

Professional support led to personal acceptance

Preston: Hi, I'm Preston, and I'm an ex US Air Force weather observer and I entered the service just about towards the tail end of the Vietnam era. I was stationed in Sacramento and the surrounding areas of California. I spent most of my time at Travis Air Force Base working underground with the 90 second weather wing.

One of my biggest concerns about entering the Air Force was the fact that I was beginning to feel that I was confronting a big issue in my life and that was being gay. I had tried to suppress it for all my life because I grew up very conservatively in a very conservative family where you just don't talk about that stuff and it's just not a part of your life but for me it was and I sort of got this crazy idea that hey, by going in the Air Force to become a real man and all these issues are just going to away. So, I had to walk a very fine line because during the whole time in basic training for example there was word of certain guys who had been found out. So, I had conflict already starting to build. I was also starting to realize that I'd like to become an officer and a program had opened up for me to apply for Commission, and I took the opportunity and went through all the exams and presentations and was accepted.

The next thing I knew, I was being transferred to Berkeley, California to go to school, counter to that happiness was the fact that I was now back in quasi-civilian world and in San Francisco no less. The more I moved into civilian side of life, the personal side came up you know, wanting to meet someone. Wanting to find out who I was inside. So, I decided to get help but I couldn't go to the Air Force for help because if I was to mention that I was struggling with these issues I'd be out.

I went to 2 weekly sessions with a gay therapist, and he gently walked me through what the issues were and no pressure to do anything. I could evolve at my comfort level. As our sessions unfolded and I become more comfortable with working with him, he brought up the subject of, "well, would you be interested in going to a group meeting of other gay men just like yourself that are dealing with lots of issues, from relationship, to coming out to their parents, to coming out at work." So, I went and there was an instant rapport. It was nonjudgmental. It was very welcoming. After a year or so of that, I had the courage to be begin to confront my commanders, because by then, I realized an 8-year commitment for my commission. I didn't think I could do that, not with being threatened every moment with being revealed, what would that be like?

So, I went to my commander the first time, after about an hour of just beating around a bush that got nowhere he said, "airman, why don't you think about it and come back to me like next week and we'll talk." Well, I thought about it and couldn't sleep. I was just full of anxiety. Came back the next week to talk to him and he says, "I think I know what you're trying to tell me." And he says, "don't worry." He said, "you already have an honorable discharge from the active military. We'll give you a general discharge from the reserves and your reputation will be saved, but the Air Force does need to get rid of you." I was frightened suddenly about going back into civilian life, like can I cope. How do I do this, how do I do that, how do I survive?

Once I had gotten past the part of the self-identity crisis I had about whether I was gay and coming out and the guys in the military are not. that was a major issue that I was able to put beside, and I was able to actually move forward with my life and let me tell you, counseling is like the finest thing you can do because you get to hear someone else



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evaluate the things that you are trying to evaluate and give you a mirror to look at what's happening to yourself. It's a pathway to making your life workable, even enjoyable down the road. Do it. Do it now. It's that important.



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