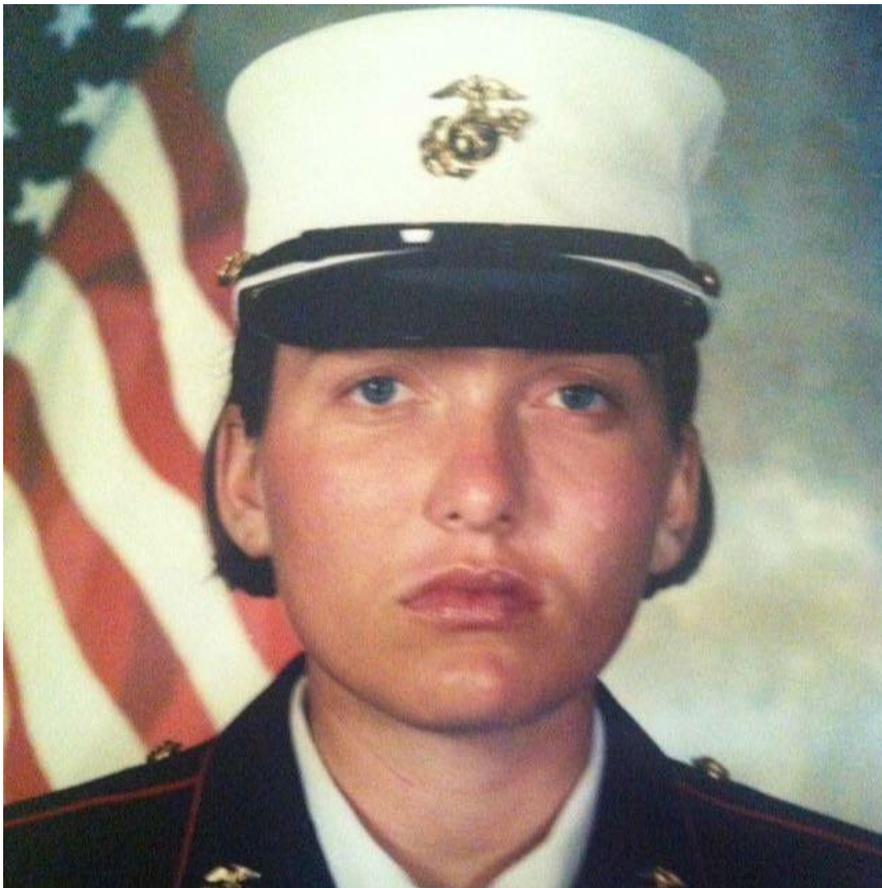




My Life My Story



Stina



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

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I was born in southern California in 1981. I moved with my mom to my grandparents' house in Dixon, California and after that, we moved to Dunnigan, which is in the greater Sacramento area. I was there from age five to fifteen. At fifteen, my family moved to Woodland, California where I attended high school.

A Marine Corps recruiter called, and after speaking with him, I decided I wanted to graduate early and get out of my parents' house. I actually had my recruiter at my eighteenth birthday party in January, which did not go over well with my family. I signed my paperwork; I was signed up for the MOS of Crash Fire Rescue.

I left for boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina in March 1999. It was the first time I had been on a plane. I was up there thinking, "What have I done?" It was a last-minute thought, "Did I make the wrong decision? Do I really want to do this?" My grandparents were going to send me to art school, and here I am doing this. I wanted to go into film, photography, and things like that. They bought me a camera for Christmas and were going to finance me going to San Francisco's Academy of Art, but I said, "I want to leave now."

Boot camp was really good in the beginning. I had run track in high school, and I had a black belt in karate; I was really fit. Then, I started feeling like I was in trouble all the time.

In boot camp, I started getting weaker, and I started falling behind. I couldn't do my pull ups, and I fell from the Alpha running group to the Charlie group. I was really slow and lethargic. I wasn't getting stronger like I should have been. Instead, I was getting weaker and weaker. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't think to tell anyone. I thought, "It's just me." I didn't think there was anything medically wrong. I just kept doing my thing, which caused me a lot of grief. They thought I was just being lazy, but I was literally getting weaker. I felt as if I couldn't catch a break.



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When we did the Crucible, I had to fall out because my hip gave out, and I couldn't take another step. They let me finish boot camp, and I graduated and got my Eagle, Globe, and Anchor; I was officially a Marine. It actually was the same day my high school was graduating.



I went home on leave and got recruiter duty, which was nice because I was still limping a lot. When I went to medical in boot camp, they didn't take any x-rays. They just said I probably had a stress fracture. "Here is some ibuprofen. Good luck."

On the 4th of July, I had to fly back to North Carolina and check in on the 5th. I ended up running into a bunch of other Marines that had to check in also. We were all going to hang out and party for the 4th of July. That was a terrible choice. I was assaulted by another Marine.

We checked in the next day at Camp Geiger for MCT. We were busy, and for the most part, they kept us segregated. During our Night Land Navigation training, while it was raining, my partner grabbed on to me and pulled me down into the bottom of an empty foxhole. My bad hip from boot camp was the same leg that took all the weight into the foxhole.

My company commander picked me up and carried me out of the foxhole. It hurt so bad; he had me piggy-back style and was jogging with me. I ended up going to the Physical Conditioning Platoon and tried to rehab; it was a down time for me mentally.



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I had time to think about what had happened; I hadn't reported the assault, but the environment didn't allow me to. I could have reported it, but it would have ended badly for me. You hear stories about other women who reported things and ruined their careers. Many years later, I did receive acknowledgement and compensation for the assault.

I'm the kind of person that has the mentality that once I start something, I will finish it. I had some bad things happen, but I still wanted to make the Marine Corps a career; that was my goal.

I went home on medical leave to heal my hip. I couldn't figure out why I was still so weak. My grandfather took me to Travis Air Force Base, and they ran a full blood panel and some x-rays. They found I had some degenerated disks and a thyroid problem. When I was at the rifle range in boot camp, I was working in the butts. Someone pulled the target down on my neck causing neck issues and migraines. The untreated thyroid problem was making me weak, and I got treated, which was helpful.

My Marine experience hadn't been great. I kept having stuff happen to me. It was all coming at me. I felt like the universe was saying, "You don't need to be here." I had given up. It was frustrating and heartbreaking. I didn't want to be there anymore. I had missed my MOS training, and I didn't feel safe, and I wasn't getting better.

My military stint was very short because of everything. In December 1999, I was honorably discharged under medical conditions and meritoriously promoted to E2.

In PCP (Physical Conditioning Platoon), I had met this guy. He got discharged before me and lived in Connecticut. He asked me to marry him and I said, "Yeah, nobody has ever asked me before, so let's do this." When I was discharged, I flew to Rhode Island and got a bus ticket to Connecticut.



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When I finally get into Waterbury, Connecticut at ten o'clock at night, his parents had to pick me up because he was at work and couldn't get me.

After work, he came to get me, and we went to his little apartment. I had never been in snow before, and all my clothes were for California. I was there until May; and I decided that I was going back to Woodland, California and asked if he was coming with me. We were there for about a year and then, we broke up. We never got married.

I stayed with my folks for a time. I tried working; but after I left the military, I went down a self-sabotaging path. I was self-medicating, which is probably why the relationship didn't work. We both got into drugs and alcohol. I had chronic migraines, and I could find jobs, but I struggled keeping them.

I wanted to keep going down the path I planned in the military. I went to the Solano College Fire Academy in Fairfield, California in 2002. I struggled, but I graduated. My health issues kept getting in the way. I am a certified firefighter, but I can't do anything with it.

I kept doing odd jobs, but my work history wasn't good. I tried going to school and had some of the same issues. My parents thought I was a screw-up, which was fair because I was screwing up. They just didn't dig any deeper to understand the why. I assumed, they thought they'd raised me better than that.

I was flailing a lot. I got into a bad marriage in 2003. I had my two babies, daughters, and started counseling. I was able to leave that marriage in 2009; it was a toxic relationship. He was a raging alcoholic; I had stopped partying because I had babies to raise.

I had to get myself together. I left with my kids and my dog – left everything behind and moved in with a girlfriend in Sacramento.



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Now, what do I do? I'm a single mom with two kids and practically homeless. I looked at my options, and there was Voc Rehab. They gave me their aptitude test, and I received great scores.

Given my medical conditions, they told me they wouldn't set me up for failure. My health issues wouldn't grant me success in a 'real job.' They wanted to know what fun was for me? I said, "I like photography." Ok, let's do that. That is how I got back into photography, and it's what I think I was meant to do and what I'm doing now.

I went to SAC City College, but I didn't finish my schooling because of my health issues. Photography teachers just wanted me to turn in photos, but my math teachers liked you to be in class. I get migraines three or four times a week. I haven't found a good remedy. I am sensitive to the side effects of treatments. If there is a side effect, I will probably get it; so, I'm limited in my treatments.

I am trying to get in the Reno photography market. It's a challenge. I'm the new kid in town, but I am meeting people. My art is my therapy. That's how I process what's going on in my head. I'm not very good at articulating it; words don't match what is happening. Anytime, when I'm in crisis, that's when I do my best work; it's when I am inspired.

I am limited in the art field on what can sell because my work is dark. It's not still life or puppies. It's a darker mood because that is where it's coming from. I know there is a market for it, I just don't know where it is, but I'm making it work. Originally, I wanted to go off and work as a photojournalist, but I have kids, and it wouldn't be fair to the kids.

What's really important for care providers to know is we need to be heard. I had several doctors who tried to diagnose my migraines and put me through the medications I had already tried. They really shut me down, and I was suffering because of the headaches. I needed those taken care of, and not being heard caused its own kind of depression.



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Finally, my third doctor heard me. I think that's a common problem throughout the medical profession, not just the VA. Hearing the patient makes all the difference. I felt validated, and that was huge.

The mental health department at Reno VA is different. To listen to you is their job. I know they are working towards a whole health approach, and I think, it needs to be embraced.

I belong to a women's group that is my maintenance group. It keeps me in a healthy place, and I need that. This group has helped me to branch out in my new community and find groups that allow me to help other veterans that have had similar issues to what I went through.

