



# THE RESPECT PODCAST with host Mike Domitrz

And Guest Laura Dunn

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Mike Domitrz: Welcome to the Respect podcast. I'm your host, Mike Domitrz from mikespeaks.com, where we help organizations of all sizes, educational institutions, and the US military create a culture of respect. And respect is exactly what we discuss on this show, so let's get started.

Mike Domitrz: This weeks special guest is Heath Phillips. Now if you haven't heard of Heath, or you haven't met Heath before, Heath is a military sexual assault survivor and a public speaker on the topic of MST. MST is military sexual trauma. He also speaks on bi standard intervention. Now Heath is originally from Protect Our Defenders, an organization that honors, supports, and gives a voice to the brave women and men in uniform who've been raped or sexually assaulted by fellow service members. Heath has chosen to be a speaker in order to relay his story, the effects it has had on him, the obstacles he has had and has to overcome, and most importantly to educate our soldiers in regards to the damage sexual assault and hazing does to anyone, including males. So Heath, I want to thank you very much for joining us.

Heath Phillips: All right, thank you. I appreciate you for allowing to be on this.

Mike Domitrz: Absolutely, and your story is so powerful that I don't want to be the one trying to tell this on your behalf. I'd like to start with you being able to tell it, so how did you get to where you are today, Heath?

Heath Phillips: The BS with you. When I got discharged I was already an alcoholic. I was already drinking heavily. I was 18. I spent close to 20 years just spiraling downhill, worse and worse and worse. It came to the point where it was either going to commit suicide or get better, and final straw was believe it or not, the date is still embedded in my brain. February 3rd, 2009. Driving home, I was to the point where I was so drunk I had to drive with one eye, and there's just way too many roads. And I wanted to die. And today I still thank God that somehow I blanked out from that point to getting home, and that was when reality actually set in. That I needed help.

Heath Phillips: I cried for the first time in 20 years. I dumped everything that I had out in my home that was alcohol related. Any type of narcotics, drugs, anything. I even got rid of my cigarettes the same day. And from that forward I have actually been drug, alcohol, and cigarette free. And no, I've never done AA, any of them exciting things that people do. My AA is not wanting to be where I was, and that's kind of what lit a fire in me to not just better myself, but to be a better father, a better figurehead, just a better person in general. And that's kind of how I started to move forward.



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- Mike Domitrz: How much of a time gap was there from being discharged to you having that moment in 2009?
- Heath Phillips: I got discharged July 26th of 1989. My first day of sobriety was February 4th of 2009. So it was just under a 20 year gap of being discharged to when I became ... my first day of sobriety.
- Mike Domitrz: All right, and people listening might have caught earlier that you said, "When I was just discharged at 19." They might be thinking in their mind well he couldn't have been in that long, so what-
- Heath Phillips: I said I was discharged at 18.
- Mike Domitrz: At 18. Okay.
- Heath Phillips: I joined at 17.
- Mike Domitrz: Right so, so a year or so roughly, so now that's got people thinking, "Okay, wow, a lot must have happened in that year for that to have occurred." But during those 20 years, were you addressing that or is that the masking of the alcohol and the drugs?
- Heath Phillips: I tried to. Due to the discharge that I had, I had an other than honorable. The VA would not help me, period. So I had a hard time keeping employment due to my alcoholism. I didn't know I had post traumatic stress disorder. I didn't know why I couldn't be near men. I couldn't handle being near it. The anxiety levels, you know, I, constant nightmares. But I didn't know what was wrong. So what I did was I just drank. That was how I coped. So there was like no help for me.
- Mike Domitrz: Right, you were not ... The sexual violence was not being addressed because you weren't that deep in yet to figure out what was causing the drinking and the drugs because you didn't get the support you needed to get on that journey.
- Heath Phillips: Right.
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and so because of how you were discharged, even though you were a survivor, because of what you were given, the form of discharge you were given, there was no support available to you. So now you're alone, and the alcohol and the drugs was coping, if I'm understanding correctly?
- Heath Phillips: That's how I cope. That's how I stopped.
- Mike Domitrz: So then, then you clear the house. I mean that's a ... So then you clear the house of all the alcohol, everything, and say, "I'm going to change." What gets you into



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the process of having the self awareness, the discovery of where's the pain that caused all this in the first place?

Heath Phillips: Believe it or not Google. I got to give Google props. So I started Googling things because I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't know why I was having nightmares, flashbacks, and I didn't know what was causing this. So I started Googling kind of like what happened to me in the military, and started reading papers because while I was in, there was a congressional investigation done on my case. And one of the mental health people wrote that I had post traumatic stress disorder. So my command had already, was aware that I had this. So I tried finding out what everything meant, and then I started finding out that I was not the only rape victim or survivor or whatever you want to call it, from the military.

Heath Phillips: And I started reaching out, and I started meeting more survivors, and that's when my curiosity started getting the better of me because they were going through what I was going through. So I was like how do we fix this? How do we help each other? Then things just kept moving forward and forward, and that's when Protect Our Defenders started to launch. And I did the video with them. In 2011, we met in Washington DC, a whole group of survivors, myself included. And outside of, I'm kind of red neckish, you know, I live in a country so I'm not used to the suits, and that attire. So I show up in Washington DC. I'm wearing jeans, flannel shirt untucked, and we go to the Capitol Hill, and we're at the press box, and everyone's in suits. I'm dressed all down, but they didn't care.

Heath Phillips: They brought me on stage as the men's survivor. Kindest woman, Jackie Spear, was introducing a sexual assault bill at the time called Stop Act. Protect Our Defenders launched their name that day, and nobody cared. It was ... The way I explain it, is, it's a lot like these six guys did all these horrific things to me. That's why I had a bad, like an anger towards the military for allowing it to happen. Allowing to kick me out, but when I met these other survivors, there was like no animosity towards them because they were in the military. It was vulnerable. Like a kinmanship, and I mean still today, we all talk. We do our own things, but we still all talk. And it was like having that family that I never had because I lost a lot in that 20 year bad part of my life. But it was just like a unity that nobody could understand. It was a unity that I should have had when I was in the military with my fellow shipmates.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and you talk about that. You talk about that before the hazing. Because that, for those listening, the form of sexual assault that you experienced was very much what some would call a hazing form of sexual assault. It was done by a group, as a form of initiation to you. Prior to that though because that was when you started actually serving on your first ship. Prior to that you were loving the military, from what you've shared. You felt that brotherhood that you're talking about right now.



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Heath Phillips: Yeah, yeah. I'm an Army brat so I kind of grew up in the military culture, and it's something my dad never spoke about because my dad, mister tough guy, you know, but there's nothing I knew would happen. Boot camp was just, I mean it was a family. It was exactly what my family talked about. My commander was my dad, kinda like, and these guys were my shipmates were like my brothers. And we had each other's back. It was a ... probably one of the tightest units I've ever seen, and it was boot camp. And it was kind of incredible because at 17, that was my first initiation into the military, was boot camp. And seeing how tight knit, everybody had my back, I had their back, and then going to a ship and your first day within hours you're being sexually assaulted. It was like what just happened? It was like reading Cinderella and happened into at a Freddy Kruger movie. So it was just mind blowing.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and what's amazing is you did report.

Heath Phillips: That's that.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and multiple times. What was the response you were getting?

Heath Phillips: My very first time I reported. I'll never forget the look on Master Arm's face. It was like dumbfounded, and then it was disgusted, and then he immediately called me a liar. And then he wanted to know how old I was. I was like, "I'm 17." He says, "Oh," he goes, "You must be a mama's boy. So you're homesick. That's why you're saying these things." I'm like, I was baffled, I was like, "No." For all I was homesick, you know, I wasn't homesick. And I was like, "No, I'm not lying. This happened." And it was just-

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Heath Phillips: ... it's like, "No, I'm not lying, this happened." And it was just like non-stop "You're a liar, you're a liar, you're a liar." 49 days before I first snapped, 49 days of reporting this ... it was always the same result "You're a liar, you're a liar, where's your proof? Doesn't happen."

Mike Domitrz: Do you think, Heath, that they didn't want to believe it was happening, but knew it was happening? And by calling you a liar was their way of covering up? Or do you think they honestly didn't believe this was possible?

Heath Phillips: They knew. Back then I didn't know they knew, but they knew.

Heath Phillips: I mean, on the 49th day, when I tried hanging myself, Chief [inaudible 00:11:45] officer brings me down, and he smacked me in my face, told me I needed to man up and fight for myself, basically. It kind of clicked, like "He knows. He doesn't even look at my birthing area, and he knows."



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- Heath Phillips: Two of my attackers, they had 17 other victims. So it's not like it wasn't a known thing, it's just nobody cared. They would rather avoid the situation and hide from it, than have to admit that this really happens. And to me that's very sickening.
- Mike Domitrz: Absolutely. And this isn't just a military thing, we've seen this happen throughout many different levels of our culture, where people cover up instead of wanting to deal with the reality of what's going on in their organization, their community, their institution. We see this happen in many different levels.
- Mike Domitrz: Since that time, since 11, you've started speaking out, and what a lot of people don't realize, you and I know, because we speak on military installations. There's an image out there that the military's still operating the way it's always operated, the way it was operating 20 years ago, 10 years, and no one cares about this topic, and everybody's trying to cover it up. The reality is, yeah when you have hundreds of thousands of people in an organization, there is still sexual violence, absolutely. There are still some that are working to cover it up.
- Mike Domitrz: At the same time, there are very passionate professionals out there, many.
- Heath Phillips: Many.
- Mike Domitrz: Who are working hard in the military to stop this from ever happening to another human being again. And in fact, you and I get to work with the majority of people who have that passion, have that fire. But I want you to be able to speak to that. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe that's what I see, where I'm traveling the world working the military. Do you feel the same, or do you think "No, we don't have enough people ..." I mean, we want more, obviously.
- Heath Phillips: I'll be honest with you, it has come a long way. Phenomenal. If I would have reported this now, [inaudible 00:13:57], here and now and this is happening to me, so many different options that can help me. I can be transferred, I can get moved, this person get transferred ... You will have cover-ups, that's a gimme, but the cover-ups now are nothing compared to what they were 20 years ago. 'Cause this is more of an eggshell issue, and I'll be honest with you, I speak for the SHARP Divisions, Sexual Harassment Assault Response Programs, and these people are so dedicated. I'll be honest with you, it sucks that we have to have these programs, but I'm glad that we do, because now there's somebody to actually help a victim, where, like in my case, there's nothing. The alcohol is what helped me.
- Heath Phillips: They also have a program where now they're talking about bystander intervention, which is something that I touch on, because for me it's a personal issue, because being on-board my ship and not having one person ever extend



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the hand out to help me ... That's just as harmful to me as when I was being assaulted.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and what a lot of people don't realize is today you have in the SHARP program now, if it's Navy it would be called SAPER, but you have victim advocates, and you have a sark, and some of those people can be civilians, some of those people can be active duty, but there are very specific roles they play that guarantee confidentiality unless you want to pursue the case in a Judicial format, and that would be called an unrestricted. But you can go restrict it and have a one-on-one conversation that stays completely confidential, and a lot of people just don't realize this, and at the time, in nine, even if that existed, they weren't doing the training to teach you that existed, or what was available to you. Where now they have to go through training on a regular.

Mike Domitrz: I always tell people, they think "Oh colleges are better at this than the military." No, no, no, no, no. Colleges might hear about this at orientation, the military has to go through this training every year of their career, so they know all the resources that are available.

Heath Phillips: And sometimes somebody has to do it twice a year.

Mike Domitrz: That's right.

Heath Phillips: Even more beneficial.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and when it gets really beneficial is when they realize installations, regions, department of defense, realizes just doing our three hour mandated department of defense training is not enough. We need to bring people like Heath in, we need to bring ... that's why we get to do the work we do, because installations realized we need outsiders with unique perspectives, not just people from within.

Mike Domitrz: Now you also are an outsider, but you come from within.

Heath Phillips: Yes. And I also bring something different than Power Point. Yesterday I spoke at Fort [inaudible 00:16:56] with victim advocates. I do that monthly, I go and speak to their classes, and I give them a different perspective, 'cause now it's personal.

Heath Phillips: I think with any based installation DOD, even the Pentagon would be able to benefit from people like you and I coming in, because we make it personal, we make it not the generic form that you're seeing from their Power Points and paperwork. We bring in our whole entire ... everything, and they're like "Oh, shoot. Wow." They don't realize all the things that really happen.



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- Mike Domitrz: Yes.
- Mike Domitrz: So what do you say to the person listening who maybe is old school military? And I know you've gotten this push ... I'm guessing you've gotten this pushback, 'cause I certainly get it in comments section of articles on my work, the trolls of what's happened to our military that they're worrying about this stuff instead of killing the enemy? How do you react to that, do you see that stuff, or do you just blow it off? How do you view that when you see that kind of trolling?
- Heath Phillips: See, I get that trolling occasionally. Like Senator [inaudible 00:18:10] working on the Military Justice Improvement Act, which I'm on the fence with it, I see both sides, so-
- Mike Domitrz: Can we pause and help people understand the both sides, 'cause you and I know the act, but a lot of people don't. I believe you're specifically referring to whether these should all be handled civilian, or they should be handled at the military level. Because what happens now is in the end, it's a military justice.
- Heath Phillips: Yes.
- Mike Domitrz: And even if civilians are involved, it goes through military justice. Joe Miranda's saying "Hey no, we've got to take that element out of it", but then leadership says "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that breaks down the whole military environment." And that's why you're saying I see both sides.
- Heath Phillips: I think what bothers me is ... for one, it's politics. But for two, if we take this away from the command, what are we going to take away next? That's how I look at it.
- Heath Phillips: SHARP is not perfect, but, like anything else, once you start getting the wheels spinning, and you get all the bugs, and you figure out everything, that's how you start making things better. I'm not saying it's wrong, I'm not saying it's right, it's just ... that's how I see it. They want me on-board with them, and it's kind of hard to get on board with you're on the fence, so it's like sell it to me. And so far I haven't been sold, so-
- Mike Domitrz: You know what, I love, Heath, that you're addressing this, and you're sharing your authentic view, because our show's all about respect.
- Heath Phillips: Right.
- Mike Domitrz: And so to pressure someone into a belief they don't have is not respectful.
- Mike Domitrz: Now to educate somebody to shift their beliefs, that's a different discussion. That's because they make the choice based on education. But to say we all must



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feel this way, because we all come from a like-minded situation ... no, we're still going to be unique in this. I think that's what's so important to your discussion is ... a lot of people "Well, jeez, as a military survivor, of course we're going to say civilian, it should all be civilian, especially the way you were treated." And yet you're going "Wait, I still have ... in understanding the military system that I honor and I respect," and I think that's probably, for some, surprising.

Heath Phillips: Yeah. That's where I get my lovely ... I call them zombies, you call them trolls, that's where I get them. They're like "What do you mean you're not on-board? We're survivors! We stick together!" Yeah, we're supposed to stick together, but I'm one of the few survivors that actually goes on bases, I'm one of the few survivors that actually works with DOD, so I am the eyes that sees the change that's starting to happen. Culture changes can be probably the hardest thing to ever do in this world, it takes time, but it's just like inventions. How did it take us to decide we wanted to use the wheel? It takes time.

Heath Phillips: To implement a bill to immediately destroy something that's been going on for years in a chain of command, you really have to weigh the pros and the cons. And that's why I said I see both sides, that's why I'm on the fence, because ... maybe if you word it differently, maybe if you make it so they work together? Then yes. But to just take something straight away from a commander kind of bothers me.

Mike Domitrz: Sure. I respect it, 'cause you understand the hierarchy you worked in, and you grew up in it, too. And so that brings a different perspective, you grew up in a family-

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Mike Domitrz: You grew up in it too-

Heath Phillips: Right.

Mike Domitrz: ... and so that brings a different perspective. You grew up in a family environment of military and so that has an impact too. What are the ways that you feel ... Obviously all sexual violence is a lack of someone being treated with respect and this show is all about respect.

Heath Phillips: Right.

Mike Domitrz: There's a complete lack of it. So what do you think is the number one connection you make when you're sharing with people, of anyone to try to help them understand the importance of respect and dignity and how that lacks when this behavior takes place?



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- Heath Phillips: Well, I'll be honest with you, I have this method that I've been using for the last year. I don't do it at every event that I do. But I share my experiences, what happened to me. Then at the end I turn it around and I ask everybody to close her eyes, the whole audience close their eyes. Then I start doing this reverse psychology gizmo that I once learned, and I ask them, "You guys heard everything I said. Now start putting that into feelings. You're in the military. What if this was your mom and dad that came and talked to you? Process how you would start feeling." Then I throw it out, "What if it was your brother or sister?" If I got an older crowd, I'll ask them, "Well, what if this was your son or your daughter that came and talked to you about this?"
- Heath Phillips: Then my last thing I always say, "And better yet, what if this was you? What if this was you up here sharing this? How would you feel? How would you want things to change? What would your response be?" I'll be honest with you, I've had grown men cry. I didn't think I would ever get that effect, but I have. Then I asked them to open their eyes and then I start interacting with them. I'm like, "Hey, how would you feel? What would you want different?" I think that goes a long way because the answers you start getting back is like, "Well, I'd want my command to help me. I would want them to listen. I would want," as you're saying, "the same respect that I should be getting." It's just amazing how differently they are when I do that.
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah. It humanizes.
- Heath Phillips: Yes.
- Mike Domitrz: It totally humanizes the discussion.
- Heath Phillips: Especially when you know, I nail them when they're half asleep-
- Mike Domitrz: Well I think that's what people don't realize. You know someone-
- Heath Phillips: ... because they don't [crosstalk 00:24:31]. They fall asleep-
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah. That's what people don't realize is that some people are coming to these planning to sleep because they think they've heard it all before. And when I say that, I don't want people listening thinking all. You know it could be two out of a hundred, but when you're presenting you notice two people sleeping out of a hundred.
- Heath Phillips: I call myself an a-hole on this, but if I'm spending my time coming up there, and it's not pinpointing them to get them in trouble. In mids, because I walk, I can't stand at the podium. I walk. I'll point and say, "Hey you, where are you from?" Just to give a point so that, "Hey, give me some respect. I'm up here doing this."



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- Mike Domitrz: Yeah. Well and that's just it and that's what people don't-
- Heath Phillips: I do that all the time.
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah, and people don't realize that. People go, "Oh you're picking on them." I'm not picking on them. I'm engaging. It's my job to impact as many people as possible in that room. So if I see you're not engaging, it's my job to engage you. Now, that doesn't mean you're going to like me or you're going to want to listen to me, but I have to at least attempt the engagement and that's what I love what you're describing. You're making sure that you're engaging them, which is actually respecting them, right?
- Heath Phillips: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Mike Domitrz: Because I'm going to make sure your time is valuable in here. You came in here. I want to make this an amazing experience ideally for you.
- Heath Phillips: And also I don't want to see them like get [PT'd 00:25:51] outside because they're caught sleeping.
- Mike Domitrz: That's right. Because that will, for those who aren't aware what will happen is-
- Heath Phillips: I got, there are six unfortunately. Sometimes it's unfortunate, but you know I got there six, and in different directions. I'll give you an example. I spoke at Fort Leonard Wood this year and the guy right in the front row was nodding and nodding. I was trying to ignore him because I didn't want to make him get in trouble. So what I did is, I asked a question of the lady behind him, but I bumped into his leg. That way he kind of opened up his eyes and then I stopped talking and I said, "Oh, and let me ask you this." He came up and thanked me afterwards. He just said, "Oh," he said, "I really didn't want to do pushups today." You know like, "It's cool, man."
- Mike Domitrz: And to be fair, you and I know this, our listeners might not realize, sometimes I go into this training after a full workload and I mean a heavy physically exhausting work load and this is the end of the day.
- Heath Phillips: Not only that, but some of these guys haven't sat all day.
- Mike Domitrz: Right.
- Heath Phillips: You know they're out all day long, rucking it or something and then they're coming in and the air's on because I'm there to speak so they don't want it hot for me. I don't know, but so now they're in a comfortable area. So I understand because I remember bootcamp and I remember rucking all day and then sitting down in class going, "Ahhh," you know.



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- Mike Domitrz: Yeah. What do you think is the biggest misconception about military sexual trauma?
- Heath Phillips: That only happens to women. I think that is the biggest misconception out there. Period.
- Mike Domitrz: What do you think is the biggest misconception about the military in this topic?
- Heath Phillips: That they don't care, because I know they do.
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah.
- Heath Phillips: I see it when I go to the bases. I know they care.
- Mike Domitrz: They do, they do.
- Heath Phillips: I don't go for the challenge coin. I don't go for their certificates. I go and Fort Bliss their general is like so strict on sexual assault.
- Mike Domitrz: Were you there recently?
- Heath Phillips: I was, I spoke there last year.
- Mike Domitrz: Okay. Yeah. I know who you're talking about. So that's it. Yes.
- Heath Phillips: He is like, "That's not just happening in my command," and I'm like, "Whoa. Wow." He's strict. So you know, that I respect.
- Mike Domitrz: Well, the ones who show fire change the game. Right?
- Heath Phillips: Yes.
- Mike Domitrz: When you have leadership that says ... Now like in that situation, "I'm not going to allow this in my command, but I'm also going to support survivors if it does happen." Right?
- Heath Phillips: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Mike Domitrz: And shows that versus the ones that goes, "All right, let's get through this. We got to get through it." That's not leadership. That's towing the line to follow the requirements versus-
- Heath Phillips: [crosstalk 00:28:52] few of them events.



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- Mike Domitrz: Yup. You'll meet them. They sometimes support you coming in because then they don't have to address it. Right?
- Heath Phillips: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Mike Domitrz: So you get two different kinds of leadership. But when you get the leader who's fired up you're like, "I want to keep working with you because you're going to keep reinforcing the right messages and that's so important." So I'm glad you brought that up. This misconception that nobody cares in the military when there's thousands, I mean literally thousands of people in the military who care deeply about [crosstalk 00:29:19].
- Heath Phillips: Well look at how large the military is. I think that's another misconception that people have. The military is huge. So to actually keep an eye on every single person is never going to happen. We're overseas. We're inland or on the seas. We're in the air. So how can a commander keep an eye? Yes, it trickles down to the lower levels but-
- Mike Domitrz: Yeah. That's where bystander intervention comes in. You talk about that and we talk about that because then you get it down to the individuals all looking out for each other, which is so important
- Heath Phillips: Right.
- Mike Domitrz: Heath, you've been amazing. Fantastic.
- Heath Phillips: Thank you so much for having me.
- Mike Domitrz: Absolutely.
- Heath Phillips: Thank you for everything you do.
- Mike Domitrz: Oh. Like you we do this because we love what we're doing.
- Heath Phillips: Thank you, Mike.
- Mike Domitrz: Thank you for joining us for this episode of The Respect Podcast, which was sponsored by the Date Safe Project at [datesafeproject.org](http://datesafeproject.org), and remember you can always find me at [mikespeaks.com](http://mikespeaks.com).

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