

Openly gay in the military: Katie Miller advocates for change

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In an emotionally, politically, and morally charged lecture, LGBT advocacy leader and former cadet Katie Miller presented "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Stories, The Politics, and the Path Forward" on March 14. Cosponsored by the Gay-Straight Alliance, the Union Board, the Political Science department, the Gender Studies department, the Chidsey Center, and the College Democrats, this stream-of-consciousness talk chronicled Miller's five-year journey from West Point to Yale.

Honest yet witty, Miller brought to campus a discussion of what it means to be LGBT in a military community, an academic setting, and a public environment, and how that dynamic has evolved in recent years.

Miller's commitment to repealing the United States' "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy, signed in 1993 to prohibit those in the military from being openly homosexual, is far from modest. Since resigning from West Point in 2010 and coming out publicly on the Rachel Maddow Show, she has won many awards, escorted Lady Gaga to the 2010 VMAs, and been featured on numerous political shows. Now a student at Yale, she also serves on the Board of Directors for OutServe, an association of actively-serving LGBT military personnel.

Yet she began her talk casually, using a conversational tone throughout the lecture to establish a sense of relatability between herself and the students at Davidson. She wanted students to view her as "a peer... someone who experiences life much in the same way as [they] do," saying, "What is it that I feel qualified to speak about? When I first left West Point I was just telling my story." The sense of narration carried throughout her presentation, as she emphasized herself as one voice within the political movement later used to repeal the DADT policy.

"She was definitely relatable but at the same time, she was a soldier. She had that mentality about her...she was hard working and independent," said Taylor Sorillo

'14.

After receiving a West Point pamphlet in the mail as a high school sophomore, Miller described how she knew instantly that she wanted to be just like the woman in uniform on the pamphlet, whom she called "a leader of character," and later learned was the brigade commander at West Point.

Before she was admitted to West Point, which she cited as her first feeling of absolute during this time, she realized she had a "slight hang-up," as she humorously said, involving a "barrage of failed relationships." Living in the Northwest Ohio culture of "Republican: do or die," she found it "funny how desperately we cling to the values we are brought up with."

But after her admittance to West Point, she experienced her "second feeling of absolute in the past six months" in her first kiss with another girl. "I was gay," she said, "and separately I wanted to go to West Point."

"Both of her greatest loves are ones I will never share; but we can certainly share the humanity of it," said Rahael Borchers '15.

Miller believed that her sexuality had no relation to her duty to her country, and remained closeted to her friends and family. "Some have called me naïve for this," she said. Yet Miller excitedly moved forward into her army life, leaving behind a girlfriend named Kristen whom she referred to as "Chris" at West Point.

At West Point, she was introduced to the cadet honor code, which she cited as similar to Davidson's own honor code, but for a while, she said, "I didn't think I was lying. I was just doing what the military was asking of me." It wasn't until the end of her freshmen year that she was forced to reevaluate, after a class roundtable discussion.

"A cadet said he disagreed with the DADT policy because it was against the Bible. Then a better friend of mine said he thought gays were going to hell. Next another stood up saying the thought of men having sex disgusted him...I was having a visceral reaction. All I wanted to do was stand up, throw the desk, and say, 'I'm right

here. This isn't some abstract concept... this is your battle buddy right here.' But I couldn't," said Miller. "I thought back to the reason I came to the academy, to the picture of that woman dignified and full of character...and I realized that wanting to become this woman would not be possible. I decided by junior year that either the policy needed to be gone or I would leave."

With this decision in mind, Miller began seriously researching the policy. She realized that "from that day onward I began to resent the way the military policy dictated my life. I hated this act of betrayal of being someone I was not. I finally learned that this was DADT."

Miller watched as former infantry officer Dan Choi, who would become a personal idol, came out and began to publicly challenge DADT. She discovered the hypocrisy of DADT, which she found was not only a waste of money, but also had a "disparate" impact on gender, race, and socioeconomic status, citing that black women in particular were targeted.

After an LGBT friend left, Miller realized that "her invisibility meant that [she] would remain invisible as well," unless she publicly came out, which she believed, "was [her] duty at that point." She started connecting with LGBT military groups, leaving letters to the media, and telling friends that she thought might be gay.

OutServe lined up interviews for her, and she finally agreed to a Skype interview with Rachel Maddow, as that was the only method of communication possible since she was unauthorized to conduct these interviews. Military members were not permitted to speak in uniform, yet Miller wore formal uniform the day of the interview, as she was asked by Maddow, "Katie Miller, tell us why you're leaving West Point." In response, Miller declared, "I'm gay and I'm coming out to the world." Two days later, Miller was discharged, although such procedures usually take two months.

Lady Gaga then invited Miller and three other former military officers who had been discharged to the VMAs, which generated much controversy as all of them illegally wore their uniforms to the ceremony. Mill-

er explained how, despite some support she received, her Facebook also filled with hate mail after the event, which was "a lot for a 20-year-old with no friends."

Despite the outpour of media attention that she's experienced, Miller emphasized her ordinariness, saying that "I was thrust into the spotlight very quickly. I had not completed my time at West Point and was gay. This was publicized and celebrated to an extent and I wasn't sure how I felt about it at that time."

Showing the audience a picture of her relatively bare Yale dorm room with a Titanmen Square poster in the background, she described her celebration of the final DADT repeal in September 2011. For Miller, the DADT was "pretty straightforward. Others [opposing] are holding on to old prejudices."

"I definitely think that her coming here is good for the campus in the sense that it allows other students to know that it's okay to be who you are, and if you are in a situation or in an environment that does that accept who you are, that you have to speak out to advocate for yourself and others who are like you," said Justin Prescott Warren '14.

Miller ended her talk by advising students "not to be afraid to be involved in GSA if [they] are straight." Along with Miller's talk, GSA encouraged lecture attendees to vote in May against Amendment 1, North Carolina's added ban to the state constitution defining marriage in the state as between one man and one woman. Miller joked about her life at Yale, saying, "I was immediately mobbed a little by people with less than genuine intent...but my dating life's great."

Miller is re-applying to return to the military now, and noted that while the military isn't culturally gay-friendly quite yet, there's a long road ahead. "I see a lot in politics - everything's reactionary these days," said Miller.

"I admire Katie as an example of uninhibited integrity. She loved her country more than her individual relationships, and I would hope that our country can love her back in the same way," said Rahael Borch-

Playwright's visit brings high hopes for "In the Blood" performance

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"Unafraid to question current practices in our society and to show the ugly side of people."

This is how cast member Lori Pitts '12 describes Suzan-Lori Parks' critically acclaimed modern tragedy "In the Blood," which the Davidson College Department of Theatre will shortly stage at Duke Family Performance Hall.

On Tuesday April 3rd, Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Parks will give two free lectures about the play and her other works. Before her visit, at five performances from Wednesday March 28th through Sunday April 1st, a cast of six and Director Ann Marie Costa will challenge the audience in an intimate exploration of how race, poverty, sexuality, and gender stereotypes intersect in the protagonist, Hester La Negrita.

Christa Johnson '12 plays Hester, a single, homeless, illiterate, and poverty-stricken African-American woman struggling to support her five illegitimate children. While the play draws upon themes of classical trag-

edy and American literature, most clearly Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it uses this familiar base to invert the audience's expectations.

Johnson calls Hester a combination of optimistic perseverance and pessimistic awareness. Only by sacrificing her honor and personal integrity, particularly through her sexual identity, does Hester see a path to move her children out of urban poverty. Her children, however, are hardly angelic inspirations to their mother.

Pitts, who plays Bully, one of the children, explains the family dynamic as a potent mixture of devotion and resentment. The question of whether the children are a

treasure or a hindrance is one with which Hester struggles to resolve throughout the play. However well-intentioned and driven her efforts, she fails to resolve this question

and achieve economic security. Fighting against the judgment of the community, she ultimately snaps when her family unit is penetrated by those judgments.

Homelessness and poverty set the tone of the play, underlining Hester's desperation, sense of helplessness, and sense of alienation from the traditional pathways to the American dream.

The issue of accurately representing the struggles of the homeless engaged cast members in research into the day-to-day experiences of poverty.

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By participating in Room at the Inn, an E.P.I.C. program which hosts homeless individuals from Charlotte at Davidson College Presbyterian Church once a week in the winter months, they were able to put a face to the struggle in the same way that they hope to do for the audience.

Johnson describes the connection she developed with one family in particular as essential to nuancing how she represents love amidst such hardship: "I just saw so much love and connection in this family. It truly helped me to understand... I didn't want to be "pretending" to be homeless [or]... to make a caricature of homelessness." There will be no caricatures onstage, only a challenge to, in Pitts' words, "take a look at ourselves and our own contribution" to the quest for social justice.

General admission for "In the Blood" is \$15, seniors \$11, faculty and staff \$9, students \$6.

There will be five performances, March 28-29 at 7:30 pm, March 30-31 at 8:00 pm, and April 1 at 6:30 pm, and tickets are available at the Union Ticket Office or by calling 704-894-2135.