

# EVELYN THOMAS

b. June 30, 1968

## U.S. MILITARY ACTIVIST

**Her protest focused national attention on the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.**

*"Character is not bought or earned; it is lived."*

Corporal Evelyn Thomas is a former marine and the founder of the Sanctuary Project for Veterans. As one of the "White House Six," she was arrested for chaining herself to the White House fence in peaceful protest over the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

Raised by a struggling single mother, Thomas often did her homework by candlelight when her mother couldn't pay the electric bill. She learned about the Civil Rights Movement and the philosophy of nonviolent resistance from her mother. Thomas came out to her when she was 17. Months later, in 1986, Thomas joined the National Guard with her mother's authorization. She was not yet old enough to enlist on her own. The National Guard transferred her to the Marine Corps to serve her five-year commitment.

Thomas was stationed at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California. She was outed by a fellow Marine who discovered a letter from her mother mentioning a woman Thomas was dating. The letter made its way to Thomas's commanding officer. Despite being a model cadet, she was laughed at, arrested by military police, and isolated. The Marines discharged her in 1991, under the national ban on gays and lesbians in the military.

Thomas subsequently enrolled in college. She earned her master's degree and found a job as a high school teacher.

In 1994 the Clinton administration instituted "Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT)," a policy permitting gays and lesbians to serve in the military if they kept their sexuality secret. A stop-gap compromise intended to end the official ban on LGBT servicemembers, it created problems of its own.

In 2009, after the murder of August Provost, an African-American Navy seaman who was suspected of being gay, Thomas became an activist. She established the Sanctuary Project for Veterans (SPV) to offer a refuge and confidential services for LGBTQ people serving "silently" under DADT.

In 2010 Thomas and five other military activists chained themselves to the White House fence to protest DADT and were arrested. Although civil disobedience was a difficult decision, Thomas felt strongly motivated, especially to protect women of color, who were disproportionately silenced and sexually coerced because of the policy.

Thomas's efforts, along with those of other activists, led to the abolishment of DADT in 2011. She was invited to witness President Obama signing the repeal. At the ceremony, she asked the president, "May I hug you on behalf of all the women of color impacted by DADT?" The two embraced.

Thomas is married. She is an openly gay educator who works to eliminate homophobia in schools.



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