

Kristin Beck, transgender former Navy SEAL, delivers lecture at Alfred University

3/23/18



Kristin Beck (right) visits Thursday with Wayne Higby, director of the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum.

ALFRED, NY -- Kristin Beck has grappled her entire life with who she is. Born male but identifying as a female, she spent most of her 51 years struggling against others' expectations of how she should live.

"We are forced into labels, into bubbles, instead of taking the entire you and living the whole you. I've been struggling with that my whole life," she said during a lecture Thursday evening at Alfred University.

Beck, a 1989 Alfred graduate, was on campus Thursday to give a talk titled "Warrior Princess: A Lecture by Kristin Beck." The lecture is being offered as part of Queering Space collective, an art exhibition that examines where queerness meets form, which opened Feb. 2 and runs through March 28.

She spoke about her journey from growing up as Christopher Beck in small-town America, serving with distinction for two decades in the U.S. Navy, and finally coming out as transgender three years shy of her 50th birthday. Growing up in Western Pennsylvania and New York, Beck said she struggled with gender identity at a young age. It was a struggle that continued through adolescence and into adulthood.

"I had to crush everything down and put it away," she said. "I knew who I was and knew there was a problem. I looked at myself and was confused. I was afraid to connect with people so I isolated myself."

Beck said that made her a target for bullies, so she learned to fight back. If she saw others being bullied, she fought to stick up for them as well. She said that desire to defend others is a reason she eventually joined the military.

After graduating from Wellsville (NY) High School in 1984, Beck attended Virginia Military Institute from 1984-87, before enrolling at Alfred University, where she earned a BA degree in political science in 1989.

After college, Beck joined the U.S. Navy and attended SEAL school, graduating at the top of her class. She would serve 20 years with the SEALs, taking part in 13 deployments, including stints in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. She was a member of the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group, a special counter-terrorism unit popularly called SEAL Team Six, and received multiple military awards and decorations, including a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

Beck retired from the Navy in 2011 and began transitioning to a woman that year. In 2013, publicly came out as a transgender.

Looking back on her service, Beck thought of the differences – between American soldiers and the foreigners they

would encounter in battle – and realized they were minor, based mostly on appearance. “I saw people that looked different than me. Can you imagine walking down the street in America and seeing anyone that different? Yet that’s what causes all this hate among us, these minor differences.”

Those differences are what she struggles with as a transgender. She recalled a 2011 incident in Tampa, FL, when she was walking down the street, dressed in women’s clothing, and was assaulted by a group of four men. “That happens every week in America: someone like me getting beaten or killed. That’s what we need to stop. What we never do when we walk down the street is look out for the other human being. We just look for the differences,” she said.

Beck said as a transgender woman, she doesn’t want to be treated any differently than others; she just wants to be treated fairly. It’s a sentiment she tries to convey when she speaks to representatives in government, advocating for transgender rights.

“I go before Congress and tell people, you hear the words – transgender, gay, lesbian – those aren’t just words; they’re human beings. It’s not something that goes away. It’s me and I’m not going to change. I don’t want extra money and I don’t want my job to be easier; I just want to be treated like a human being.”

Beck has been an outspoken critic of President Trump’s decision to ban transgender people from openly serving in the military. She’s confident that the policy will change, as will other policies that discriminate.

“The truth is the truth and it’s never going to go away,” she said. “The truth will win out. The progress of humanity – being better to each other – will win out.”

Beck offered some advice to people who may be dealing with struggles similar to her own. First, she said, people should make an effort to treat others with kindness, the way they’d wish to be treated.

“On a daily basis, it may be something as simple as a smile, a handshake, or giving a compliment. It could save someone’s life. You can do this almost every single day,” she said. “That’s all I ask: be good to each other.”

She also said that people struggling to make the decision to come out, should look at themselves not at being confined to a closet, but rather as living in a “great room” filled with people and things that give them comfort.

“Invite your friends and family in; create a support system. Before you know it, those walls will be gone,” she said. “It’s hard sometimes. The highs are high and the lows are low. My support system evens it all out.”

The father of two sons from a previous marriage, Beck has remarried and lives on a 53-acre farm with her wife. Of her life she says, “It’s been a wild journey: lots of ups and downs and a lot of struggles. It took me a long time to get here and be at peace with myself.”