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U. of U. forum: Gay service members say 'Don't Ask' asks too much

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Sarah Hjalmarson has grown adept at what she calls "the pronoun game."

In deference to the military's 16-year-old "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which bans gay members from discussing their sexual orientation while serving, the Army medic and Afghanistan war veteran has done her best to dodge questions about her lesbian partner.

"I'd never refer to her as 'her' -- it was always, 'my fiance' -- never really denying but never totally lying," Hjalmarson said.

But the University of Utah senior is tired of pretending.

Hjalmarson was one of four veterans who spoke about the Pentagon's policy at a Wednesday forum at the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics. Afterwards, the 27-year-old said she recognizes that public affirmation of her sexual orientation could cause trouble for her if she's called back into service, as many medics in the Army's Individual Ready Reserve have been in recent years. And that could trigger an other-than-honorable discharge and loss of her educational benefits.

But Hjalmarson said she has been inspired by Dan Choi, a West Point graduate and Iraq War veteran who is being processed for discharge after coming out of the closet on national television. Choi, who also sat on the Hinckley panel, has called on other West Pointers to come out, as well.

"Listening to him speak has really prepared me for this," Hjalmarson said.

Choi and Hjalmarson were joined on the panel by actor and gay rights activist Jeff Key, who served in the Iraq War, and Utah Pride Center Director Valerie Larabee, a former Air Force officer.

The policy was thought by some to be a bridge to open the service for gay members when it began under then-President Bill Clinton. But all the panel members agreed it instead forces them to serve in silence and has resulted in the loss of valuable military talent at a time of war. Choi, for instance, was an Arabic linguist.

Moderator Ken Verdonia, of KUED-TV, said representatives of the military declined to participate in the forum.

But one supporter of the policy summarized the opposition to lifting the ban while debating Choi during a taping of CNN's Anderson Cooper 360 on Tuesday night. Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness -- which also opposes the use of women soldiers in combat -- said lifting the ban "would be tantamount to saying that military men would be living with military women constantly with little or no privacy in conditions that the law describes as 'forced intimacy.' "

Choi scoffed at that contention on CNN -- complaining that Donnelly was confusing gender and sexual orientation -- and fellow panelists seconded that notion Wednesday.

Key said the Marines he served with knew he was gay and didn't care, so long as he was fighting alongside them. (One former comrade told *The Salt Lake Tribune* in 2008 that Key was "an outstanding Marine. He pulled his own weight. That was the bottom line.")

Hjalmarson joked that even though she kept her sexual orientation to herself, most people knew. "I mean, look at me," the short, spiky-haired woman laughed, gesturing at her khaki pants and men's style, striped collared shirt. "Everybody knew. They assumed -- but they assumed correctly."

And when they came to her for medical care in Afghanistan, Hjalmarson said, it didn't matter.

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