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Soldier Fights for Equality

Service member faces new obstacles upon retirement

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND
OBSERVER

Despite recent strides towards equality for same-sex couples, one local retired military service member has discovered there is still a long way to go for justice.

Sue Leavy experienced emotional ups and downs as a lesbian woman with 33 years of service in the Oregon Army National Guard.

Leavy remembers what it was like both before and after 'Don't Ask Don't Tell,' the law that did not allow gay men and women to be their true selves while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

The 1993 law was repealed last September after more than 13,000 service members had been discharged under terms of the Congressional action.

"For all those years I couldn't be who I was because I was scared of the repercussions," Leavy said.

Now as a newly retired military service member, she is finding there are other laws that still discriminate against her.

Leavy met her wife Michelle Martin six-years ago, and last year they made their vows to spend the rest of their lives with each other, while surrounded by family and friends in a



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Sue Leavy (left) with her wife Michelle Martin and a display case that commemorates Leavy's 33 years of service in the Oregon Army National Guard. The couple is in a domestic partnership recognized by the state of Washington, but the military doesn't recognize the relationship as it pertains to benefits for her spouse and child.

church ceremony.

Inside the couple's Vancouver home where they are raising their eight-year-old son Evan, images from their wedding rest on the wall, behind a newly framed display case of an American flag, which was previously hung at the White House in Washington D.C. and given to Leavy at the end of her service.

By law, the couple is in a domestic partnership officially recognized by the state of Washington. Both consider themselves to be married.

"I know I will be with her the rest of my life," said Martin. "I feel married regardless of who recognizes it or not. Government, or not."

The military, however, does not recognize their union in quite the same way.

"If the government wants to give us all of the rights a marriage has to offer and call it a domestic partnership, I am alright with that," said Leavy. "But they don't."

Currently, efforts are underway in Congress to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which bars federal recognition of same-sex marriages. The Justice Department decided it will no longer defend

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