Colonel Margarethe (Grethe) Cammermeyer

I was born in Oslo, Norway in 1942 during the Nazi occupation. Living across from Nazi headquarters, my parents used me in their exploits in the Norwegian underground, resisting the Nazis. My mother would conceal guns under my mattress as she pushed me in the baby carriage along the streets of Oslo. As I grew up and learned to read, my heroes were those resistance forces and my parents who stood up to "the bad guys" and were willing to sacrifice their own lives for the freedom they believed in. My name is Margarether “Grethe” Cammermeyer.

My father was the first Norwegian recipient of the Rockefeller Fellowship in 1946 which enabled us to spend nine months in Boston, Massachusetts. We then returned to Norway but ultimately immigrated to the United States in 1951 when I was nine. Learning to speak English and dealing with the humidity of Washington DC was difficult.

At 17 I started college at the University of Maryland and in 1960 I became an American citizen, feeling that I now belonged. In 1961 I heard about the Army Student Nurse Program, joined the military, and became an Army Nurse on graduation. My first active duty assignment was basic training in Texas where I learned to salute, wear the uniform, march, and carry patients on litters through the desert terrain of Camp Bullis.

I met my husband in Germany. After Germany, we were sent to Virginia. Then I was sent to Vietnam first as head nurse of a medical unit and later, as head nurse of the neurosurgical intensive care unit. I was forced to leave the military when I became pregnant because women were not permitted to have dependents. By 1972 that regulation was changed and I returned to the military in the Army Reserves, achieving the rank of Colonel in 1987.

My husband and I divorced after 15 years and having four wonderful sons. There were problems which I did not understand at the time but which turned out to be my own identity crisis, as I came to understand that I was a lesbian. The process of a personal journey of self-discovery was difficult and painful, but necessary to find the real me.

In 1988, now as Colonel Cammermeyer, I accepted the position of Chief Nurse of the Washington State National Guard. In 1989, during an interview for top-secret clearance to apply for the War College, I told the military "I am a lesbian". I was separated from the military despite an exemplary military and civilian professional record, losing all military privileges. My attorneys filed suit in Federal District Court in Seattle. We were in and out of court many times during the ensuing 25 months until Judge Zilly ruled the policy was unconstitutional and based on prejudice.

I was reinstated in the National Guard in June of 1994 and resumed my position as Chief Nurse. I also had a concurrent civilian career in the Veterans Administration Medical Health Care System where I specialized in neuroscience nursing and in Seattle, served as the neuro-oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist in San Francisco, and, in Tacoma, Washington, I was the Clinical Nurse Specialist in Neuroscience and Sleep Research. Completing my Ph.D. at the
University of Washington in 1991, I focused the last years of practice on the diagnosis and care of patients with sleep apnea. In 1996, I retired from the VA Health Care System after 30 years.

My career in nursing and the military has been highlighted by numerous awards and honors, including the Bronze Star for Meritorious Service in Vietnam. In March 1997, after 31 years of dedicated service to America I was retired with full military privileges.

My autobiography with Chris Fisher, SERVING IN SILENCE, was recognized by the National Education Association and was named Outstanding Book on the subject of Human Rights in North America. A made-for-television movie of the same name starring Glenn Close as Colonel Cammermeyer, received three Emmy Awards and the prestigious Peabody Award.

In 1998, I accepted the challenge of running for Congress. I lost that race to the incumbent by a margin of 45% to 55%. Subsequently I got very involved in local politics and spent six years as Chair of the local Democratic Party.

In March 2004, my partner, Diane and I were married by a judge in Portland, Oregon. It was one of the most exciting experiences, after having been together for 15 years. The devastation was losing that "legitimacy" when the Supreme Court of Oregon ruled that the marriage "never took place". But we still had the certificate on the wall, and the grandkids were all there at our Episcopalian wedding and blessing. On July 23, 2007, we registered as Domestic Partners in the State of Washington and on December 9, 2012, same sex marriage was legalized in Washington.

After retiring and serving in local politics, I was looking for something new to focus my energy. In January 2006, I opened an Adult Family Home to provide skilled care to sick and ailing elderly. Nationally I was actively engaged in successfully overturning the Don't Ask, Don't Tell law which prohibited gays from serving in the military with dignity. In June 2010 I accepted an appointment to serve on the Defense Advisory Council of Women in the Services).

Adapted from her website at http://www.cammermeyer.com/