NAVAL AIR FACILITY ATSUGI, Japan – It’s not a topic normally talked about in an open setting. And, for some, it may not be a recognizable concept that takes part in their normal lives until that thought is challenged by their surroundings. Privilege, in most cases, is something you are born with and individuals may find they have little or no control over it. The benefits that come along with it can set a standard in one’s life and not until it is recognized that may one be able to correctly understand others’ struggles.

Lt. Shelby Dziwulski, Baltimore, Md., native and MH-60R Seahawk pilot attached to the “Golden Falcons” of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 12, was given the opportunity to talk about how her views on the privilege she had growing up and the change she experienced later in her life in a talk at TEDxCollegePark scheduled for June 21 at the University of Maryland.

She describes her transition as going from being raised in Baltimore by her two parents, alongside her two brothers in an environment with less struggles than most people have, to joining the U.S. Navy and becoming a female pilot in a male dominated field.

“When I first joined the military, there were not a lot of females. I never really recognized that I would be the only woman in the room. Last year I was giving a briefing and I realized I was the only woman in the room. That was the moment where I was like, ‘I am the only girl in here. I wonder if other people are recognizing that?’ I never recognized it before until all these things started coming together.”
Looking from the outside it may be easy to recognize. Those individuals who never had a reason to analyze certain situations may never come to that conclusion without realizing their own background’s differences from others.

“We grow up in America and our bubble is very small. Just being in America gives you privilege. As you go through life, your bubble keeps growing. Then it comes full circle and you realize you had all these things that other people don’t have, then immediately my gender can isolate me into losing a privilege I thought I had, just by being a minority.

People often think that there is a single moment in your life that instantly changes you or the way that you think. It evolves and doesn’t happen overnight.”

The Navy is a melting pot with unique people and backgrounds that have shaped them to be who they are today. Those individuals we share experiences with, and call our shipmates, have had 18 years to shape their lives before they joined the Navy. Dziwulski had a division of 28 Sailors with their own unique upbringings to get to know.

“Some of my Sailors are from the Philippines and some of them are from cities or who grew up in the suburbs like I did. Some of their parents are divorced, mine are still married and that is a huge difference. Some of them are paying to put their siblings through college. They are paying to put their siblings through college! My parents paid for my college. I would say that my Sailors did a lot when it came to understanding privilege.”

Mentorship is a powerful tool in the Navy for helping shape lives based off of personal experiences. Being able to come to the realization that your background has afforded you more knowledge in certain topics that others might not have had the chance to learn, builds mentorship.

“That’s the goal, right? And it doesn’t just go for privilege. It goes for knowledge too. If you are more qualified or knowledgeable than someone else or Sailors under you, your job is to train them. If you have any type of privilege, knowledge, or advantage over someone else. It’s your duty to help give that knowledge to them if they want it.”

Dziwulski points out that knowledge is there for those who want it whether that information comes from your mentor, blogs, or videos online.

“Last year at the squadron, it was a really challenging time for me with qualifications and such. I was watching more TED Talks to decompress - that’s my outlet - and I found out about TED Global, which is a conference you can attend in person and one was happening in Tanzania, Africa. The last one they
had was in 2007. I went to that conference in Africa and it was an amazing six days of my life.”

During that conference, Dziwulski met people from all over the world, one of whom happened to be Neelay Bhatt who is originally from India and has called the United States home for several years. They became friends she shared her story. Later she found out that he was the licensee and curator for the inaugural TEDxCollegePark event.

This once in a lifetime meeting opened the door for Dziwulski to share her story. Bhatt says “Through my conversations with Shelby, I realized that she was in a unique situation to share her perspective of being on both sides of the privilege spectrum. We thought that was an idea worth spreading which is why we invited her to speak at TEDxCollegePark this year”

Having been afforded the chance to recognize and reflect on the privilege Dziwulski has experienced in her life has helped her in her journey to mentor others.

“If every single person could have the transformation I had in my mind last year of understanding how valuable it is to recognize where you come from and the advantages that gives you over other people and because you have those advantages you need to help other people that don’t. If everyone could have that shift, no matter what your gender, race, background, no matter what it is. Everybody has some type of privilege in some way, in some context, in some situation. So, just being able to recognize that, it can open your world up and blow your mind.”

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