A BATTLE WON FOR LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

MICHELLE DOUGLAS

Michelle Douglas is an LBGTQ Human Rights Activist. She served as an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces from 1986 to 1989. Despite an exemplary service record, Michelle was fired from the military in 1989 as part of the military's "LGBT Purge". She launched a landmark legal challenge against the military's discriminatory policies and her lawsuit resulted in the ending of Canada's formalized discriminatory policies against LGBT members of the military in 1992. She has been an active part of the movement to seek legal equality for the LGBTQ+ community for the past 30 years. Michelle currently serves as the Executive Director of a newly established organization, known as the LGBT Purge Fund, that administers a $15,000,000 fund that was established as part of the LGBT Purge Class Action lawsuit settlement.

Let me start by telling you a little bit about my personal story. In 1986, I joined the Canadian armed forces. I was so honoured to serve in the Canadian armed forces. I never saw myself becoming any kind of a soldier, but realized it was a huge pillar in my life's set of values. I thought it would work out as part of my general university education, which was pretty mediocre. As it turned out, the military was a really good fit for me. I thrived and excelled in an environment that was splendid and quite structured. It was just such an honour to be serving. At the same time that I was excelling in my training – indeed I was finishing as a top candidate in each course I took – I also had the very lovely, very human experience of falling in love for the first time.

I fell in love with a fellow officer in the military, and she was incredible. So, as I was going about my training, I kind of knew that the military had a policy towards homosexuals – a policy that was headed by the words "sexual abnormality." We tell people what the policy was in the mid-1980s regarding the service of LGBT people, because many still don't know. The policy stated if you are gay, you can stay in the military, but there are a few rules: you are to never get a promotion, never to get a pay raise, no more training, and no more posting. But please, "feel free to serve your country."

As I was learning about that policy and, having fallen in love at the same time with a person of the same sex, I was also trying to advance my career.

That's when things really started to get tricky. I was serving in a unit of the military police and part of their mandate was to investigate allegations of homosexuality. One day, my boss came to see me, and he said: we have to fly to Ottawa for an important investigation. You're to gather your things. We're going immediately. So, I got into the undercover K-car and headed for the Toronto airport with my boss, not really suspecting anything at that moment.



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However, just before getting to the airport, he turns into the hotel strip just before the airport. I then spent two days in a hotel room by the Toronto airport being interrogated about my sexual orientation. It was an interrogation that was conducted by two male military officers, and it was actually very devastating. It had a kind of life-scarring impact that was to come out later, one that other people have also experienced. After denying my identity to them in order to save my career, this interrogation session was followed up by subsequent interrogations – more hotel rooms and a police polygraph in another city. I finally told them I was in love with a woman, and that, pretty soon afterward, led to my being fired by the military.

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I was dismissed in 1989 by the Canadian Armed Forces, under the category of not being "advantageously employable" due to my homosexuality. The reason I shared with you how well I'd done in all my training courses is that this makes it quite obvious the kind of depth of sheer discrimination within the system at the time: it was codified. Systemic discrimination: it was codified, on the books. I was a young woman at this point, 23, 24 years old, not sure what to do. I did get the support of one Member of Parliament by the name of Svend Robinson, and I was able to hire a lawyer. In 1992, it

was my legal challenge against this discriminatory policy that ended Canada's so-called ban on gays in the Canadian Armed Forces.

So, that was a pretty historic outcome, and it's always important for me to say that, while we're still serving under that terrible policy, as part of the settlement of my case, all those people in the same situation had their ranks, their training restored, and as I like to say, their dignity restored. What I did not know was that I was not alone in the experience that I'd been through. I was a victim of what we now call the "LGBT purge." Between the 1950s until quite recently, we think 9,000 Canadians, people serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP, and the federal public service, experienced this kind of discrimination.

So, when I received some measure of justice from my lawsuit in 1992, there were literally thousands of people who had had no such justice. Many took their own lives, or went back into the closet, or were shamed and never had their potential fulfilled. They were humiliated because of their identity, but some other courageous activists took up the mantle, and by 2018 there was a large class-action lawsuit that was settled with the Canadian government. This brought some measure of justice to about 750 living people who finally got some remedy, some financial settlement, and some restoration of dignity for what they went through.

The other thing that's important is that Prime Minister Trudeau apologized in 2017 to the LGBTQ community for the systemic, state-sponsored discrimination against our communities. That was a really powerful moment, and I know some people say: "We give out so many apologies. Why do we do that?" You know, if you were an aggrieved person who felt there was never any way to get justice, an apology from the prime minister is a pretty powerful thing. There were also some very special things that came from the settlement of that lawsuit. One of them was the founding of the LGBT Purge Fund, which I now have the honour of leading. We're doing some really cool things now, and it is just a mark of the hopeful progress that Canada has made on the journey for equality for LGBT people.

We're building a national monument in Ottawa – the LGBTQ national monument – that's going to be inaugurated in 2024. And finally, as I'm wrapping up, I'll just let you know that we're also trying to tell our story, to tell you about the purge and let you know that thousands of your fellow citizens who went through this are still out there today, being courageous, still serving, and still being activists in striving for equality and being great allies with other communities along the path to justice.

LGBT Purge Fund