

ERA Speech

Mr. Chair and Members. My name is Dr. Kristy Janigo, and some of you have heard from me often this session speaking on behalf of veterans organizations. Today I am not here for them. I am here for myself, for my mom, all female veterans, and all Minnesotans.

In the early 1990s, when I was in middle school, my mom was an elementary principal at a rural school district in North Dakota. She was fired for being a “woman in a man’s world.” The school board held a type of hearing where they accused her of things like showing her slip during public appearances, as though she did that on purpose. My mom got a lawyer and sued the school district. She took it all the way to district court here in St. Paul, and she won a small settlement. After that, my family moved all the way across the state so my mom could get away. A woman in a man’s world.

I am third generation Army in my family. I served in the North Dakota Army National Guard for six years as a water treatment specialist, with some active service in 2003, and I left the military as a sergeant. Now veterans advocacy is my life. And there are veterans of every race, color, creed, gender, identity and orientation.

All six years of my military career were marked with regular, demeaning, and sometimes threatening sexual harassment starting from the very first day of basic training and continuing through my last annual training exercise. I had respect within my unit because my fellow soldiers knew me and the work that I was capable of. But each time I had a drill, training exercise, or a person from outside our unit with us, that was the source of the behavior. I was very young, a shy Christian girl from North Dakota. I didn't know how to fight back or shut down the behavior like I do now that I'm twice that age. And I knew that eventually sexual assault would happen to me. It was one of the reasons I did not re-enlist after completing my term of service. I wanted to enter civilian life a whole person. Sexual assault is particularly bad in the military community. While in the general population, the statistics are one in four women will experience a sexual assault at some point in their lives. In the military it is one in three. Appalling and unacceptable. A national security risk.

This is a veterans issue. It is NOT a partisan issue. In fact, my mom is a Republican. This is not a man's world. It is everybody's world. And America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. I ask you today to support this bill, to allow the people of Minnesota to add the Equal Rights Amendment to our state's constitution. I am a woman veteran. If I can honorably serve with the willingness to die for God and Country, then I think I've earned equal rights under the law.