

I wanted my son to experience a healthier mother

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie and I served in the first Gulf War with which was Desert Storm 1990-91 in Saudi Arabia. My MOS was the 88M truck driver which is a transportation specialist and you can drive every vehicle in the military, but my unit was just a black top unit where we drove 14 contracted trailers and hauled patriots, ammo and missiles. We were in threat of scud missiles all the time so we had threats of chemical warfare and you know sirens going off and you know everywhere we went we had to carry our weapon and what not. So the stress and anxiety level I became hyperaroused. We had like 500 people and about 30 women so it was very ... the dynamics was different. So what I experienced was kind of like a mistreatment or lack of respect and honor for women. I felt kind of ostracized and not really respected and really embraced as a soldier was difficult. I was expecting support and respect and it was a lot of sexual harassment, cat calling, you know unethical things that the military code of conduct basically says it should not be happening.

I really didn't know at the time that I was experiencing sexual assault, what they call military sexual trauma. It wasn't a term then. Definitely at the time of service you just get through, you made it home, you made it alive, I'm done; so when I got back from Desert Storm in '91 I actually detached from that unit and got assigned to another unit where I just totally wanted to act like it didn't matter, it didn't happen.

I used to have nightmares and sleep disturbances so when I first got home I just was different. I was estranged from my family. I was very serious. I found myself not able to really be understood when I did express myself with family, friends of some of the things that I went through because they were not there. So I didn't find myself supported in the system so I would say I kind of hid. I was depressed. I'm a divorced single mother, I'm struggling raising my son, doing all the work myself not having the support system so I used to be home at night crying all the time and then I would come, put this face on at work and perform. The job I had high stress level child welfare, social work, I mean you see the worse of the worse. I just couldn't even find a common ground.

So my doctor took me off on stress leave, I ended up on long-term disability, ended up being unemployed and never went back to work and that's when I entered the Ann Arbor VA homeless Veteran program and I changed my life actually. I was able to get a HUD voucher and it moved us out to Grand Blanc, Michigan. Actually, it was the best thing ever that happened to us. I had a worker she was like my champion. She was the first worker that believed me. When I spoke she helped me, you know. It wasn't a game approving, I felt safe. I think that is what was the turn around was one person that was able to advocate for me when I couldn't advocate for myself. I did a lot of writing therapy, venting on paper. One thing about writing, instead of saying it you know you could put it on paper, you could decide to publish it or not. I was able to release in a safe place.

I felt as if it was my duty to heal myself. You know I said if you're brave enough to serve, you're brave enough to heal so I said if I am brave enough to go to Saudi Arabia and fight for my country I'm brave enough to heal myself with these tools and it was necessary for my son. I wanted my son to experience a healthier mother and a better life. Being diagnosed with PTSD officially in 2010 made it clear what it was and then he just said, "Mom I knew something was different about you." Our relationship is stronger



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because I healed myself and I believe once you heal yourself you are able to empower the ones you love around you.



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