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A West Point first: Chapel hosts same-sex wedding

Penelope Gnesin and Brenda Sue Fulton were married at Cadet Chapel, at the US Military Academy at West Point. The pair have been a couple for 17 years and Fulton was a West Point graduate.

By Associated Press | DECEMBER 2, 2012



Jeff Sheng/Outserve-SLDN/AP | View Caption

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Cadet Chapel, the landmark Gothic church that is a center for spiritual life at the US Military Academy at West Point, hosted its first same-sex wedding Saturday.

Penelope Gnesin and Brenda Sue Fulton, a West Point graduate, exchanged vows in the regal church in an afternoon ceremony, attended by about 250 guests and conducted by a senior Army chaplain.

The two have been together for 17 years. They had a civil commitment ceremony that didn't carry any legal force in 1999 and had long hoped to formally tie the knot. The way was cleared last year, when New York legalized same-sex marriage and President Barack Obama lifted the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy prohibiting openly gay people from serving in the military.

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The brides both live in New Jersey and would have preferred to have the wedding there, but the state doesn't allow gay marriage.

"We just couldn't wait any longer," Fulton told The Associated Press in a phone interview Saturday.

Cadet Chapel was a more-than-adequate



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second choice, she said.

"It has a tremendous history, and it is beautiful. That's where I first heard and said the cadet prayer," Fulton said, referring to the invocation that says, "Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, and never to be content with a half-truth when the whole can be won."

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The ceremony was the second same-sex wedding at West Point. Last weekend, two of Fulton's friends, a young lieutenant and her partner, were married in another campus landmark, the small Old Cadet Chapel in West Point's cemetery.

Fulton has campaigned against the ban on gays in the military as a member of two groups representing gay and lesbian servicemen and servicewomen. She graduated from West Point in 1980, a member of the first class to include women.

She served with the Army Signal Corps in [Germany](#) and rose to the rank of captain, but left the service in 1986 partly because she wanted to be open about her sexual orientation. Obama appointed her last year to the US Military Academy's Board of Visitors.

Fulton said the only hassle involved in arranging her ceremony came when she was initially told that none of West Point's chaplains was authorized by his or her denomination to perform same-sex weddings.

Luckily, Fulton said, they were able to call on a friend, Army Chaplain Col. J. Wesley Smith. He is the senior Army chaplain at [Dover Air Force Base](#), where he presides over the solemn ceremonies held when the bodies of soldiers killed in action overseas return to [US](#) soil.

The couple added other military trappings to their wedding, including a tradition called the saber arch, where officers or cadets hold their swords aloft over the newlyweds as they emerge from the church.

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