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# PRIDE MONTH

By Major Jennifer Lake

One JAG Corps member's personal journey from being relatively unaffected by LGBTQ+ considerations to a life in which those issues have become and remain paramount, through the lens of an otherwise ordinary part of military life—choosing where to live after a PCS move.

## Pride Month

Pride month offers an opportunity to better get to know the challenges our LGBTQ+ Airmen and Guardians and their families face as they navigate day-to-day life within the Department of the Air Force. Knowing our Airmen and Guardians and creating an environment of support and respect within the JAG Corps is instrumental to mission-readiness, as well as our ongoing recruiting and retention efforts. The following is one JAG Corps member's personal journey from being relatively unaffected by LGBTQ+ considerations to a life in which those issues have become and remain paramount, through the lens of an otherwise ordinary part of military life—choosing where to live after a PCS move.

## Repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell

I joined the Air Force in 2011. At JASOC, our class was briefed on the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT). At the time, I had a serious boyfriend who I had been dating for two years and who was following me to Alaska for my first assignment. I was aware of DADT, but only on a surface level, as it did not apply to me. The briefing at JASOC was just another drop from the firehose that I mentally tucked away.

A couple of years later, that boyfriend became my husband, and I was headed to my second assignment. We decided to move houses in Alaska to have more space and give him a shorter commute to work. We looked online, found a place we liked, toured it, and rented the house. Easy. Fast forward

another couple of years, and I received my third assignment, to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. We talked to people about where to live, toured a house virtually, and rented it before we ever set foot in Florida. Even easier. Things didn't work out between my now ex-husband and me, and we ended up parting ways. As a single woman, I moved into a new house in Florida. My main considerations were rent, pet friendliness, and ease of commute. I looked online, visited a couple places, and moved in.

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What type of neighborhood am I moving to? Will they accept us as a couple? What if we have kids? Will they be friendly to my family?

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## Same-Sex Couple

After two years in Florida, I received my next assignment; I got my dream job teaching at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), in Colorado Springs, Colorado. However, this move was a little different. I was moving as a geographically separated spouse who was married to a woman, and fellow AF JAG. My wife still had a year left on her assignment at Joint Base McGuire Dix Lakehurst (JBMDL) in New Jersey. We traveled to Colorado Springs to find a house the day after our wedding. We had previously found a realtor who had about twenty houses ready for us to look at on our two-day, whirlwind, house-hunting tour. This was my fifth house-hunt since joining the Air Force, but this time, everything was different. There were new things to consider, new concerns and uncertainties, and many *many* more questions. What type of neighborhood am I moving to? Will they accept us as a couple? What if we have kids? Will they be friendly to my family? When we began asking these questions to our realtor, she ended up crossing a few houses off the list. We were very lucky to have found a realtor so knowledgeable about the areas we needed to avoid.

## Millions of Questions

This was the first time I really thought about how different my life was now, as a part of a same-sex couple. Now I was thinking about a million other things, and had a million more questions to answer. Will being out in the military affect my career? Yes, DADT was repealed, but will my new boss and co-workers accept me and my family, or only tolerate us? What if one of my new co-workers has political or religious views that are opposed to my life and family? Will they still be willing to work with me? I thought: "I'm going to be geographically separated, maybe I will just keep my relationship status private for as long as possible." It was a terrible feeling to have to consider whether to hide my joy about my brand-new wife. I hadn't considered any of this before getting married. I was madly in love with her; why wouldn't I marry her? And why wouldn't I be proud for people to know it?

After moving to USAFA, the unanticipated considerations kept coming up. I thought: "When I introduce myself to my class, do I say anything about my wife? What if one of my cadets believes gay marriage or being gay is wrong? Will I lose all credibility? Will cadets ask to transfer out of my class?" For my first year, I waited until at least mid-semester to use the word "wife," opting to use "spouse" or "partner" instead. In my second year, I changed tactics. My wife was now stationed at USAFA as well, as the Victims' Counsel, and I introduced her on day one, just like I would have if she had been my husband. Not only did no cadets ask to transfer out of my class, after the first class of the first day, a cadet stayed late to thank me for treating my family like everyone else's. She was so grateful to see herself represented by an officer and a professor in such a "normal" way.

## Inclusivity

Some of the million questions I had were based on feeling uncertain about my place in a post-DADT Air Force, but within a society where discrimination and disenfranchisement were and are a reality for many, both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community. Understanding that no two people's experiences are the same, I am grateful that many

of my fears have not turned into reality. Now, 12 years into my career as a JAG, I have met and built lasting relationships with mentors and friends who embody our Air Force ideals of respect and inclusivity. I am happy to say I have also never experienced an issue where my family and I weren't accepted by an office or a co-worker. I have received numerous performance reports and successfully met multiple promotion boards, without ever feeling like my LGBTQ+ status was even a factor. I would love to say I don't worry about it anymore, but the landscape of LGBTQ+ issues in our society creates extra challenges that my family will probably always have to navigate.

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We now have three children, and every time we get ready to move it's never just about finding the best commute, best neighborhood, or best school district. It is always about our family's safety first. Where are we going? Will we be safe there? Will we be accepted? By the community, by leadership, by our coworkers? Will the laws of the state recognize my children as my own, or would we be well-advised to adopt our own children? Will they be able to talk about their family in school without consequence? The questions may never cease, but my trust and faith in the JAG Corps and Air Force's commitment to allowing my wife and me to continue serving with dignity has always been rewarded.

One of the best leaders I've had in the JAG Corps unintentionally showed me the model of how I hope everyone treats my family, and all LGBTQ+ families in the JAG Corps. We were briefing a brand-new major general commander, and after I got done introducing myself, my boss jumped

in to brag about my wife and talk about my children (at the time we had three kids under the age of two). He was proud of my family and wanted the General to know. The briefing continued as planned, and when it ended, we all went back to our office. As soon as we got back to our office, my boss asked me to come into his office, shut his door, and said, "I'm so sorry." I was so confused. "About what, Sir?" He went on to ask if he overstepped by telling the general I had a wife. He was concerned he had "outed" me without my permission. I let him know that, for me, he did exactly the right thing. He didn't see me as gay, straight, or other. He didn't see my family as an LGBTQ+ couple, or our kids as kids with two mommies. He saw us simply as a family, just like any other family, which is all we want to be seen as.

## Understanding

I am sharing this experience because as a first and second-assignment captain I had no idea how something as routine as house-hunting could become so complicated by so many things I didn't have to consider at the time. I had no idea what people who weren't "like me" were going through on a regular basis until I experienced it first-hand. In order to support our Airmen and Guardians, we must rise to the challenge as leaders, peers, and subordinates, regardless of our background, to know and understand all our Airmen and Guardians, to support them, and to ensure they understand how integral they are to our Air Force family every day.

## Glossary

- **DADT:** Don't Ask, Don't Tell
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **JASOC:** Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course
- **LGBTQ+:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, and more
- **PCS:** permanent change of station
- **USAF:** United States Air Force Academy

## EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

External Links to Additional Resource

- **Barrier Analysis Working Group for LGBTQ:**  
<https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2585778/departments-of-the-air-force-creates-two-new-barrier-analysis-working-groups-for/>
- **Every Airman & Guardian Has A Story - Pride Month Video:**  
<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/848475/every-airman-guardian-has-story-pride-month>
- **Library of Congress on Pride Month:** <https://www.loc.gov/lgbt-pride-month/about/>
- **National Archives on Pride Month:** <https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/lgbt-pride-month>
- **Signature Block Pronouns:**  
<https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2879382/signature-block-pronouns-now-allowed-for-airmen-guardians/>

## About the Author



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