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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – If it wasn't for her older sister, Helena Barney-Anthony, calling her a "crybaby", telling her she was "too small" and saying she wouldn't make it through boot camp, Angela Barney-Nez might not have joined the Army.

Army veteran Barney-Nez said that was her sister's response in 1974 when she told her that she was going to join Army.

"I was wanting go into the Army in 1974 and I would have made it to Vietnam," she remembered. "But when I told her I was thinking about joining the Army, she really just came out and said, 'You're too much of a cry baby. You're not going to make it.' And I thought, 'Oh yeah! Oh yeah!' And the more I thought about whether I could make it or not, this movement about women being equal to men happened."

Barney-Nez explained that NOW or the National Organization of Women had just made a “great fuss about women’s equality.

«I had a chance to see for myself what that meant. How equal would I feel in the Army? And what I also didn’t know was that the military had changed its pattern of basic combat training or BCT.”

That was in 1978.

“I thought I would just regret it if I didn’t do it,” Barney-Nez remembered. “I would never know for myself if I made it or not. So it was like a self challenge. It was also a challenge in a way because I was a college-educated young woman and a former Miss Navajo Nation.”

She laughed as she remembered how she became a contestant for Miss Navajo.

Right after graduating from college, Barney-Nez, who is from Tohatchi, decided that she didn’t want to go to work immediately.

Miss Navajo

“I could have gone to work but I went way out there with the sheep,” she said. “I built an open pit fire where I cooked my food. I carried a rifle all summer. Right after that I went into Miss Navajo.

“I had no idea what Miss Navajo was about,” she said. “It was something my parents got talked into.”

Barney-Nez explained that relatives or community members would often ask her parents to enter her into the Miss Navajo competition.

“Our excuse was she’s in school,” she said. “But once my grandmother said yes that was it. I always said ask my grandmother. And so after I got my degree, my grandmother said she’s ready to do other things; she’s not in school. She gave me away.”

Barney-Nez laughed again as she remembered her grandmother and how the Miss Navajo pageant was under the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

That was in 1975.

“I had to go to the BIA superintendent office to apply to be Miss Navajo,” she recalled. “The superintendent was Donald Dodge. It was good encounter.

“I went through the Miss Navajo competition and it had its own little things that challenged women’s feminism,” Barney-Nez said.

Barney-Nez, who was single at the time, became the 1976-77 Miss Navajo.

After her term as Miss Navajo, Barney-Nez decided that she wanted to earn a master’s degree.

Military benefits

“I had started the masters program but I had no money,” she said. “Miss Navajo had a scholarship but you had to show documents.”

Barney-Nez then realized that her bachelor's degree would earn her a $3,000 educational bonus when she joined the Army.

"I could finish the masters program and get over not being good enough, being a cry baby," she said. "My sister doesn't know she put incentive, a challenge into me to join the Army. She was in the Marines. If she didn't say anything then maybe I would have stopped thinking about joining the Army.

"But she's my older sister and we spent lot of time together," Barney-Nez said. "She took care of me at boarding school. She fought my battles. She knows how small and petite I was. How people picked on me.

"She also knew my abilities and where to take me," Barney-Nez said. "I was a fast runner and I won $30 at the Gallup Ceremonial. I guess that's how she knew I was a crybaby."

Barney-Nez laughed again.

She said that she joined the Army on July 19, 1978, and her sister, Helena, joined the Marines right after high school in 1968.

First co-ed boot camp boot

Helena went to an all-female Marine boot camp at Paris Island. Barney-Nez, ten years later, went to the first co-ed Army boot camp at Fort Dicks, N.J., with 12 other females.

All the female recruits had to have high school diplomas, which was not a requirement for the male recruits, she said.

And since she had a college degree, she was offered officers' school, which she declined because she wanted to prove that she could make it though boot camp without special treatment.

But she was relieved that the "old military" which was "very, very brutal in its treatment of trainees" was a thing of the past because boot camps were now co-ed.

Co-ed boot camps also ended "name calling," she said.

Barney-Nez said there more 200 men in her whole company and maybe 40 to 30 in each platoon.

She was assigned to the 3rd platoon, Alpha Company.

At the end of boot camp, nine of the 13 females graduated.

Women in uniform

"You'll be surprised at how many men feel uncomfortable with women in uniform," Barney-Nez said. "It's like this is mine. You're not supposed to be in my profession. You're supposed to be at home. You're supposed to be married to somebody and not in combat garb.

"And even today, here on Navajo Reservation, there's a little bit of that kind of thinking," she said. "But Navajo men are getting use to it because of different experiences.

"Before 1976 or 1975, somewhere in there, women soldiers became the feminist movement," Barney-Nez said. "And it was the equality movement that changed boot camps."

She smiled as she remembered her father telling her and her sister, Helena, that women can do anything a man can do.

He also said that the only thing that a woman can't do by herself is have a baby.

That was in the late 1960s and before the feminist movement, Barney-Nez said.