

Changing Hawaii

By Diane Yukihiro Chang
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A tell-all on sex harassment in the military

WHENEVER I write a column on sexual harassment in the workplace, the inevitable happens. Immediately after it runs, I get telephone calls, letters and e-mail from Hawaii women being bothered, "romantically pursued" against their will, or worse, by a boss or work associate.

While some do file formal complaints or lawsuits against their harassers, most wahine are paralyzed into inaction. They're terrified of losing their jobs or of jeopardizing future employment.

So they just keep quiet. They don't make a fuss.

Then there is feisty Linda A. Fischer, who is currently an Army major stationed at Fort Shafter in Moanalua. The Honolulu resident was so traumatized by a sexual assault six years ago by her commanding officer in Panama, and so outraged by the military's refusal to discipline him, that she wrote and self-published "Ultimate Power: Enemy Within the Ranks" (available at www.unlimited-inc.com).

Fischer calls it "a tale of psychological coercion, betrayal and institutional abuse of power that exposes the dark side of the Army's male-dominated power structure." Wow.

As she'll probably explain during her next book-signing at 2 p.m. Sunday at Borders/Ward Centre, Fischer wrote the first-person account partly for catharsis, partly to support others. "After putting my life back together with the help of motivational programs, friends and family, and counseling, I decided not to leave the Army," explains the 38-year-old. "I chose to fight from the *inside* against the forces that allow pervasive sexual harassment."

Her easy-to-read and fascinating autobiography -- a good part of it based in Hawaii -- starts with Fischer's 1993 assault by "Lt. Col. Smith" (not his real name), when she was in charge of a 200-soldier military police unit in Panama.

She explains how an outgoing, goal-oriented, physically strong woman (she was Athlete of the Year for U.S. Army South in 1991) could be intimidated, unexpectedly assaulted and then stalked by her commanding officer.

Six months later, Fischer is transferred to Texas, but her attack continues to haunt her. It is when she is promoted, and gets a congratulatory note from Lt. Col Smith, that Fischer realizes she will never be able to escape her living nightmare until she reports his criminal behavior to authorities.

To her horror, Fischer's trauma mushrooms. In emotionally painful detail, she describes how the Army made her feel more like a suspect and a troublemaker than the victim of an assault.

Although a military psychiatrist finds her story to be credible, Fischer's case is eventually closed and the Department of the Army refuses to even let her see the report. Only after filing a request through the Freedom of Information Act does she learn what happened to Lt. Col. Smith.

Hint: Because this is non-fiction, folks, there is no story-book happy ending.

YET Fischer's literary offering is still a true public service. All victims of sexual harassment in the workplace will be able to relate to the agony and fear expressed throughout her book.

To her co-workers at Fort Shafter, Linda Fischer may be provost marshal and assistant chief of staff for the Pacific division of the Army Corps of Engineers. But to other women who have gone through the same ordeal, she is a model of strength and one heck of an author.

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