

Finding My Path

Penn: There is a part of you that is constantly aware of the fact that you have to be on guard. So, even though I did very well in the service, I could have done so much better if I hadn't had to guard and protect who Penn really was. Name is Penn. I was in the United States Navy Submarine Service, and I served for seven years and a quarter. I had an abusive childhood, so anything to get me out of Bay City, Michigan was going to be just fine. I ended up going into the nuclear navy. I knew when I went into the service that I wasn't "straight", but I didn't know what I was. And at that time it was perfectly okay to beat us up, to kill us. So, that LGBT part of Penn had to stay hidden. Getting back, I had forced myself into several situations that were pretty violent. Get drunk, go in bars, get in fights. So, I seeked counseling.

The VA has got me to the point where I can stand in that fire just to find my damaged self and work to heal that. It was a time when I finally figured out what a family was. Through a couple really good therapists, I've gotten comfortable talking to them. She provided nonjudgmental ear. At no time did she ever say, "That's just wrong." It was teamwork. And she counseled me all the way through coming out to the company that I worked at. The VA allows me to be in community with like-minded people. There's a camaraderie there, because I don't feel threatened because we're walking the same path.

Dorothee: Penn's quite a piece of work.

Penn: Dorothee and I've been married 52 years.

Dorothee: Never a dull moment. I met Penn in New London, Connecticut, dated for quite a while. And then Penn asked me to marry him, and I couldn't say yes, but I eventually did say yes.

Penn: I was that straight uber male when we got married. We went through a lot of different things together. I'm the president for the American Veterans for Equal Rights. I became connected with Native American background. I conduct ceremonies in the Cree and the Ojibwe tradition. If I'm talking to a veteran who really struggled to keep a lid on what they were doing, we understand one another. It gives me a purpose in finding that spiritual path.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

MAKE THE
CONNECTION