

Coming Out and Coming Alive in the Fight for Social Justice

As the daughter of a famous World War II submariner and later admiral, for Wesley Palms resident Beth Coye the Navy was a powerful career draw. She joined up in the 1960s—a time when opportunities for women in uniform were limited.



“I graduated top of my class in an otherwise all male postgraduate program, but was denied my top assignment choices,” Beth said. Rather than letting her experience discourage her, however, Beth chose to focus on championing women’s rights. “I always come back to my favorite quote, from Howard Thurman, who said, ‘Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.’”

A natural leader, she brought together a group of women to highlight the issues they were encountering. “I love working with other people to affect change,” she said. In the 1970s, Beth headed a comprehensive study on women in the Navy that led to expanded women’s access and roles. Her recommendations contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of both officer and enlisted women today—15% active duty (18% including reserves) compared to just 2% when she joined.

Although her work to foster a more inclusive environment for women in the Navy is a point of pride, it was her experience as a lesbian serving her country that shaped Beth’s later activism. When she was on the cusp of making captain, she was forced to make a difficult decision. “Making captain was a lifelong dream of mine,” Beth said, “but after 21 years of service I chose to leave the Navy early for being forced to compromise my integrity.” As a commanding officer, she was having to discharge gay and lesbian enlisted personnel while living as a closeted lesbian herself. “I felt I had no choice,” Beth said. “To maintain my integrity and sanity, I needed to say goodbye to a professional relationship with the United States Navy. It was the only way I could live my truth.”

After working as a professor and lecturer at Mesa College and then San Diego State and the University of San Diego for many years as well as penning her creative memoir, Beth received a critical call that would once again make her “come alive.” She learned that a Navy captain who had also served for years as a closeted lesbian had chosen to retire. Inspired, she joined the fight to repeal “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” a policy that prohibited gays, lesbians and bisexuals from serving openly in the US military. “We got the people behind us, the newspapers behind us, and the courts behind us,” she said. “Communication is how you change the world.”



As part of the prominent Service Members Legal Defense Network (SLDN), an activist group of retired and former gay and lesbian veterans, she spent time talking to and educating the Congress. To engage policymakers, Beth edited and distributed *We Are Family Too*, a revelatory book of letters written by gay and lesbian veterans. With help from friends, she worked tirelessly to distribute the book from the Pentagon to the White House. “United by courage, strength, determination and respect for our country, we were able to deliver this important package to a broad coalition of stakeholders.” That steadfast determination by Beth and other veterans led to the eventual repeal of the discriminatory legislation, which saw approximately 13,000 service members discharged between 1993 and 2010. Finally, gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans could serve openly in their military.

As a proven community builder, it’s no surprise that Beth has quickly taken on a leadership role at Wesley Palms. As president of the resident-led Wesley Palms Club, she has helped the organization make great strides in defining its bylaws and responsibilities. Being surrounded by intellectually curious and like-minded community members keeps her inspired to continue making a difference. After all, she said, “I’ve always believed that activists are people who need people.”

So, what advice does Beth have for the next generation of change-makers? “Find your passion. Talk to others who have the same fire in their belly. Then get out there and fight. We can all do something.”

About Wesley Palms

Wesley Palms is an award-winning San Diego retirement community that features a modern take on senior living. These retirement homes in San Diego can be found on 35-acres of parkland overlooking scenic Mission Bay and the Pacific Ocean.