

Leading and living strong after facing adversity

Trista: I'm Trista, and I served a total of 16 years of active duty. I served in the Navy, the Marines, and the Army National Guard.

Hector: My name is Hector. I served in the Army for 18 years.

Trista: Hector and I met in the military.

Hector: I was training future officers for a unit here in Minnesota.

Trista: Coming in the door, I see this ranger marching with a purpose.

Hector: She was late to our first formation, and so at first it was a lot smoking her, just making her do pushups and a lot of exercise.

Trista: He was mean as heck, really mean in fact, and I hated him.

Hector: There was something about her that I thought was unique. She never broke and she kept coming out as a leader, but her character is what drew me to her.

Trista: In the military, you're not trying to be one of the best women, you're just trying to be like your brothers next to you. You have to work harder than the men and you get about half the respect most of the time.

There's the big repel tower at Coronado. It's one of the tallest repel towers that the military uses and it was my first time repelling and I'm afraid of heights. But when I got there and realized that they're like, "Women can't do this," I had to do it. There's a lot of unofficial hazing that goes on and, you know, people will push to see how far they can take it. And it's that harassment, it's those off-color, inappropriate sexual jokes, it's comments, and then it goes into full rape, and rape happens and assaults happen. I experienced a military sexual trauma while I was in my officer candidate school in the Navy and a pregnancy resulted because of it, and I was completely isolated.

Hector: Women in the military will isolate themselves when that happens. They won't tell anybody; they won't even tell each other.

Trista: The scary part about it is, you know, we're trained that the guy to your left and your right is your brother. Well, if it's your brother that's assaulting you, who are you going to tell?

Hector: Whenever we'd get into the arguments or the fights, things came out where I was like, "This has nothing to do with us," and I started picking up on things, "Whenever I go this route, it's an explosion, and it's an immediate explosion."

Trista: I guess I never recognized it in myself, you know, then or, and it wasn't until later when I, you know, saw a psychologist after my service that I realized I was totally in denial and blamed myself.



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Hector: She started doing outreach for women's Veteran issues and talking about women's Veteran issues, and I said, "Well, have you ever been to the VA?" "Well, no. Why would I want to do that? I don't want to talk about it."

Trista: His favorite quote is, "You can only lead as far as you've gone, and you're trying to lead these women vets and you haven't even been there, you haven't walked through the doors yourself." Through my comp and pen physical, I met with a psychologist and we talked about my military sexual trauma, which by that time had been 10 years prior. I had never even told anyone how I ended up pregnant back then or what happened to me. I chose to keep my son and Hunter is a special needs child. He is severely autistic and developmentally delayed and, you know, that came with some career choices. I mean, it's why I left the Marine Corp.

Hector: With Hunter, our 12 year old now, it was really tough. It's the hardest relationship in our relationship.

Trista: I work with a lot of women vets and we meet for coffee and we talk and, you know, you hear story after story of experiences of military sexual trauma or PTSD; sometimes they go hand in hand. So, all of my guys that I've been with for years are gone and I'm here at home. My first day on the job, the first notification, is my platoon. You know, you're in that moment of like, "I'm a Lieutenant. I've got to be strong," but dammit.

Once you start talking to women that our experiences are very similar. They have this idea of, you know, it's people who have got a physical injury that need to go to the VA, and it's not just about physical injuries.

Hector: The hardest conversation you'll ever have is a conversation you'll have when you take two steps forward and then turn around and face yourself.

Trista: For two military people, both older, and we had been single parents prior too, so we had different issues, that's a lot of stuff going on in a household. So, we get mental health help because we need it, and it's keeping things healthy and in a great environment for us and our family. The first step is going to the VA and get a treatment plan for whatever ails you, mental health, anxiety, whatever it is, it's your service. We're so willing to sacrifice ourselves for others as Veterans, but at some point, you have to look internally and just take care of you. It's all about talking and it's amazing what you can do by just telling and owning your own story.



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