

Military OneSource Podcast — Navy Federal Credit Union

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Hi, I'm Bruce Moody. Today's episode is about spouse employment. There are lots of obstacles to employment for military spouses, including having to move from place to place to place, but there are employers who value military spouses. They want to hire them, and they want to retain them, that's the most important part.

Often, with that commitment, they become part of our Military Spouse Employment Partnership. We're going to feature one of those companies today, that's the Navy Federal Credit Union.

For today's conversation, we have military spouse Kara Cardona, who started with the credit union as a part-time teller and is now their chief operating officer. It's quite a journey, and I want you to stick around to hear it and to share it with others.

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We've got our phone number and a website and the program notes along with a link that you can use to send us your questions, your comments or ideas for a future episode. We'd love to hear from you.

A reminder, you can subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen, so please do. Okay, let's jump into today's conversation.

Kara Cardona, welcome to the podcast. Great to have you with us.

Kara Cardona:

Thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be with you today.

Bruce Moody:

And we are thrilled to have you with us. To get us started, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your connection to the military community?

Kara Cardona:

Absolutely. Well, first and foremost, I'd like to start out by saying, on the personal side, I'm a very proud military spouse. On the professional side, I currently serve as the chief operating officer for Navy Federal Credit Union.

Bruce Moody:

Wonderful. Well, I'm a retired Navy chief, and I have been with the NFCU, the Navy Federal Credit Union, for a long time. Thank you so much for those car loans, by the way. I know what my experience with the credit union has been like. What has it been like for you? What has your journey been like over the past 25 years?

Kara Cardona:

Well, thank you for starting out by saying, "What has my journey been like?" Because for me, it truly has been a journey. I first got connected with Navy Federal back in 1999 at Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico. I had just relocated there as a young military spouse and walked into a Navy Federal branch to open a savings account. Now, I was going in to open a savings account because, at the time, I was unemployed. I had not found a job yet. Truthfully, I was hoping that my good family back in the U.S. might send a little money along the way to help us get started. So, while I was there, opening my account in the branch, I was assisted by this really wonderful member service representative.

Throughout the process, I was sort of noticing around me that there appeared to be many military spouses also working there, and it just seemed to be like a really extraordinary culture. Everyone was smiling. Everyone was happy. Everyone seemed to truly be there because they enjoyed what they were doing. In that interaction, I happened to ask her, knowing that I was without a job and hoping for the best opportunity in the world, if Navy Federal happened to be hiring. She slid that paper application across the desk, and yes, back then in 1999, that's how we applied for jobs. I took the paper application home and, fortunately for me, within two weeks, I was working at the branch.

I started there as a part-time teller. But by the time we left Puerto Rico, I had worked my way through a variety of roles, and I eventually became the branch manager of that location. In the 26 years, I've held a number of roles that have helped me in so many ways diversify my career, including positions such as regional manager for branch operations, vice president for branch operations, and then more recently, before I assumed the role of chief operating officer, I got to serve as the executive vice president for contact center down in Pensacola, which happens to be our largest campus.

That's sort of the Reader's Digest version, but it's certainly been a journey and a wonderful one at that.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk a little bit about the Navy Federal Credit Union as an employer of military spouses. You're part of the Military Spouse Employment Partnership. And I'll pause there to say what this is is a partnership that we in the military have with companies. They join the partnership with the agreement and the commitment to recruiting and hiring and promoting and retaining military spouses, even as they move about the military, which of course they do. What does being in the partnership and what makes serving in the military community meaningful to you?

Kara Cardona:

Navy Federal is dedicated to serving all military branches, veterans and their families. We accomplish this through servicing our members through our global presence, which includes 372 branches, that includes 27 overseas locations, and I always like to highlight we do that in every time zone. We also support Department of [War's] Overseas Military Banking Program. I'm proud to say that our members are our mission, and we really show up for them in ways that go beyond just banking. I would say what truly makes us unique is that credit unions are not for profit, and we don't answer to shareholders, and we aren't required to submit quarterly earnings reports. What that does for us is it truly allows us to focus on putting our members first and their needs first. Our military specialization lets us meet members where they are, and we take pride in the fact that our team members truly understand the military life because so many, like myself, they've also lived it themselves.

As I talked about my career, I started in the branch. I think if you were to visit any of our branches around the globe, you'd also find that I'm not an anomaly. A significant percentage of our branch employees are also military spouses, and so they can truly understand what it means to live the military life. Also, for me, whenever I talk about our mission, I always come back to what an honor and a privilege it is to get up and go to work every day and get to serve those who serve our great nation. When I think about that — How many people get to say that I know that I get to work for a great company whose values and principles are really, truly founded on always doing the right thing and being there for our members when they need us the most.

Honestly, I get a little bit emotional when I think about that. When we're able to deliver for a member who's relying on us, and I've seen this through my variety of roles, whether I've worked in the branch or worked in the contact center, when myself or my teammates have been able to help their member get in their first car or move their family into their first home or send their child off to college, that's very meaningful and I'm proud to be a part of that work.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk about your career trajectory. Do you remember any programs like MSEP, again, the Military Spouse Employment Partnership? Do you remember any programs like MSEP during your time of building your career and, at the same time, navigating military life? Any programs like that or something you wish you had more of during that time?

Kara Cardona:

Yeah, I'm happy to touch on that. I'll kind of go back to my onboarding at Naval Station Roosevelt Roads. When I got to the base, like military spouses, obviously, you're sort of desperate to get life going. You want to build that normalcy. You want to have your routine that you had in the place that you left before you got there. One of the first things I did was stop in at the Fleet and Family Support Center. While visiting the Fleet and Family Support Center, of course, they were very helpful. They guided me through what the available job opportunities were on base. They also talked to me a lot about tuition assistance and resources that would be available for me personally as a spouse.

Now, for me, ultimately, I was fortunate enough to happen to walk into that Navy Federal and need to open that membership account, which led to a conversation about a job opportunity, and I caught a great break in doing that, but I can tell you that I always think that there's more that we can and should be doing to help military spouses. Because, as I just mentioned, you get to a new base, there's a lot of trepidation. With all of this, there can come a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. When you move to a new community or you're relocating to, let's say, like a new country, that can be really disruptive for the service member and their spouse, but I think the most challenging part for military spouses is truly knowing and understanding where their opportunities lie. Because of all that trepidation and uncertainty, what comes with that, I think the more that we can do to build and deliver programs to ease some of the burden, the better, and that's something that we're certainly always looking to do at Navy Federal.

A final piece that I definitely think that can get overlooked and another reason why it's important to focus on building up and enhancing resources for spouses is because we know that when spouses are taken care of, the better the service member can be when they show up each and every day. So whatever we can do to support in that regard, we're happy certainly to do our part here at Navy Federal through those partnerships.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, that's a really, really important point to make. Everything that we do here, everything, is to make sure our war fighters are able to focus on the mission. We can all relate to when life happens back at home what it does to your ability to focus at work. Can you share with us — do you remember any times when that big military life moment happened to you, and how did you navigate that with your family?

Kara Cardona:

Yeah, and I just touched on this a little bit. I'll go back to that first big PCS move for me and arriving somewhere where I didn't speak the language; I didn't have any friends; I didn't have any family. All of it was just such a big change, and really what I learned from going through that was to really try to embrace it all with such excitement. Even though I had a lot of anxiety of, "Hey, I've just arrived in a new country. I don't know anyone. I don't speak the language. Am I going to be able to get a job?" All of these things that were sort of percolating through my mind, I thought about what a wonderful opportunity really lay before me

because, frankly, how many of my friends or family were going to be able to say that they had the opportunity to live abroad? So I kind of started to look at it through that lens.

I thought about the fact that I could really embrace the culture. I wanted to get out and about on the island of Puerto Rico and really explore as much as I could. And then I really wanted to focus on making friends because I knew that that was really going to help me be able to adapt to these new surroundings. I will share that because I feel like I really embraced the opportunity by sort of fighting that it was different or the challenges that lied ahead, I think that really uniquely positioned me to be able to ultimately find that job opportunity, but to make lifelong friends. When I think about my time there, I met some of the best friends in my life. I can tell you two of my closest friends today are friends that I met while we were stationed abroad there at Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, and they will always stay with me. Regardless of the complexity or challenge, I would just say embrace it, make the most of it and think about it through the lens of excitement and what an opportunity it truly can be.

Bruce Moody:

What was a defining factor for you at the Navy Federal Credit Union for you and your career success?

Kara Cardona:

Oh, I love this question because I love this program that I'm going to talk to you about and I think of it so fondly. I had the opportunity while I was serving as a regional manager based out of our Atlanta office to be tapped to participate in Navy Federal's Executive Development Program, and that was really a pivotal moment for me. Up until the point of being selected to participate in this program, I had spent basically my entire career working in branch operations and working either as a branch leader or a leader of leaders and leading teams. The opportunity to participate in this program really changed me and shaped me in many ways, and I say that because not only did it take me out of my comfort zone of doing what I was used to doing day in and day out, but it really helped immerse me in enterprise initiatives that otherwise maybe I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do.

As a part of the program, I got to participate in curriculum coursework through University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. There was a large focus there, which was just a unique experience for me because, although I had attended college through, I would say, more non-traditional means, this was an opportunity for me to be in the classroom with other executives from across the enterprise and truly network and learn from each other. Another part of that program was the requirement for a rotation, and so I had the opportunity to rotate into a new role and do something completely different outside of the branch operations role that I had been doing for many years up until that point.

I also saw in that program that people from across the enterprise were really rooting for you. My teammates, my supervisors, and my leaders, they all truly wanted me to succeed. So whether that support came through one-on-one conversations, mentorships, anything that was involved in the program, I would say, for me, that's when our culture at Navy Federal really came alive and I saw that we are so invested in our workforce, learning opportunities and everyone's success here.

It was a wonderful experience. It was a two-year learning opportunity for me. Ultimately, that rotation is what led me down to Pensacola, Florida from Atlanta and opened the door for many, I would say, wonderful roles that came after that.

Bruce Moody:

Kara, what I'd like to do is spend some time getting some advice from you to other military spouses and maybe starting off with just the fact that we move our families around a lot all the time. We know that many spouses are looking for ways to grow professionally despite frequent moves. What would your advice be for these spouses and their families?

Kara Cardona:

As I just mentioned, I sort of went through college through non-traditional means, and there's a reason for that right? One, I was a military spouse, and so there were moves involved and different challenges navigating that. But when I first returned to the States from Puerto Rico ... I'll share a little story with you. I had a great friend who was a stay-at-home mom. She had three kids, juggling multiple priorities, and at the time I was already working for Navy Federal. While I had the opportunity to complete some coursework while I was living on base abroad, I was still striving to achieve my bachelor's degree. I was chatting with my friend one day, and I noticed that she was logging in to an online class at Columbia College, and she was telling me how she was really enjoying the experience of being able to be flexible with her schedule, take her kids to school, be there in the afternoon to pick them up while still continuing her education.

I'll be honest with you, I thought it seemed very interesting, but I sort of questioned, "Is that something I feel like I could personally do?" But the moral of the story is she really encouraged me to do it, to try something new and so I did. As I got connected with Columbia College and I started taking those classes in the evenings after the working hours, I started to realize that this is something I can do. It's not what I'm accustomed to, but this is going to be great because it's flexible. I can still have my career during the day and can continue my education at night. What I always like to remind spouses of is that we are all on life's journeys at different intersections. So regardless of your circumstance, it's really all about being creative and still continuing to invest in yourself.

I would like to say it's certainly not a one size fits all and there's not one piece of advice I can give anyone, but if you're willing to adapt to your circumstances and just find different creative ways to invest in yourself, you're going to be successful regardless of what else is going on around you.

Bruce Moody:

Looking back, were there mentors, communities, maybe groups that made a difference in your journey? Where should young military spouses and professionals look to seek out mentorship and support?

Kara Cardona:

Through our executive development program, I had the opportunity to relocate to Pensacola, and I found myself in a very new and different role. At the time, the leader of my rotation was Debbie Calder, and Debbie was serving as the executive vice president for our largest campus there in Pensacola. As I mentioned, up until that point, I had only worked for branches, and so this was a great opportunity for me to rotate and try my hand at something new. I will say that Debbie was very instrumental in shaping and forming certainly my leadership style. She really changed the trajectory, I would say, of my career here at Navy Federal. She did retire in 2021, but to this day I definitely keep in touch with her and I still consider her a friend.

I'll tell you some of the ways she helped shape me. First and foremost, being a part of the community at our Pensacola campus was huge for us. Debbie, I would say, set the standard for that. She really encouraged her leaders to give back by joining boards or community groups and really encouraged all of us to get involved with local charitable organizations. Navy Federal started out small there, but we've grown into something very, very large, and Debbie recognized along the way there were really a lot of needs in the community. It was important and it was incumbent upon us as leaders to do our part to help build that community up and not just Navy Federal. That principle and what she instilled in me really helped shape me as a leader. I would say that since relocating from Pensacola back to our headquarters here in Virginia, I've really been intentional about our culture and the focus on our community. That was always Debbie's expectation during my time in Pensacola, not only that we valued community, but that we viewed it as our duty to give back.

I'll just say that all of the communities in which we operate play a huge role supporting our growth and development, and it's never just a one-sided relationship. I've really enjoyed watching our culture flourish in that regard and being able to be a part of that.

Bruce Moody:

On the finance side, for military families just starting out, what are some key steps in building a strong financial foundation and a sense of security?

Kara Cardona:

Well, there's a lot of support out there. If you think about it, there's tens of thousands of 501(c)(3) groups, and they all have really great intentions to support our service members and, I would say, veterans across the country. But I do understand that identifying the right place to turn for specific support, that can be overwhelming. I think we would all agree just about, all of us listening can understand, what a task that could be. That's part of the reason Navy Federal has really expanded partnerships, and I think that has been something very deliberate we've been doing, particularly over the past three years or so.

But one organization I'd like to call out is the Bob Woodruff Foundation. The Bob Woodruff Foundation works with dozens of partner organizations, and the goal there for them is truly to simplify the process and to get people in the military community connected to support. At Navy Federal, we certainly recognize the active duty segment of our membership. They

have different life circumstances and financial realities than just about anyone else in our country, so part of our strategy is built around supporting members when they face situations that truly can be unique to the military life. We really value organizations that support the military, their spouses and their families, such as Bob Woodruff, and we just want to make it as easy as possible for our members to connect with those organizations whenever they need help.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks so much for joining us today, Kara. Last question, and maybe this is just gathering up everything we've talked about and asking you to crystallize it. Finally, for military spouses or transitioning war fighters listening today, what's one piece of advice that you would share for building both a career and a life of purpose?

Kara Cardona:

I get asked this question a lot, and I think it's a really great question. The top advice I like to give people is truly be patient with yourself. When I think back on my career, I wish more and more I would've allowed myself to just enjoy the moment and what I was doing and not place so much emphasis on being perfect or analyzing where I was at at that moment in life. I think we would all agree we're our own worst critics and we're always, always evaluating ourselves of where we are at at any moment in time. So if I could go back, the answer for me is easy, don't be so hard on yourself, don't put unnecessary pressure on yourself. If I think back, there were many nights that I probably stayed up way too long, trying to make something perfect that could have been achieved a little bit differently.

All along, I think my message for everyone is, generally, people are rooting for you. This sort of goes back to my example of the executive development program. I have learned in life that, genuinely, people want to see you succeed, and that doesn't take away from the fact that you have to work hard and that you have to be committed. Certainly, if my daughter was here right now, she would tell you that there are things in her life that I missed out on. There's soccer games that I didn't get to go to, there's school events that I missed, but now I don't have the opportunity to go back and do those things again. I think it's about finding a balance, but there's always a trade-off. I would say what I learned through all that is there's always a silver lining, right? It certainly helped me become a more empathetic leader.

I'll sort of close by saying this. If you're ever trying to decide between work and sort of a family commitment, I always ask the question of, "Do you get a do-over for that?" So if it's a championship game, that's not a do-over. But if it's a routine practice, well, maybe you can bend a little bit on that. So like anything in life, you do need that balance, but my advice is is that you don't want to look back and certainly think about something you missed that is really incredible when you don't have a chance to do it over.

Bruce Moody:

We are so grateful to have you with us today. Thank you for sharing your thoughts, your story and your advice. We really appreciate it.

Kara Cardona:

Alright. Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed being here today. Thank you for letting me share a little bit of my story.

Bruce Moody:

You're very welcome. Thank you so much.

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