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First year without 'Don't ask, don't tell' proves uneventful

By Jennifer McDermott

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Cadets report little reaction to revelations about sexuality

After the "don't ask, don't tell" law was repealed one year ago today, John Mack told his classmates at the Coast Guard Academy that he is gay.

His revelation was met with a collective shrug.

"You don't have to worry about the rumor mill spreading it if you don't want it to get out," he said. "No one really cares."

Adm. Robert J. Papp Jr., the commandant of the Coast Guard, said the first year was so uneventful that he spends no time even thinking about the change.

That contrasts with the integration of women into the service academies. After the ban was lifted and women were admitted in 1976, the transition was rocky and female cadets struggled to be accepted.

It was a "fairly big event" to allow women into the Coast Guard Academy in New London and make accommodations for them, said Rear Adm. Sandra L. Stosz, the superintendent of the academy, who graduated in the third class to include women.

"It's a great sign of progress within the Coast Guard, the military and society that we've carried it forward and continued the expansion of freedoms and equal treatment to now, where we have another big event, and it was seamless," she said.

Stosz has been in the public spotlight as the first female superintendent of any of the service academies. Holli Bastinck is the academy's first openly gay regimental commander, but she makes the news instead for her softball skills.

"I'm on the softball team, I'm Spectrum co-president, so it's another thing to add to the list," she said.

Bastinck and Mack, both senior cadets, lead the Spectrum Diversity Council, the academy's gay-straight alliance. After officially forming in December as the first alliance of its kind at a U.S. military academy, the cadets got organized. This school year they are planning events and attending conferences. The membership has doubled to 100.

Mack said the repeal made a big difference in his life because otherwise he would have left the academy. But sometimes he wonders whether the entire student body even realizes things are different.

"We're all so busy with sports and academics, and it came and went," Bastinck said.

"There was no fire and brimstone," added Mack, who explained that even if cadets don't agree because of personal or religious reasons, they're respectful.

Homosexuality was the "elephant in the room," Antonio Farias, the academy's chief diversity officer, said when he used to speak to students about diversity and the value of difference. He said the repeal allows people to talk openly about what it means to be gay, what it means to be straight and what it means to work together.

"It gives us the opportunity to grow," he said. "If we're not challenging them to think, we're not developing critical thinkers, we're just developing automatons."

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Papp said he always thought the academy would be one of the easier places within the Coast Guard to implement the change because the cadets grew up as society was becoming more open and understanding.

Outside of the academy gates, in the fleet, it has also been "remarkably quiet - I mean really remarkably quiet," Papp said. The other service chiefs have not experienced any significant problems either, he added.

Everyone in the Coast Guard received training before the repeal, and Papp said he met with those who left the service because they had to lie about their sexual orientation as well as retirees who spent a career hiding theirs.

"They said, 'All we want to do is to be able to serve. We don't want to make a big deal out of it. We just want to be considered equal to everyone else,'" he said in an interview this month. "And from my experience so far, that's exactly the way it has been. It's almost like it has been a non-event."

There most likely won't be any huge celebrations or ceremonies for the anniversary, Papp said. "We just want to simply let them serve, like anyone else."

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