life is about.

Jason Higgins

Well, Jennifer, I want to thank you for sharing your story with me and teaching me about your world and your advocacy and your service to others and it is very admirable. (OVERLAPPING) Thank you to Kerry [Ward] for hosting us and for being part of this journey.