

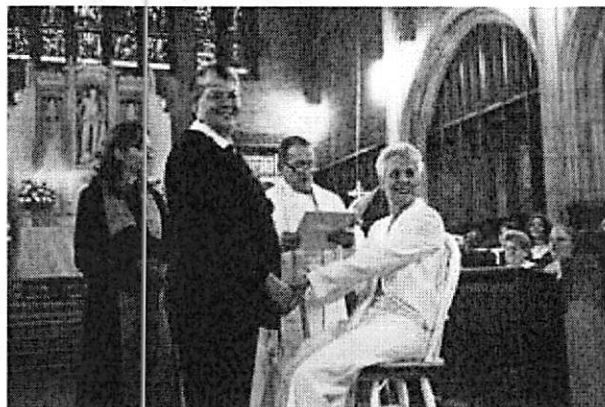
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## LESBIAN COUPLE FIRST TO BE WED AT WEST POINT



Fulton and Gnesin receive a sword salute during their wedding ceremony. / Courtesy of Jeff Sheng

Written by  
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Sue Fulton and Penny Gnesin are married Saturday at West Point. They are the first same-sex couple to exchange vows at the U.S. Military Academy's Cadet Chapel. / Photos courtesy of Jeff Sheng

It was harmony that brought Brenda Sue Fulton and Penelope Dara Gnesin together.

Back in 1995, Fulton attended a “community sing” event in Plainfield, N.J., and while almost everyone there was singing melody, she and her friends were singing harmony. Gnesin, a choir director, asked to join their group, Fulton recalled.

“We were attracted to each other immediately,” Fulton said.

The couple had a commitment ceremony in 1999. But on Saturday afternoon, 13 years later, they added legal significance to their union and set a precedent at the U.S. Military Academy’s Cadet Chapel at West Point.

At a ceremony before some 250 guests, Fulton and Gnesin were the first same-sex couple to exchange their vows at the 102-year-old chapel.

“We are both very humbled to be at this historic place and to stand up for our integrity as a legal couple,” said Fulton.

Though the ceremony was private, dozens took to Twitter tweeting about the momentous occasion, quoting Army Chaplain Col. Wesley Smith as saying “someday, and it’s coming, this won’t rate headlines.”

Fulton graduated from West Point in 1980, part of the first class of cadets that included women. She later founded the Knights Out organization that is made up of West Point alumni, staff and faculty who support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) soldiers to openly serve.

“I was in the first class of women and what you learn is that someone has to be first and after that it’s not a big deal,” said Fulton, 53. “That’s what we want to give the cadets and soldiers who follow.”

Fulton and Gnesin’s wedding ceremony comes more than a year after President Barack Obama repealed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” or DADT, policy that banned gay men and women from serving in the military.

In June 2011, New York legalized same-sex marriage in the state.

Fulton said she and Gnesin, a lifelong New Jersey resident, would have liked to wed in the state they call home. They live in Asbury Park.

But when Gov. Chris Christie vetoed a bill earlier this year allowing same-sex marriage in New Jersey, they started thinking of other options this summer. Gnesin, 52, is a breast cancer survivor and lives with multiple sclerosis, Fulton explained, so they didn't want to wait any longer.

In July 2011, Obama named Fulton to the West Point Board of Visitors, making her the first openly gay member of the board that advises the Academy. Fulton said she and Gnesin have both been very active in working to repeal DADT and supporting LGBT military. Fulton is also the communications director of OutServe, an association of active LGBT military personnel.

“Throughout that work, the ideals of West Point have been central to us, that of integrity, honor and service,” said Fulton. “Getting married there just started to seem like the right thing to do.”

The only issue they encountered when arranging their wedding there was finding out that none of the chaplains come from denominations that authorize same-sex weddings, Fulton said.

But their good friend is fulfilling that role. Army Chaplain Col. Wesley Smith, who is Episcopalian, will co-officiate the ceremony, along with Rev. Vanessa Southern, a Unitarian Universalist.

Earlier, Fulton had said they would pass under a traditional saber arch at the end of the ceremony, something that photos tweeted from the chapel illustrated. They planned to celebrate their union with a reception at Thayer Hotel.