

Eric Alva: Courage Under Fire  
by Jean Albright  
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Former Marine Staff Sgt. Eric Alva, along with Rochelle Crump, former Assistant Director of Veterans Affairs for the State of Illinois, will speak at the American Veterans for Equal Rights ( LGBT Veterans ) Veterans Day Dinner, Sun., Nov. 11, 5:30-9 p.m. at the Center on Halsted.

Alva was following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather when he joined the Marines at the age of 19. He had been a Marine for 13 years and was serving in Bagdad when—on March 21, 2003, the first day of Operation Iraqi Freedom—his right foot found a land mine next to his Humvee. One arm was shattered, and one leg was destroyed. Alva became the first casualty of the Iraq War.

On his return to the states and during the early days of his recovery, he was visited by and photographed with Donald Rumsfeld and other dignitaries. He was awarded a Purple Heart by the president. As he adapted to the loss of his leg and returned to health, he began public speaking on both military service and sports participation for the disabled. He appeared in and on everything from the Oprah Winfrey Show to People Magazine to the Runner Triathlete News.

In late 2006, he began to look for opportunities to support another group of which he had been a member—gays in the military. Although he was out and honest with many Marine friends, he said his gay identification had not figured as a primary consideration while he was serving.

“As a Marine, I was all about the work,” he said. “If I ever decided to try to meet someone of the same sex for a relationship, I knew that would have to come later in my life.”

But, while still in the spotlight as the first injured Marine of the conflict, it bothered him that under the military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy an average of two servicemembers a day, many of whom have key skills, were being discharged and that those facts are not widely understood.

In 2006, Alva’s partner, Darrell Parsons, was already involved with the Human Rights Campaign ( HRC ) and suggested that Alva offer his services to the organization.

“We were interested in the civil rights work and I sent an email asking if there was anything I could do. I assumed that it would be something like running a pride booth. After they’d looked into my credentials, they saw what the opportunity was and asked for a meeting.”

He has since traveled widely for speaking engagements and local and national media appearances. He was featured on the Legacy of Service Tour and spoke at the February reintroduction to the House of Representatives of the Military Readiness Enhancement Act.

In March, when Gen. Peter Pace, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ( JCS ) , said that he supported Don't Ask, Don't Tell based on his own beliefs that homosexual acts "are immoral," Alva was a prime candidate to respond.

These remarks by the chairman of the JCS, "...were disrespectful and insulting to the thousands of men and women who are serving in the military at this current time under the policy," he told CNN's Paula Zahn.

As he has gone on to educate the public on the ramifications of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Alva said that few questions from the audience surprise him now but some do lead him to spend his time at home on research and getting deeper into related topics.

"You can tell by audience reaction that it is necessary, that it is news to them, by their eyes, their body language." he said. "It has been a blessing to survive the war and now to do this work, helping spread the word about what Don't Ask, Don't Tell really means in the lives of those affected by it."

Some of those questions concern the future of the policy.

"As I watch the debates, and hear support from the Democratic candidates for overturning Don't Ask, Don't Tell—and none from the Republican ones—I'm looking for the next Commander in Chief, " he said. "Can they say, 'I support the troops, but, wait, no, if you are not straight, you cannot hope for the same things in life'?"

"I've earned their thanks for my service, but how far does that go? This limitation shows that we still accept discrimination. We're attempting to be a model country for the rest of world, and gays serve openly and well in other countries. How much longer are we going to be hypocritical?"

Tickets to the Nov. 11 event are \$40, which covers cocktails and dinner. For info or reservations, call Jim Darby at 773-752-0058.