

Student organization, veterans address military discrimination at event



Dwayne Carl and David Lyons spoke about their struggles serving in the military as gay men. (Jintak Han/Daily Bruin)

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BY CATHERINE LIBERTY FELICIANO

She rose from her crouched position to the sound of “Hallelujah” with sharp, erratic movements that flowed into one another.

Using music to guide her dance, Tiffanie Chow shared her story of being raped when she was 13 years old.

For years, Chow, a UCLA alumna, said she has choreographed dances that told the story of her rape and taught them to others who had no idea what she was trying to communicate or what it meant to her.

Chow’s performance, multiple speeches, art and other performances were part of Operation Mend Undergraduate Association’s event Wednesday night called Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: Invisible Wounds. The program addressed mental health, sexual violence and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender discrimination in the military and how they intersect in the combat zone and may affect veterans after they leave it, she added.

Operation Mend is a UCLA-based organization that provides veterans who suffer from severe facial or other injuries with reconstructive plastic surgery. The event was named to mirror the repealed “don’t ask, don’t tell” military policy, which used to require LGBT service members to hide their sexual identities or be discharged.

To a crowd of about 80 UCLA students at the event, former Air Force serviceman Dwayne Carl spoke about the struggles he faced working in the military as a gay man and about his battle with AIDS. He said six months before being honorably discharged in 1989, he was drugged and raped.

Several years after being discharged, Carl said he was dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder because of his service and his rape. Despite these challenges, however, he said he reintegrated into civilian life successfully.

Carl said he did not know he had HIV for more than a decade and had avoided getting tested for HIV because of the fear and stigma he said surrounds AIDS. It wasn't until he suddenly became ill that doctors diagnosed him with AIDS.

He said he felt alone and abandoned by friends who turned their backs on him because of their fear of AIDS and family members who stopped talking to him because of their disapproval of his sexual orientation.

Inspired by Carl's story, Chow said she chose to convey her own narrative through dance at the event because the words to describe her experience eluded her.

Riana Cerceo, a fourth-year human biology and society student and medical education chair of Operation Mend Undergraduate Association, said she thinks hearing Carl's story helped student performers relate his experience to their own and express their personal struggles through art.

David Lyons, a UCLA medical student who served in the Navy for five years, also spoke in the program and said he thinks the policy essentially told LGBT service members that there was something wrong with them. Because he identifies as gay, he said he felt forced to hide his identity.

Showing his wedding video in between performances, Lyons said because of his ability to accept himself and slowly trust others to accept him as well, he is now living the life he never thought he'd have.

Other student performances Wednesday included three songs adapted by a capella group AweChords, a piano-violin duet, a spoken-word piece and an interpretative dance.

Tsu-Shuan Wu, a third-year psychobiology student who attended the event, said she thinks the performances made the issues they addressed more relatable.

"I really do believe awareness is the beginning of everything. Once you're aware, you start to care," said Huy Nguyen, Operation Mend Undergraduate Association's head coordinator and a third-year microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics student.

Chow said she thinks her openness in the performance was another step in overcoming the silence she had learned to live with after she was raped. Many of her friends in the audience did not know what had happened until she told her story before performing, she added.

"(Dance) stresses a lot of things I can't say," Chow said. "Saying I was raped is a huge understatement."