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At Montclair State, Iraq veteran speaks out against 'Don't ask don't tell'

Last year, Feb. 7 took on new significance at Montclair State University when a note that said "fags will die on 2/7" was found on the door of a women's bathroom there.

Daniel Choi, a former U.S. Army lieutenant who served as a translator in Iraq, speaks to a class of Montclair State University students about revealing himself as gay to the Army.

As a result, the university dubbed that date a "Day of Unity" and students rallied against discrimination. This year, they held their second annual Day of Unity, during which Daniel Choi, a former lieutenant in the U.S. Army Infantry, who is now a gay rights advocate, spoke about his experience being gay in the military.

He told students last Thursday night that even though the military instituted a "Don't ask, don't tell policy," they never instituted a "no discrimination policy."

Choi explained that military commanders had to know who to notify in the event of a soldier's death and who to give a death benefit to, something that presented a problem if a gay soldier had a significant other.

Still, initially he went along with the military's policy toward gays.

"I never felt I was a victim of don't ask, don't tell," he said. "I felt I was entirely complicit."

However, when Choi met his partner that changed. On the phone he would call his boyfriend "Martha" to hide the fact that he was speaking to another man. And he feared it would force him to lie in other ways if prompted to speak about his love life.

So he revealed his sexual orientation, and the military launched an investigation.

"I had an investigation. It was a pretty quick investigation because I came out on TV," Choi said. He later added, "I was found guilty, but I don't have an ounce of guilt."

Choi, who worked as a translator fluent in Arabic, sees the military's loss as greater than his.

"It isn't about the soldier being a victim, or crawling in a hurt ball at night," he said. "It is about the unit being the victim."

He also said that "Don't ask, don't tell" violates free speech because identity speech is a type of speech that is be allowed under the constitution.

And he approves of MSU students' reaction to last year's bias incidents on campus – creating the Day of Unity.

"The unity as a solution, rather than wallowing in some kind of blaming. ... They chose the better route."

Karen Pennington, vice president for student development and campus life, said that this year's Day of Unity was well received. Choi's words were also fitting, in her view.

"It fit in perfectly. (It conveyed) a message of inclusion a message of empowerment of students taking charge of there destinies and understanding that were all together in this and that if were not all free none of us are free essentially," Pennington said.

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