

## Board rejects gay Naval Academy alumni chapter

Academy graduates denied for second year; 'We are not going away'; San Francisco group already operating

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SUN STAFF

For the second year in a row, the board of the Naval Academy Alumni Association has rejected an application filed by a group of gay and lesbian graduates to start a national chapter.

Meeting at the academy in Annapolis, the 29-member board voted unanimously not to recognize the proposed Castro District Chapter, named after the predominantly gay Castro section of San Francisco.

Although the group had revised its application to meet objections raised by alumni leaders a year ago, the board maintained that the group still had a narrowly defined mission and that members were not tied to a specific region.

"The geography of the group was a huge part of the decision," said Skid Heyworth, spokesman for the 51,000-member alumni association.

"There is already a San Francisco alumni chapter, and the board does not support a chapter within a chapter," he said.

Members of the Castro District group — six of whom traveled to Annapolis for the vote — said the decision dealt a blow to gay and lesbian alumni.

"We proposed a chapter that's free

of discrimination — one that met all the rejection criteria from last year," said Jeff Petrie, a 1989 graduate and founder of the 69-member group. "Yet it was still denied, and we're disappointed with the decision."

Petrie said group members had no intention of disbanding and he did not rule out future efforts to secure official status.

"We have not decided on what to do next," said Petrie, who works for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

"But one thing is for sure — we are not going away. We've already won our biggest victory — coming out and staying out — and we will continue to move forward," Petrie said.

Thursday's decision came more than a year after the group, then called USNA Out, made its first bid for recognition from the alumni association on Veterans Day.

The board unanimously rejected that request, saying that chapters need to be geographically based and cannot be too exclusive or focus on a special interest.

In an effort to gain official chapter status, Petrie said, the group changed its name to reflect its geographic base and altered its bylaws to allow heterosexual members (the group now has three).

"We are not a special interest group," said Petrie, 37, who served four years as a surface warfare officer in the Navy. "Our mission statement and bylaws are identical to those of any other chapter — we want to support the academy and

the alumni association."

But the association said the proposed group still failed to meet the criteria for forming a new chapter.

Heyworth noted that the proposed group has only 12 members in San Francisco, falling short of the bylaw requiring a "critical mass" of 25 members in a chapter's hometown.

In a memorandum released Thursday, the board also pointed out that none of its 93 existing national chapters are organized around "personal characteristics."

"We are an organization that exists to serve the nation, the naval service and the Naval Academy," said George P. Watt Jr., president and CEO of the alumni association, in an e-mail statement.

"Geography-based alumni chapters support this mission; special interest chapters would not," Watt said.

### Existing chapter

Watt and others encouraged members of Petrie's group to join the San Francisco alumni group. To endorse an additional chapter in the area, the board said, would potentially "isolate gay graduates" from official alumni groups.

"That's a mixed message," countered Petrie. "But we will take what the board said today and ask our members to join the local chapter — although that might make some of them feel uncomfortable."

Chet Kolley, a 1985 graduate and president of the 327-member San Francisco chapter, said he has repeatedly extended an invitation to gay and lesbian alumni.

"I have asked members of the Castro Chapter what more I can do to make them comfortable, but I was told nothing," Kolley said. "The

fact is, they are more than welcome to participate.”

Thursday’s decision was viewed by some experts as an indicator of how far the military community is willing to bend in its acceptance of homosexuals.

If the academy had approved the chapter, it would have become the first military academy to officially recognize a gay and lesbian group, and moved away from the military’s decade-old “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

“If they had approved the chapter, the academy could have sent a signal that gays and lesbians who serve deserve the same respect and rights as every other service member,” said Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

“Instead, they took a position that’s consistent with the military’s history of discrimination, and does not reflect an understanding of current views,” Belkin said.

### **Military polled**

Belkin cited a recent poll of military personnel and their families by the National Annenberg Election Survey, which found that half of junior enlisted officers said they think homosexuals should be allowed to serve openly.

“Attitudes are changing,” Belkin said.

Petrie, who formed the Castro District Chapter by recruiting members of an informal group called the Service Academy Gay and Lesbian Alumni Association, said he kept his homosexuality a secret during his four years at the Naval Academy out of fear of discrimination.

He said he hopes that the existence of an unofficial gay and lesbian alumni chapter sends a message to

homosexual midshipmen — and students at other military colleges — that they are accepted as service members regardless of their sexual orientation.

“This is all a process of removing the mystery of who gay people are, and showing people that there is really nothing wrong with us at all,” Petrie said. “I am very pleased that the retired admirals and generals who serve on the board of trustees might be able to see that we are just people — and for the most part pleasant and thoughtful ones.”

According to the board’s regulations, there is no limit on the number of times a proposed chapter can apply for recognition.

If the Castro District Chapter decides to apply at the board’s next biannual meeting in May, it will have to file another application early next year.