

Tiahna Pantovich

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Jay VO: Hi, I'm Jay Ruderman and welcome to "All About Change", a podcast showcasing individuals who leverage the hardships that have been thrown at them to better other people's lives.

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Tiahna Pantovich: It was an awful night. I was very young and I was 20 and I'm very grateful. I was in the army and at the same time, very sad that I was in the army and this occurred to me.

Jay VO: And today on our show: Tiahna Pantovich, veteran, therapist, social worker, and activist.

Tiahna Pantovich: If your soldier's coming to tell you that they've been sexually assaulted. They need to be able to tell you, and you need to give them a hug, not a "Well, why did you..." Not a, " Oh geez!" You need to be that support.

Jay VO: Tiahna Pantovich joined the US Army after her senior year in high school to become an Arabic Cryptologic Linguist. But, after a traumatic experience with sexual assault, she experienced a systematic failure of the army managing cases like hers.

Tiahna Pantovich: Don't bring this drama over here. We don't want none of this.

Jay VO: Tiahna fought the reprisal and became an advocate for Sexual Assault survivors. While still serving, she worked closely with the Pentagon's Inspector General to investigate the conditions at Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, TX, and Fort Hood Army Base in Killeen, TX.

Tiahna Pantovich: We really need to be better at this. What are we going to do as a civilized military to stop this?

Jay Ruderman: Tiana Pantovich, welcome to All About Change. It's my pleasure to have you as our guest today.

Tiahna Pantovich: Thank you.

Jay Ruderman: You grew up in DC. Tell us about your childhood.

Tiahna Pantovich: so I grew up in the DC suburbs. I was the child of a single mother of four. I had a stressful childhood, but I was a smart kid back then, too. I was brilliant as a kid and just in bad circumstances.

Jay Ruderman: What were the bad circumstances growing up and what caused you to join the United States military at such a young age?

Tiahna Pantovich: I was very poor. Like that's just really, as, as simple as it gets. I just grew up poor with negative net worth. And I knew the military had benefits for a lifetime. I understood that at 18.

And after 18 years of struggle, I was really willing to struggle just a little bit more for the benefits on the other side, whether that meant a decade, two decades whatever the case may be. I was willing to do the work in the military to get a lifetime of benefits on the other side.

And it was really worth it, even though it was rather hard it was rather difficult and not what I expected when I joined.

Jay Ruderman: So talk us about going into the recruiter's office did you imagine what life would be like being a soldier and, what type of response did they give you once you walked in there?

Tiahna Pantovich: I had walked into the recruiter's office one day, I was with a boyfriend at the time who was not very smart, but I was young influenced by hormones, and following a very handsome, boyfriend around. And, he got a seven out of a hundred on the ASVAB and I got a 92 and he was not allowed to join, but I was a very good recruit per se

Jay Ruderman: What is an ASVAB?

Tiahna Pantovich: Mmm... the ASVAB it's the aptitude test for the military, Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery is what it stands for ASVAB. It's a test that millions of recruits have to take. There's a certain threshold to be able to enter the military.

The highest you can get is 99, cuz it's a percentile. So you've scored higher than 92% of all people who've taken this test and I had quite a few jobs available to me. Unfortunately, cuz my boyfriend couldn't get in. I walked out and did not necessarily have intentions to go back. Then, I made some unwise decisions with college deadlines and had no funds to make the deposits, although I had gotten into

good schools in the area. I had no dollars to make that college dream happen. And so I ended up one day getting dress coded out of the school, and it was summertime. But now I'm 18. I walk in, I tell them I wanted to be a 68 Juliet, which is a lab tech. And I had this plan. They said, " what about a linguist? Do you know any other languages?" And I was like, "Well, I learned Spanish in high school, and, uh, I'm pretty good at it."

I ended up taking the language aptitude test, which is very similar to the ASVAB. It's just the Defense Language Aptitude Battery. It's called the DLAB. And I score very high on it.

I got a one 10 and that was decided. I was gonna be an Arabic crypto linguist. I had no say in it, just signed the contract and you'll be off after you graduate and we'll wave \$15,000 in front of you. And that sounded really good when I was really poor. And I joined and then I shipped off right after high school.

Jay Ruderman: So \$15,000 upfront...

Tiahna Pantovich: After I learned my language, not just for signing. I had to learn my language and then get my \$15,000.

Jay Ruderman: But you didn't know Arabic at this time. They believed that you had the aptitude to learn Arabic.

Tiahna Pantovich: Correct.

Jay Ruderman: What comes first boot camp or your specialty in learning what you're brought into the army to do?

Tiahna Pantovich: Actually every soldier goes through this path. It's your boot camp and then your specialty and everyone has a specialty.

Jay Ruderman: Is it as grueling as people say?

Tiahna Pantovich: Yeah. And I was hungry the whole time. I just was not necessarily used to the output of calories and being in such a deficit of calories every single day. The crawling and the mud and the letting soldiers climb across my back to get across bridges. It really felt like that and I changed. If I would've had a piece of candy and split it in half, as the big sister, I thought I was entitled to the bigger piece. Now, I'll split it in two ways and give it to my two hungry friends. And I would do that without a thought and go hungry for the rest of the evening. And now I will literally let a stranger stay on my couch if needed. I'm just a different person now.

Jay Ruderman: Did you enter boot camp with any type of physical shape?

Tiahna Pantovich: They do prepare you as a high school student. I was required to go into what they called delayed entry program DEP. I felt like Rambo that summer in North Carolina, torrential winds, it felt torrential in the mountains of Appalachia. You'd get such severe downpours and we'd go running in it as like a team of young people willing and ready to go and we'd sing the marches and we were all going to different branches in the recruiting station. Some of them went off to different branches and I still know them. Some of them went off to the army with me. And we remained friends for many years.

Jay Ruderman: So you go to Monterey and you're learning to be a crypto-linguist. What is a crypto-linguist?

Tiahna Pantovich: A crypto-linguist translates top-secret intelligence.

Jay Ruderman: How long was the process? How long did it take you to become proficient in arabic and to be able to do that job?

Tiahna Pantovich: It's actually a really grueling process cuz it's only 15 months and you have to be completely able to translate very complex military instructions and discussions and things like that. And it was just 15 months of complete Arabic, eight hours a day. And then you go work out and now, you know, I still know my

Arabic. I talk to Arabic-speaking folks on the street throughout my days, if I interact with them in DC, which I do.

Jay Ruderman: And did you love your job there at Monterey?

Tiahna Pantovich: Monterey was a fascinating experience. I was raised by a lot of the people there. I still remember some of my scoldings and I'm really grateful for them.

Jay Ruderman: What's an example of a scolding that you got? from your fellow soldiers?

Tiahna Pantovich: Um.. We were guarding the barracks. And this was the time where females were being allowed into combat units in combat positions and special forces. And my chunky, can't pass weight, little PFC-having person, that person who I was, who I'm not anymore said that she did not believe that females belonged in those units. And I got chewed out by a very strong female who then ended up becoming airborne, having an excellent career out of Fort Bragg.

She embodies army excellence and she chewed me out right there. She just screamed at me as I deserved. I always remember that and I have carried on that light, that torch per se.

I remember actually I was talking with someone who I respect very much who's an artillery soldier and was beginning to say that they did not believe it made sense at the time for females and I knew where they were going and I immediately cut it off.

And I said, " Well, it's time. We finally put aside that belief that all females are frail and small. Cuz there are many females who are strong and agile and very capable. I may have passed that correction on and maybe that person heard me and now that spirit is still being carried on in 2022.

Jay Ruderman: And did you see this as your career?

Tiahna Pantovich: I did believe I was gonna be a career soldier probably until about 60 days before I left the military in 2017.

Jay Ruderman: Can you tell us what happened?

Tiahna Pantovich: So while I was at Monterey, I was sexually assaulted, off the base and it was a traumatic event for me. It was an awful night. I was very young and I was 20 and I'm very grateful. I was in the army and at the same time, very sad that I was in the army and this occurred to me. The first thing I did when I was able to get out of the house, was go to my roommate and tell my roommate how awful it was. And all, I always remember my roommate say, " Pantovich, that is rape!" And we're just looking at each other. And we are both knowing what that means, basically, we're just sitting with weight in that room. and I'm very grateful. She walked with me to report. She stayed with me, for the first long, long hours of my 14 hours stay in the hospital, and she had plans and she still put aside the plans and did support me. But then there became fallout. Like I remember walking in almost as if I was a pariah. it just, it felt weird. Like I felt like I was an omen, like a bad spirit. Like, it just felt very odd when I came back into the barracks after the hospital stay.

Jay Ruderman: And were you feeling this from fellow soldiers from superior officers?

Tiahna Pantovich: Well people's eyes speak. And, you know, also I'm dealing with trauma at the same time. I'm 20 dealing with something that was just awful. I just knew the gravity of what was about to occur. I just felt the weight on myself and looking from side to side, I felt the daggers looking at me and that's really what it was.

And I went in my barracks and I just. Ooh, I ate like chocolate lava cakes. I was allowed, the Monday off, but then on Tuesday I went back to work and was supposed to somehow, you know, have my uniform looking nice and standing in the formation like, I still physically hurt. Like I was still physically sore from the event and I had to stand in the formation. And be straight-faced.

Jay Ruderman: I'm sure that was so incredibly difficult, as a former assistant district attorney who covered the domestic violence unit for many years. I'm so sorry for what you went through.

Tiahna Pantovich: Thanks. I appreciate your support. It means a lot.

Jay Ruderman: Was the perpetrator also a member of the military?

Tiahna Pantovich: The perpetrator was not, was a member of the local college, but not the local, military. What disturbed me the most of the whole occurrence was the perpetrator made the joke that he had rich parents and thus, he would be fine. he verbalized that, as I kind of grappled in a heap, and I'm not sure if I necessarily was the last person, he would be able to do that too, because later on, after I left in the case, continued, The case got dropped. And I became entangled with a whistleblower reprisal case, which was insane.

Took me so much away from going after the real perpetrator, the predator in society, whom I really could have put all my efforts at ensuring this did not happen again, but the army messed up. The incident happened in the summer and I was gone by October.

But the following base, the leaders there almost were like in multiple perspectives. Don't bring this drama over here. We don't want none of this. Just terrible. Just awful. but then it became reprisal. It became more than just, "We really don't wanna touch this."

It became a type of retaliation to force, not only myself, but there was a pattern and it was a systemic problem. And now here I am still 20 years old, with a unit that is mishandling multiple people's cases or a small county in California mishandling my personal case. Now, the self-righteous 30-year-old, would've loved to be able to say that I was able to push through both of them.

But the reality is I was 20. I was reading thousands of regulations and my army case went all the way up to the Pentagon because there were multiple females

involved, multiple people who were experiencing this. I had to put all my efforts into the Inspector General case for whistleblower reprisal on Goodfellow Air Force Base.

And I'm very grateful that I did cuz I did win that case. And I am positive that the people who were retaliating against sexual assault survivors will never be able to retaliate against sexual assault survivors again. I can confidently say that.

Jay Ruderman: That's great. And you know we did a previous podcast with Ilse Knecht about rape kits and how many rape kits sit on the shelves. Thousands and thousands sit on shelves and state after state and, police just do not pick them up and prosecute. So it sounds like you may have fallen into that category.

Tiahna Pantovich: Correct. I remember the call, I was in Texas and, unfortunately, due to it having been two years, which I couldn't believe it was two years, they were gonna close the case. But such is life, you can't win them all. And I know it just sounds not. superhero-esque to say that. but, sometimes, you have to remind yourself now I'm a well-educated psychologist and can say that at 20 years old, I did not have the capacity as a human being to take a case to the Pentagon and take the case to the Monterey county.

The capacity wasn't there and that's fine. because I'm stronger now, I've grown from both experiences and I'm an advocate for others to report. I'm even grateful that at 20 years old, I was wise enough to report it. Because at the very least, I can't be sure he's not gonna do it again, but I pray that the next person would report and now we have a pattern and we can do something with that.

Jay Ruderman: When you show up on base you've gone to the hospital and you've had the rape kit done. You report to a superior. Are you reporting to a female? Is there someone who is sympathetic?

Tiahna Pantovich: I have no clue.. I have no clue who I have no clue who i told first. I have no recollection of what was said in those moments. I have a recollection, days later after I went back to class, like I said that Tuesday, that week

I'm in the office of an inspector and I'm going through questions that I can't even believe are stamped in my brain, but are. " What were you wearing that night?"

And I remember giving a look to him. I couldn't believe that he had said that. However, as a psychologist, at that time, I was so necessarily vulnerable having just survived a very traumatic event that any subtle indication of blame on me due to my outfit is gonna be perceived as that.

And I told him I was wearing a long sleeve sweater, ankle-length leggings in shoes with ties on it. Coincidentally, when all of this occurred, I still was in possession of all of my clothes. They were just torn.

And it was just this moment of he writes a note but doesn't hear, he doesn't hear what I said. It just was like a note and then moves on. It was just so robotic. " And why did you go there if you had bad feelings about him?" Well, I mean, I'm a normal person and now I have bad feelings about a rapist, but I didn't necessarily feel that he was a rapist before I went to his house, because then I probably wouldn't have gone to the house of a rapist. Actually, I definitely wouldn't have gone to the house of a person I would've known was a rapist, it was just these weird insinuations of, " I know this now. So why didn't, you know, this prior to the incident?"

Jay Ruderman: So it sounds like blaming the victim.

Tiahna Pantovich: Oh. Absolutely.

Jay Ruderman: It sounds like you're talking about a systematic culture in the army of not feeling comfortable and not wanting to deal with this and you're getting blamed for coming forward and talking about something that happened to you, which is serious and the army is not handling it appropriately.

Tiahna Pantovich: I know there's been changes since I've been in, but there hasn't been enough changes cause Vanessa Guillen was bludgeoned to death on Fort Hood army base a couple years after I left it.

This is a systemic thing.

This is a cultural thing and we need to do better as a civilized military, We really need to be better at this. What are we going to do as a civilized military to stop this?

Jay Ruderman: Do you think that after Vanessa's killing and the investigation and there were many senior officers who were relieved of command and, reprimanded, do you think that since then has the culture changed in the armed services?

Tiahna Pantovich: I think it's too soon to say that because that only recently happened, those officers were only recently, relieved. We need to see a half-decade and a decade of research after to see the numbers go down and we need to continue. I'm not advocating for a Stalin-esque type removal of all head generals who are deemed immoral or whatever. I'm advocating for getting the leaders who aren't giving their soldiers a space to speak up for themselves, whether it be for sexual assault in my case, whether it be for online bullying in other cases, whether it be hazing in other cases, but getting our troops to speak up and not kill themselves seems to be something we're failing at. And that's just a fact.

Jay Ruderman: Do you think you were moved from Monterey because you reported the rape?

Tiahna Pantovich: Yes, I was.

Jay Ruderman: And where did you go from Monterey?

Tiahna Pantovich: From Monterey, I went to Goodfellow Air Force Base where things hit a catastrophic low.

I started having psychosocial symptoms, in actual physiological responses to the chaotic amount of stress I was having. I was having immense shin splints. My legs worse in so much pain. They were so swollen. Also, a common indicator of stress is poor circulation. And I was probably the most stressed out I've ever been in my

life. I've never wanted to strangle myself more than every single day at work there. Living life there was so hard because I was so ostracized.

Jay Ruderman: So is this it for you in the military or is there one more step?

Tiahna Pantovich: No. Mm-mm. I go on to Fort Hood army base I'm doing some rehabilitation at Fort Hood. Also doing some work with the Inspector General, some work at III Corps, and I'm in school now. I'm actually turning things around the tides are turning, Goodfellow was so awful. and the tides did start to turn at Fort Hood in a way in which I found a stride and a purpose. There was so much to change and so much to do at Fort Hood.

I had goals just left and right. And, I was achieving them. The response to the Inspector General report. I still have. And I'm very grateful for it. When it became declassified. I was able to get a copy and I still have it. I'm very proud of it. I'm looking at my certificate of retirement from the US army in 2017.

I'm very proud of that. And so I'm proud of what I did, but I thought I was gonna be GI Jane for 20 years and I had to grapple with the fact that GI Jane was not gonna happen. **And so I tried to kill myself in 2017, and then I tried to kill myself again in 2018. And then I decided to enroll in help and I got help for four years. And now I'm thriving, but it was tumultuous. That's for sure.**

Jay Ruderman: I'm so sorry that you've gone through this and [00:24:00] I'm sure it was a very low point in your life. and yet it sounds like you're still proud that you had the military experience.

Tiahna Pantovich: Of course! And still, I thrive. and I always will thrive and I have done more service after service is what I would call my experience the best way to put it: Service After Service. I have done so many volunteer events. I've joined so many organizations. I have worked on Capitol Hill in the House Veteran Affairs Committee as a legislative intern, working on legislation for toxic exposure. I'm working on legislation for spouses, working on legislation for sexual assault survivors, working on legislation for education equity.

The veteran community is benefiting on the flip side as I'm doing really good stuff for veterans even though my time in was a tumultuous four years for me, but I'm wiser on this side. I'm a well-educated [00:25:00] psychologist. I just finished my fourth degree at the illustrious Howard University and I'm a therapist for those who experience substance use disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, many of which are veterans and saving lives on that end is awesome too.

So I may not be a medal of honor running across a field in Afghanistan to go recover my fallen comrade. but I am still saving veterans from death by getting their calls and texts. When they're on their last leg. When I need to do a buddy check for a veteran, they know that they can reach out to me. And if we're at that point, we'll have an ambulance at your house.

Jay Ruderman: Wow.

Tiahna Pantovich: And I know if there are few who are listening, they have used me as a buddy check. They've been at the end of their road and they've said, "Tiahna, I just don't think I can do this anymore." And Tiahna says, "Let's talk about it."

And then on the flip end, I'm getting somebody on the line to do a buddy check for them. Because I also don't play with suicide. I've lost comrades to suicide and I don't play.

Jay Ruderman: Thank you for what you've done to help probably countless individuals. I'm sure the traumatic experience is still with you and that you've learned to, to make that part of your life and still to find the good in life.

Tiahna Pantovich: Yes Because I have to relive it. I have to relive it when I'm listening to some of my own clients. Who have survived this and they're telling me their story. A lot of people will be so deep and dark in that tunnel. They cannot believe that there's ever possibly gonna be a light at the end of the tunnel.

Jay Ruderman: If I could ask you, When you were going through those really dark times, How did you turn things around?

Tiahna Pantovich: To be honest and real and raw I had to fail my suicide attempts and I really felt I couldn't do one more minute. And then you wake up after the suicide attempt, whether it be in the hospital, whether it be in your own bed, whatever it be.

And you set a goal. And I set these goals Three degrees was a goal. Building a van conversion and traveling across the country was a goal. And I did it. I just did it. I lived in a van for six months and went to 42 states and that was a goal. And that got me through those six months. And then I needed to graduate from Michigan. And that was a goal. And I got through that and then I needed to graduate from Howard and that was a goal. And now I need to do my next internship, which is another goal. And I have to buy this house and decorate this house, and that's a goal and I'm building a rooftop deck and that's a goal. And those keep me alive.

Jay Ruderman: If you have a message for the army at this point if you could talk to leadership, what would you say needs to be done so that this doesn't continue to happen?

Tiahna Pantovich: You need to get your shit together by fostering an environment in which your soldiers can have open communication with every piece of their chain of command. Starts at the squad leader. And then it's the Platoon Sergeant. And then it's the First Sergeant. And then it's the Commander And all of those people, not one of those people can be a weak link in the communication.

All of those people need to have an open communication line and not the bullshit open-door policy that applied when I was in the army. Cuz army had an open-door policy when I was in. And we know how that worked out. So let's be real. You need to be willing as the very conservative Baptist squad leader to your soldier, who's 19. If your soldier's coming to tell you that they've been sexually assaulted. They need to be able to tell you, and you need to give them a hug, not a "Well, why did you..." Not a, " Oh geez!" You need to be that support.

Jay Ruderman: That's great advice. You have done so much in a young life, to support so many people, How do you do it all?

Tiahna Pantovich: That's my purpose. I need that to live.

Jay Ruderman: Well, you're doing a great job. And, we're lucky to have you, and it's been such a pleasure to speak with you.

Tiahna Pantovich: Thank you. I'm very excited to help others through their trauma. And if there's anyone that needs me in any way, they're able to reach out to me. I am very there. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. There really, really is other people who are going through trauma right now may not feel like, their heart can heal after the trauma, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Jay Ruderman: Wise words and thank you, Tiahna. We really appreciated you being our guest.

Tiahna Pantovich: Thank you.

Jay VO: All About Change is a production of The Ruderman Family Foundation. This show is produced by Yochai Mital, Jackie Schwartz, Matt Litman, and Mijon Zulu.

If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to come back in two weeks for another inspiring story. In the meantime we still have all of our previous content live on our feed [00:30:00] and linked on our new website - Allaboutchange podcast.com

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