

NEWS

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL?

LCC speaker will discuss her role in taking down anti-gay military policy

RETIRED U.S. AIR FORCE MAJ. MARGARET WITT

PHOTO COURTESY MYCHAL RICHARDSON

“One day I was fine, and the next I had a label that I wasn’t fit to serve,” says retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Margaret Witt.

Over her 19-year military career, Witt logged nearly 2,000 hours as a flight nurse in the Air Force before being suspended in 2004 and facing dismissal under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. She will give a free public talk about her case April 5 at Lane Community College.

She served in Operation Enduring Freedom and received a medal from President George W. Bush for delivering “outstanding medical care” to injured service members and reflecting “great credit upon herself and the United States Air Force,” according to the ACLU, which worked on her case.

Witt says she was fortunate that she could stand up and fight — and had the support to do it. There were 14,000

people discharged under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell who “just disappeared,” she says.

Witt legally challenged her discharge, and in 2010 the courts ruled that the dismissal violated her constitutional rights and ordered her reinstatement. Her legal fight helped lead to the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of that same year.

“I helped push it along,” Witt says of the repeals of the policy that allowed gay people to serve in the military as long as the military didn’t know they were gay. “They didn’t really want the courts making the law,” she says of how her case pushed the legislation.

Military policy on LGBTQ people took a step back on Friday, March 23, when President Donald Trump approved a policy that saying that “transgender persons who require or have undergone gender transition are disqualified from military service.”

“It turns my stomach every time they come out with something,” Witts says. “It’s so wrong. It’s disheartening. It’s disrespectful. It’s humiliating. These are people willing to serve our country who happen to be transgender.”

She continues, “It breaks my heart — when you know what it takes to serve, and your own struggles at the same time. You are the soldier, the airman, the marine — it’s part of you.”

It makes no sense, she says, just as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell made no sense.

As part of the LCC community speaker series, KLCC reporter Tiffany Eckert will lead a community conversation with Witt, who will also take questions from the audience and participate in a book signing and sale of her memoir, *Tell: Love, Defiance, and the Military Trial at the Tipping Point of Gay Rights*. ■

Margaret Witt speaks 6 pm Thursday, April 5, at LCC’s Center for Meeting and Learning, 4000 E. 30th Avenue. FREE.



HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL

DIANE MCWHORTER

Inspired by Woody Guthrie, who traveled the West as an itinerant sign painter during the Great Depression, Delaware native Diane McWhorter picked up a brush early in the ’70s to try her hand at sign-painting in the remote Four Corners region of the Southwest. Sidetracked by a short-term romance with a Carmel Valley cowboy, she came to Eugene to visit an aunt in 1975. “I found the Saturday Market and set up a sign-making booth,” she says. “My first client was Humble Bagel. I’m still in the market 43 years later.” McWhorter moved on to silk-screening, making cards at first, then t-shirts, tote bags and caps. She’s had her own booth at the Oregon Country Fair since 1984. She got to know The Radar Angels performance troupe at the Fair, and took part in the Angels’ first Jell-O Art Show at the Maude Kerns Art Center in 1988. “I’ve been in every show,” she says. “This one is the 30th. I’ve used it to express what was going on in my life. A Barbie doll was my alter ego, remodeling a bread box with building materials made of Jell-O.” Her discovery that thin sheets of dried gelatin won’t rot and turn to mush has allowed her to construct elaborate sculptures that last and to fashion hair ornaments and flowers for sale at her booth. Ever since her surprise coronation as Queen of Jell-O Art in 2012, McWhorter has joined The Radar Angels on stage in song and dance. The 2018 Jell-O Art Show can be seen 5 to 8 pm Saturday, March 31, at the Maude Kerns Art Center, 1910 E 15th Avenue in Eugene. Follow McWhorter’s musings at gelatinaceae.blogspot.com.