

# Not Just Surviving, but Thriving



**I have a tattoo of a fiery, colorful phoenix on my back. In the flames at the bottom of the tattoo is the title of Dr. Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise," written in Arabic.**

That phoenix's self-destruction only to rise out of its ashes is symbolic of my life.

The challenges that I have encountered, from deployment in the Middle East, and traumas experienced in the military from sexual assault and combat, to living with MS didn't destroy me - they made me stronger.

During my time in the military, I navigated the challenges that came with being not only a black woman, but a closeted lesbian. I had to hide who I was so I could continue to serve, because of the love I had for my K9 patients, their handlers and the people. Our unit was mission-focused, but as a young leader, I learned that the mission can't be accomplished without your people having the resources, training and opportunities to improve themselves. The people skills I learned in the Army carried on throughout my life and can be summed up to: standing up to challenge the status quo, critically thinking and most importantly, listening.

My journey navigating MS was helped by those skills I honed the Army. I did my research, made sure I was advocating for my healthcare and tried to shed light on others who were also surviving life with MS, both with and without obvious indicators of the disease. I didn't want to take away the focus from fellow MS Warriors who were living with more outward symptoms than I had, but also wanted to challenge people's perceptions of MS by disclosing my condition. Listening to other MS Warriors' stories about their diagnosis, there were

common themes of frustration when doctors would discount our symptoms, family members would accuse us of malingering, random people would give their unsolicited advice on cures, and the compliments given on how great we looked despite our struggles with MS.

It's time to listen to those who have been marginalized: the disabled, elderly, people of color, women, economically disadvantaged and members of the LGBTQ+ community. These are but a few of the communities that have felt the impact of inequity in services, resources and empathy. We as a nation are seeing the gaps our most vulnerable are facing during this unprecedented time.

Working to ensure equity for marginal communities can take a toll on all of us, especially during this tumultuous time with the pandemic and living with an unpredictable neurological condition. Please stay active and engaged with your MS family and those communities you are part of by doing what you can, where you can, however you can. Remember to give yourself permission to rest, step away from toxic people and situations and take time to focus on yourself.

I believe the resiliency of the MS, Black, Veteran, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities that we are part of will help our nation move forward in finding real solutions to help all of us have access to the things we need to live our best lives now and for future generations.

I believe we will move forward by not just surviving, but thriving.