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9 February 2016

Dear Mr. May:

I am an active duty member of our proud military. I am not signing this note because while Starr is now retired, he has many friends in positions of command. What he tolerated and if I may say, encouraged, while base commander is a disgrace. You are Air Force. You understand this. I wanted you to know this. I have backed up my comments with several pieces of information for your review.

Thank you

A Christian American

Michael Bob Starr and LGBT Groups at Dyess Air Force Base

Michael Bob Starr reportedly created an “atmosphere of acceptance” for lesbian and gay Airmen at Dyess Air Force Base. The Pride Alliance - a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender support group at Dyess – had a coffee and shaved ice stall at the Big Country AirFest. In an *Abilene Reporter-News* article, the group discussed their goals, telling the paper they had their “sights set on educating Dyess personnel on LGBT issues” (Timothy Chipp, “AirFest: Local groups use refreshments sales to support base morale,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, 05/03/2015). The group also said that Col. Starr had created an atmosphere of acceptance on the base:

“We’re the first LGBT support group on Dyess. The atmosphere of acceptance, from Col. (Michael Bob) Starr to the new Airmen Basics has been great. They’ve put an emphasis on changing. You can see with us out here, we’re here because we have the support to be out here” (Timothy Chipp, “AirFest: Local groups use refreshments sales to support base morale,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, 05/03/2015)

In 2011, the Obama Administration ended the ban on gays and lesbians openly serving in the military. At the time, there were some questions about how the military would adapt to the change in policy (David Cloud, “Obama ending ban on gays serving in the military,” *Los Angeles Times*, 07/23/2011). Under Col. Starr’s leadership at Dyess Air Force Base, the base appeared to be promoting a “culture of acceptance” (Autumn Velez, “Progression, acceptance and our LGBT Airmen,” *Air Force News*, 07/01/2014).

Progression, acceptance and our LGBT Airmen

by Airman 1st Class Autumn Velez
7th Bomb Wing Public Affairs

7/1/2014 - **DYESS AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** - Diversity - it's what makes up the ranks of the United States Air Force. Between women serving side by side with men, to having Airmen from every ethnic background, the Air Force has a culture of acceptance.

In 2011, the Department of Defense repealed Don't Ask Don't Tell, followed by the first annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender pride observance month in 2013. For many, this meant they could openly serve without facing repercussions; for others, it was the beginning of self-acceptance.

For the LGBT community, June is a celebration of the achievements of those Airmen who have a different sexual orientation. By celebrating this month, it shows not only peers support this aspect of their lives, but it also encourages the decision of those Airmen to come out and serve their country in their full capacity, while still being true to themselves.

Chief Master Sgt. Pamela Rathers, 7th Logistics Readiness Squadron chief enlisted manager, felt LGBT Pride month was the perfect opportunity for her to come forward and tell her story. Before now, many people did not know Rathers is also a lesbian.

"As a chief master sergeant in the Air Force, I hold a very distinctive role and a responsibility to lead from the front," Chief Rathers said. "I've sat in silence too long and our leaders have fought too hard to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell. As a lesbian, I could not sit back and not support this opportunity to celebrate and recognize the importance of diversity in our Air Force."

Chief Rathers served much of her career during the Don't Ask, Don't Tell era, where she was forced to hide her private life. For her, serving in the Air Force had always been about the second core value, service before self.

"As I watched many great Airmen separate or retire from the Air Force because they could no longer compromise the core value of integrity first, I chose to display another core value, service before self, and continue to serve my country," the chief said. "My commitment and patriotism were much bigger than myself."

Even though Chief Rathers is a lesbian, her ability to achieve the rank of chief master sergeant was not hindered.

"I was treated no different as I progressed through the ranks and achieved my goal of being in the top one percent of the Air Force," she said.

Like the chief, 1st Lt. Daniel Klimkowski, 7th Logistics Readiness Squadron operations compliance flight commander, is also part of the LGBT community.

"With the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, I started to do some soul searching and realized what always felt off in my life. I was not a heterosexual man, I was a homosexual man," Lieutenant Klimkowski said.

Lieutenant Klimkowski continues to strive for the best results regardless of his sexual orientation.

"Me being an openly gay man has zero effect on how well I can accomplish the mission," he said.

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender does not affect the Air Force mission.



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Joseph Kay, 7th Force Support Squadron, wears a shirt that shows his support during Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) month June 18, 2014, on Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. June highlights the achievements of those in the LGBT community serving in the military. (U.S. Air Force photo Airman 1st Class Kylee Wisseman/Released)

"I have never tried to hide anything about my sexuality. I've had zero issues and no one has confronted me," Lieutenant Klimkowski said. "That alone goes to show it isn't as big of a deal as everyone on both sides of the thought process make it out to be."

At the end of the day, it is about a culture of acceptance in the Air Force that makes it possible to accomplish the mission each and every day.

"It's important to remain accepting of people's decisions and choices we know we will never understand," Lieutenant Klimkowski said. "Everyone is trying to be the happiest person possible by creating the best lives for themselves."

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AirFest: Local groups use refreshments sales to support base morale

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Article Text:

While visitors to Dyess Air Force Base Sunday took in the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the Big Country AirFest, the many clubs and organizations manned by local military personnel were reaping some of the rewards.

Take, for instance, the Pride Alliance, a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender — along with their straight supporters — manned a popular coffee and shaved ice stall.

Or there's the Phoenix Rising Council, a morale group helping the 7th Operational Support Squad stationed on the base, selling nachos and drinks — or branded trinkets like Texas-shaped cutting boards or stickers — to interested shoppers.

The money raised, these groups almost unanimously agreed, is going to help raise morale among the troops stationed at Dyess. It's necessary, said Tech Sergeant Matthew Nethken of the Phoenix Rising Council.

"I've been to many different bases and served in a few squadrons," he said. "With the few squadrons I've been a part of with no morale support, the people do the work but it's like there's no spirit. With this, it's like we can get out of the office and have a little fun. There's no uniforms, no structure. So when we are back in uniform and we see a commanding officer, we may be like 'Hey, I like you. Let me help you with that.' It improves efficiency."

Like the Phoenix Rising Council, the Pride Alliance's coffee and ice shop is dedicated to raising money to assist the group in the future. Through community service projects, Senior Airman James Rogers said, the Pride Alliance is constantly involved across Dyess and occasionally in the Abilene community as a whole.

But money from their sales of coffee and shaved ice had a different destination, Rogers said. They're planning to hold a competitive 5K race on base in honor of the Department of Defense's declaration of June as LGBT Pride Month, he said. Civilians may get to participate, if the plan is approved by base higher-ups.

Aside from organizing the run, the group also sets its sights on educating Dyess personnel on LGBT issues and forming a network of people capable of providing support, Rogers said.

"We're the first LGBT support group on Dyess," he said. "The atmosphere of acceptance, from Col. **(Michael Bob) Starr** to the new Airmen Basics has been great. They've put an emphasis on changing. You can see with us out here, we're here because we have the support to be out here."

Caption:

Ronald W. Erdrich/Reporter-News Raymond Norris, a Technical Sgt. with the 7th Operations Support Squadron, pours chicken broth over the chicken already on the grill to keep it moist Sunday, May 3, 2015 during the Big Country Airfest at Dyess Air Force Base. Proceeds from the Philly Cheesesteak concession they operated during the weekend's air show went back to the squadron.

Ronald W. Erdrich/Reporter-News An airman with the Air Force's Thunderbirds flight demonstration team polishes a wing as a B-17 Stratofortress taxis on the runway behind him Sunday, May 3, 2015. The second day of the Big Country Airfest featured a repeat of the T-birds performance the day before, plus a flyover of the B2 Stealth Bomber.

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