

## QueerSpace Episode 3 - Becoming Light

*Music in then under*

**Sofia:** Hello! And welcome to QueerSpace, a project from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, from the people who usually bring you AirSpace.

I'm Sofia from the National Air and Space Museum and my pronouns are she/her

**Erin:** And I'm Erin from the Story Collider and my pronouns are she/they.

QueerSpace features people and stories that have been historically and intentionally ignored at the intersection of aviation, space, and queer history and culture.

*Music fades under slowly*

**Sofia:** Today we're bringing you a story from the military side of aviation and space.

Historically the United States military has been hostile to queer-identifying folks. Over the last 30 years there have been attempts to be more inclusive, with mixed results.

It took until 2011 for gay, lesbian and bisexual service members to be able to serve openly and it's only been in the last few years that Trans service members have been able to serve at all.

**Erin:** Last year the Air Force and Space Force formed a working group specifically for LGBTQ+ issues. The LGBTQ Initiative Team or LIT is meant to provide support, and visibility, and to impact policy at the branch level.

Sofia, you spoke to the director of LIT, tell us a little about the interview

**Sofia:** Honestly it was fascinating to hear about her own experience throughout her career and then leading this organization, this project. And also just shocking to hear how slow things work in general but it's cool to hear they're making progress.

**Erin:** Well I'm intrigued, let's dive in

*Music button*

**Sofia (from interview):** I know a little bit about you, but for all our listeners, if you wouldn't mind getting started, if you could introduce yourself and your name and your title and your

pronouns if you're comfortable sharing them and anything else that you think our listeners would like to know.

**Major General Leah Lauderback:** Oh sure! Of course, thank you, thanks for having me and for giving us some more exposure, I suppose, to the LIT, the LGBTQ Initiatives Team and what we're doing at the Air Force and the Space Force to make it a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

So my name is Leah Lauderback. I am a major general in the U.S. Air Force. And right now I am detailed over to the Space Force and help in the Space Force set up the service. I've been in the Air Force for 28, going on 29 years this year, and have loved just about every moment of it. You know, from a LGBTQ perspective, I came out in, or realized myself, I'll say that, in 1997. And then, of course, lived and worked under Don't Ask, Don't Tell for a number of years until 2011 and then have lived openly and the way that I want to live since that time in the military. And it's been really, for myself, it's been a great experience.

**S:** Thank you. That was a great summary. You've had a long and detailed trajectory. Happy almost 29th anniversary.

**MGLL:** *\*laughs* Thank you.

**S:** So you mentioned LIT, could you repeat what that stands for and tell us a little bit about what other kinds of initiatives are there like it?

**MGLL:** Sure. Absolutely. So the LIT stands for LGBTQ Initiatives Team and it is one of what we call the Department of the Air Force BAWGs or barrier analysis working groups. Of course, we're in the military, so I have to throw out a lot of acronyms for you. But the DAF BAWGs actually started to come about in 2008, so they've been around for a while. However, just in the last year, we were able to start the LIT and a couple of other teams as well.

And so these BAWGs, you should consider them really like grassroots efforts. It is the folks at a young level within our organization that are just seeing things that they want to change. So then we have champions as part of these working groups, and I happen to be one of the champions for the LIT where we hear their issues. We try to understand what is the problem towards, towards our readiness our force readiness. What is, you know, what is making this a non-inclusive or a barrier to getting the mission done? We can then work outside of the working group and we look to change policy throughout the Air Force or the Space Force. So somebody like myself as a champion at a higher rank, I'm able to really help out the group, get some inroads with other directorates within the headquarters of the services so that we can make some change.

**S:** Oh, that's fascinating. OK, so that leads into my next question a little bit. But I was wondering if, is the LIT meant to be almost like a community resource group? Is it meant to be specifically for recruitment? Or is it, does it actually affect policy?

**MGLL:** I'd say so, it's all three of those things. So when you think of a community resource group on, you know, from a civilian perspective, industry perspective, that type of thing, we do have, we call them employee resource groups. But the LGBTQ community has not actually had an employee resource group in the past. And so we do, we can, I will say that we're not tasked specifically to do that, but we can serve in that role, as well. As an example, we have a Facebook page which sounds pretty easy and it really is. But for a group such as LGBTQ who lived in secret for so many years in the military just to be able to have a Facebook group so that you can speak with one another, network with one another, I mean, that is just, it just allows them to understand that there are other people like them. And we've all been through some issues within our career and so we can share those lessons learned and and help each other in the future.

**S:** Yeah, absolutely. And a Facebook group is as nice for that visibility as well. I mean, you can literally see the numbers and the other names and little profile pictures, so it helps to feel like maybe you're a little less alone, even if it's on Facebook

**MGLL:** Yeah, absolutely. And then we, you know, we also have we have a few LOEs or lines of effort that we're working. So one of those would be education and awareness. And this is this group is just taking on, it's an education for our own community, but then it's an education for those external to our community. And so I'll bring out for an example, a success that we've had recently, and that was being able to add our pronouns into our signature email block, which in the industry is, you know, like, of course, everybody's been doing this for a long time, you know, I mean, there's no there's probably no rule out there, in industry that says you're not allowed to put pronouns in your signature block. And we didn't actually have that policy either in the service. However, in practice, people were, anecdotally, people were either afraid to put their pronouns in the in the signature block because we do have a policy that says, 'here's what you're allowed to put in' It didn't say that you couldn't put in your pronouns, but anyhow, what we wanted to do there was to was to educate leadership and then those folks that actually own that policy. And all we had to do was, you know, go through a few months of the education and then an agreement by the, by the lawyers, essentially, that OK, yes, that that is allowable and doable. And so in the Air Force, in the Space Force, just a couple of months ago, that's when we came out with a with a policy so that everybody is very clear. Yes, you can put your pronouns in your signature email block.

So that's probably our first and biggest success that we've had thus far as being the LIT. Though that does sounds, I mean, it sounds pretty simple and it kind of is. But it was the LIT has only been around for about a year now. So there are groups of these BAWGs that I had talked about before that have been around for 10 or 15 years. And so they've got a lot of practice in changing

some policies and communicating across the services. So from a LIT perspective, I'm really proud of the team, but we still are very new and still kind of feeling our way. If I could also want the next big one that we're going to start working is basing limitations. And so I'll just throw out this, this number is that there are 22 states where we have active duty Air Force or Space Force installations that do not prohibit discrimination against LGBT citizens, whether it's housing or employment or public accommodations. And so, well a lot of folks probably look at the list and they go, Well, we're just doing that for our transgender members because transgender members are now allowed to serve again. The issue is not just about our transgender members, it's about I want people to understand active duty heterosexual couples that have children or teenagers are going to have these issues. They already do have these issues and they don't know who to go to. They don't know, you know, if their teenager is struggling or does come out as transgender, then we want to help them. We want to ensure that those states, those cities, right, those communities that we, the military, has always been a part of. We just want to ensure that they understand the implications against our members. And so that's a big area. It's a big, it's going to be a study, essentially, and it's just started. This working group has just started. And it's not just like I said, it's not just about transgender or LGBTQ, but it's also about African-Americans within the service who have difficulties. And, you know, are racial disparity studies in the past have shown that there are some places that are less friendly, if you will. And so the diversity and inclusion office that's in the Air Force, under the Secretary of the Air Force level is actually going to start looking at that. So I'm really excited about that next project that's going to happen.

**S:** That sounds awesome, really impactful. I mean, the pronouns also sound really awesome and congratulations for getting that done. That's, I mean, I know it's small and I know it can be physically small in an email. But for something that wasn't even considered before, it does feel like it's a step. You know, it's a step forward. That's really heartening to hear that those are things that you're not only paying attention to, but actively working to to change. There's always more to be improved, right? Is there anything that we didn't cover?

**MGLL:** Two things, I think, one is the transgender policy. Essentially, when the new administration came in last January, they reverted back to the transgender policy of 2016. And that is, it's wonderful for our transgender community, but it is not completely adequate. And so I do want folks to know that we are still making changes to that transgender policy and our team is going to take a larger role in that. The LIT is going to take a larger role in that. But these are discussions that are held at the Department of Defense level, so higher than the Air Force or this or the, you know, the two services, the Air Force and the Space Force. So at the DOD level, we're going to, we're still having these communications and trying to work through what are some of those, some of those issues and lots of them are quite honestly medical issues. And this is really to my second point. The second thing that I wanted to suggest is that we still have a long way to go. I think from a medical, if it's policy and definitely practice, and that's not

just for our transgender community, but for the entire LGBTQ community. You know, there's just things, there's just old checklists, old policies that we have that make it difficult or are not inclusive of the force that we have today. And as a specific example, I've used this before, is that when one of our gay men wants to go get on preventative HIV medicine, we have a policy or a checklist that that they've got to fill out that makes them feel less than, you know, like subhuman. And so it's just not necessary, probably wasn't necessary in the first place. But if we want to treat folks with dignity and respect, those are the types of things that we've got to, you know, overcome. And so this grassroots effort that we have of the LIT, I think it's a perfect way for us to make that happen.

**S:** This is a really great conversation. Thank you so much.

**MGLL:** Yeah, sure. You bet. You bet. Yeah, no. Thanks for having me.

*Music up and under*

**Erin:** A big thank you to Major General Lauderback and her team at the Air Force and Space Force for setting up our interview and taking the time to speak with us.

**Sofia:** QueerSpace is brought to you by the people behind AirSpace at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It is produced by Katie Moyer, Jennifer Weingart, Nick Partridge, Amy Stamm and me, Sofia Soto Sugar. Mix by Tarek Fouda. QueerSpace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

Do you like personal stories about science? As told by the people who experienced them? Then you may like Erin's podcast, The Story Collider!

**Erin:** On The Story Collider podcast, we share true, personal stories about science, from scientists, journalists, comedians, and more. Some hilarious, some heartbreaking, and everything in between. Find it wherever you listen to QueerSpace.

**Sofia:** Thank you for listening! We'll have another episode of QueerSpace for you in two weeks. And new episodes of AirSpace will be back soon.

Did you know there's also a monthly AirSpace newsletter?! You can sign up through the link in the show notes. And follow us on Instagram and Twitter @airspacepod.

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