

Military OneSource Podcast — Making Friends and Finding Support as a MilSpouse

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

It is great to have you with us. We're going to talk about military spouses and the lives they lead. So we'll begin with introductions, and I'm going to take my microphone and wave it to each of the three of you. So, I'll start with you, please.

Kristen Gilbert:

I'm Kristen Gilbert. I was a former Army officer myself and married a fellow officer, so I've been on both sides, but I'm now a proud Army spouse for the last 12 years. And I think it's an amazing lifestyle, and it's great that we can get together to talk about it.

Bruce Moody:

Great. And you?

Shannon Lazarchick:

My name is Shannon Lazarchick. My husband is a colonel in the National Guard. So, we are from New Jersey. So, we, five years ago, decided to do the full Army life. He's always been active guard reserve, but I gave up my teaching position, and now I get to be a full-time military spouse. So, it's not been a long time.

Bruce Moody:

So, we're going to unpack that. That's really interesting, because a lot of people have a journey like that. And good morning.

Melinda Chapman:

Good morning. I'm Melinda Chapman. My husband's the sergeant major over at DIVARTY [the 1st Infantry Division Artillery]. So, I have a bit of a mix here. I've been both a stay-at-home mom where I could be a full-time military spouse, and I've been a working mom as well as a military spouse. So, balancing that I think is something that we really have to work on rising to the occasion of and have a whole different perspective there as well.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so there's a lot going on in your personal lives and the lives change and you're also part of a community. So maybe we'll start with what it means to be a part of a community of military spouses.

Kristen Gilbert:

I think that these military spouse friendships that we share, they are all formed through ... we have so many shared experiences, whether you live on post or off post or in the guard or active. We still have so many shared experiences and a mutual understanding. And so, I think that this area, we should be women supporting women, as well as military spouses if they're male, and that we can really just bond with each other and hunt the good stuff.

Bruce Moody:

So what is the differences and the similarities? What are the things that bring you all together?

Shannon Lazarchick:

I think one of the major similarities, I should say, is the high intense stress of moving around so much. Some of us don't get a long time to prepare. We were given 30 days' notice to come here. So, it's just drop everything, leave the friends that you made, and switch over to somewhere where you know no one and might not necessarily have family in the area. So, it's so important for the spouses here to be the best friend, the sister, the cousin, the mom that one another needs. So, I think it's great to just jump all in.

Bruce Moody:

And when you do see somebody who's new, what are your thoughts when you see somebody new in the community?

Melinda Chapman:

So, I've been there before, as we all have, been the new person, not knowing anyone. And for those of us that might be more introverted like I am, it feels like an even bigger hurdle. I try to welcome that person, introduce myself, shake a hand, maybe even give a hug if that person is a hugger. Just let them know that it's okay to be the new person. Try to be open-minded to other people.

That's one of the amazing things about being a military spouse, I think. You get opportunities to meet people from all different walks of life, from different areas of the nation, even overseas. It's a very great opportunity to meet those people and to get to know them and the different cultures that they bring to the mix.

Shannon Lazarchick:

I don't know if I finished because, no, not that you cut me off. You said differences. It's a great opportunity to celebrate the differences, and I had never met anybody who lived overseas. So, hearing other spouses' stories about how amazing it was and how it's a must have and traveling with your family and getting to see what's out there, and even people just from different areas of the country, learning about their traditions and what they do for holidays. So, it is fun to celebrate the differences and learn new things.

Kristen Gilbert:

If I see a moving truck in the neighborhood, to me that is such an opportunity to make a good friend. And so, when we see moving trucks, we try to get there within a day or two. But there have also been times I've lived off post and we were the moving truck, and nobody was at our door. It was a civilian community, but I ordered these cute cards that said, "We've been planted on your street."

And I went to Lowe's and Home Depot and bought flowers, and I personally was intentional to meet those on our street. So, I think that with regards to friendships, if it's not granted upon you as a new arrival to a neighborhood, you can still be purposeful yourself to reach out and get to know the street.

Bruce Moody:

And right now, roughly three-quarters of military families are off base. How does that impact the sense of community or the ability to connect?

Kristen Gilbert:

It probably results in less of a military climate in your neighborhood because they're likely civilian. So, if you can really try to connect with the organizations on post, your unit Facebook pages or coffee groups, that's a way to grow. But you can also just be a great role model and example of a positive military family if you live in a civilian neighborhood.

Shannon Lazarchick:

I have a very quick story that happened to us. Okay, good. We decided when we were in Alabama to send our children to a private school, and most of the school was civilian. They didn't really know too much about ... Even though we were surrounded by an Army base, it wasn't the predominant culture in the school. However, I just decided that I was just going to go all in.

I volunteered for everything. I was on the PTA board. I was helping run the golf tournament. I just dove all in. And I found some moms were not receptive to it, you know? So, I got a little bit of harsh feedback and I was like, I don't know, what am I doing?

And another military spouse sat me down and said, "I talked to that person and I explained to her that military spouses have two choices. We could either come in, sit in our hole and just go about our own business, or we can jump all in while we're here and make the best of it. Shannon chose to jump all in. And she doesn't know how much longer she has here, but she wanted to make an impact while she was here."

And then she said she saw the light turn on and she's like, "Wow!" So if you are experiencing that, just keep trying. Let's turn that light on for other people.

Bruce Moody:

That's right. Are there other stories that you want to share about being new into a community or just being a new military spouse?

Kristen Gilbert:

Shannon and I are both new this summer to our on post neighborhood here, and we quickly organized neighborhood social events and it was a great turnout. I'd say we had over 70 people out there. And we did an ice cream social, a hot dog social, as a way to form friendships among not just us, but also our children.

And I think that has really shaped the vibe of our neighborhood. And now when you see the bus stop come and go, you see ladies still connecting and talking on a daily basis. And I think that's so uplifting because the lifestyle is challenging. We face long patches of time with our spouse away, but really close friendships make it still a rewarding experience as an Army spouse.

Shannon Lazarchick:

And that's how we met each other through the social that she planned. And we found out we were actually in Alabama together at the same time, but we didn't know each other, so we met here.

Bruce Moody:

So, for those who are new to the military, that is what's going to happen. You're going to keep bumping into the same people over and over again. So certainly there's deployment. We talked about military life, but there's a lot of other things happening in addition to that that just make it tough for military life. I'll give you an example.

Some people have jobs that are just so highly classified, they can't talk about anything. And that's understood when the person gets home and it's understood in the family, but it can really lead to anxiety, stress, communication problems. How does a network of spouses help both the spouse and the service member deal with the pressures of military life?

Kristen Gilbert:

I think if there were to be a bingo card of squares of what it's like to be a military spouse, on it you would see interrupted vacations, uncertainty about where you're moving next, short-term assignments, children born in different states each time, and we would probably all check them off and win at the same time in this game of bingo. And so close friendships make life I think so much more bearable in a good way.

Because instead of commiserating, which you can do when there's hardships, my husband is currently deployed for nine months, but I think that so many different personalities and flavors of having friends. You've got the seasoned wife that has been in it for many, many years. You have the new wife that is excited about what the Army has to offer. You have those that you can rely on as the jack of all trades. Having different types of friendships makes your time at that duty station enjoyable and ideally one that you look back on as a great time for you and your family.

Bruce Moody:

There's a mindset that I've encountered, and I want you to comment on it; and that is someone who has a need, someone who has an issue and they can handle it. And they want to do that because, and this is the thing, they don't want to take the spot that somebody who really needs it should take.

They're going to be okay. They'll take care of the problem on their own. Somebody who's got more serious problems is the one who really needs that space. That's wrong. Everybody's situation is valid and deserves help and support. And from a military spouse network point of view, what are your thoughts on that?

Shannon Lazarchick:

The one thing that came to mind that was something that was surprising to me, because I did tell you I haven't been doing this life for such a long time, was how people do reach out in times of need. So on social media, I was so surprised to see people saying, "Hi. I just moved here, and I need a friend." I'm like, what? What do you mean you're just publicizing you need a friend?

But kudos to them for doing that because that is how you do it. And I met some great people who are like, "I just moved here, what should I do?" And I was like, join the spouses club, come to coffee, we're doing that. And people came and we became great friends. But I think because of those downs, I saw somebody saying they were going to give birth, and they don't have a network here.

And what do they do with their other little? Oh my gosh! Every mom can sympathize in that position. So, there were so many people who said, "Bring your little here. I'll watch your little." So immediately we jump in because we understand what everybody's going through, and we'll be there when times are tough, but we'll also be there to celebrate the big things too.

Bruce Moody:

So, let's talk to somebody who hasn't reached out and maybe is anxious to do so. So, I'll give you an example from a guy point of view. There's a certain amount of time after somebody tells us their name that it's okay to say, "Oh, what was your name again?" After that, you're not allowed to ask their name because you're supposed to have remembered.

And there's a guy next door to me and they're just, "My name is hey." So maybe there's somebody who says, "I blew my opportunity to reach out." What would be your recommendation to them for taking the first step to introducing themselves into the community?

Melinda Chapman:

Try not to be shy. It is scary. Again, I'll mention introverted people, I am one of those people. So, it is a struggle for me to reach out at times just for introductory or for any issues. Try to be open-minded to that because we are definitely open-minded to anyone that's willing to reach out, and we will try to reach out to them, of course, if we are aware that there's an openness. Sometimes there isn't, and that's fine.

We're not all at a base where our extended family may not be anywhere nearby. Some of us have the extended family closer, some further. Some of us, it's our experience, we don't live on base. So, our community ends up being more in the civilian community that we're in with some military spouses sprinkled in from time to time, depending on where we are, of course. But don't be afraid to reach out. It is scary to take that first step when you're in a new place especially.

But even if you've been in a place for a long time and you just haven't had the courage to take that step yet, there's so many resources out there where for one, we're looking for you to reach out so we can make that connection and share those resources with you, welcome you in so you know you are welcome, and to just form that bond, that relationship, build the rapport so we can be helpful to those that may need it or just are looking for a connection.

Bruce Moody:

And so, I'm mindful of the fact that you're identifying yourself as an introvert and I'm sticking a microphone in your face.

Shannon Lazarchick:

And she's doing fantastic.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, and you're doing great. And if you don't mind, I'll just press on that a little bit. Meeting people where they are, I mean, there's a place for everyone, including someone who maybe finds some of it overwhelming. Talk about how there is truly a place for everybody.

Melinda Chapman:

There really is. One of the big life experiences just personally where I've seen all different walks is the times that I've been able to be a part of the FRG.

Bruce Moody:

Undo that acronym for the rest of us.

Melinda Chapman:

When I've been able to be a part of the family readiness groups and provide support in that aspect. That is for not only the military spouses; it is for whoever that single point of contact is that the soldier has entered. It can be a mom. It can be a brother, a sister, a cousin. At times it can be a girlfriend or a boyfriend, of course. And I think it's important to reach out for one and to share what the opportunities are to be a part of that family readiness group.

During those times have been the biggest times where I've felt the most connected because those are the times for me since we live off base, those are the times when I get to speak to more military related people. And I say that related people, not just spouses because it is a whole lot more than just spouses. There's a special community within the spouses, of course, but there's an even bigger community in addition to that.

There are things you can do with the family readiness group that are just as simple as the key caller position where maybe you do a few quick phone calls to family members, and share some information. It's not huge information. It's not bad information. It's just sharing information. That's a really good way to get involved, but not necessarily physically put yourself in front of people, which can be more nerve-racking at times.

If you are good with numbers, you can work with the treasury side of it, and the name of that position is leaving me for some reason right now. You all might be able to help with that, but that's one you can do without putting yourself in front of anyone at all. Or you can go out there and lead an FRG, and you can mentor and give guidance and advice to those that are willing to come be a part of that.

And the more you're able to bring in for people that are willing to be involved, the better able that family readiness group is to support the families of the battalion or the unit or the battery that the spouse is in. So it makes you more effective.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. Yes.

Kristen Gilbert:

I would advise a new spouse if they're new and introverted to just at least in the beginning to more often than not say "yes" if possible when you're invited to things, to coffees, or to even when you're out walking your dog meeting people, even if it doesn't seem like someone that you think will click with. In the beginning, if anything is asked of me, I raise my hand and say yes.

And I think that some great friendships and especially unexpected ones, have formed from it. And so, in the beginning, if they can just have a good attitude about being willing to participate, I think that they could do so at their comfort level, but to just say yes in the beginning.

Shannon Lazarchick:

I always think of it like when I tell my sons when we go somewhere new, find somebody with a common interest that's the same as you. If somebody loves coffee then you know, invite a neighbor to the coffee shop.

Bruce Moody:

We all love coffee.

Shannon Lazarchick:

It's simple. It could be as simple as that. Again, like you said, if you're an introverted person, but you're still wanting to find out what's like in the community, volunteer somewhere small and volunteer and do something as simple as stuffing envelopes, but you're there. You're hearing what's going on in the community. You might meet another volunteer. There's different ways to get involved, and the spouses club is always a great outlet as well.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk a little bit about social media. There's the productive and the non-productive. Let's put them in those two categories. What are your thoughts about that?

Kristen Gilbert:

I think for us as a senior spouse in the military, I can see on social media the unproductive conversations. And I don't choose to get involved on the social in responding necessarily, but I will private message them on the side if it's something that I felt that I could be as a positive influence towards. I think that there's so much good and it's easy to commiserate and social media may be a place that you can do that.

And there are plenty that will understand what they're going through, but I think we can use this experience in an uplifting and rewarding way and really help shape them to possibly change their attitude or improve their circumstance.

Shannon Lazarchick:

Yeah, because you said, there's anxiety, there's stress; there's a whole bunch of negatives that come along with this life. So, feeding into the negative comments and the negative scripts on social media is just going to spiral you even further down that hole. Celebrate the greats and focus on the positives. When somebody says, I'm looking for a friend, if you want to be that friend, be that friend. Be positive. If not, keep scrolling.

Bruce Moody:

And to get back to what you were saying before, and maybe this would be an interesting way to wrap this up, it's if you've been around for a while, it really isn't weird to show up in a new community and say, "Hi, I need a friend." Because for one reason, the people around you, the people who are hearing that are going to totally get it and they're going to probably think that's pretty awesome. So maybe I'll just go around, and just invite any last bits of advice or inspiration and maybe something we can aim toward people who are very new to the military.

Melinda Chapman:

So, one of the things I wanted to be sure to mention was just this day and time, there's a lot more dual income families where the spouse is also having a career of his or her own. So that makes it tougher when you are trying to have a successful career and put your efforts towards being a mother as well as having your career, but also wanting to share the time that you do have with the family readiness group or supporting that so you can be a part of the other military spouses, the military spouse community.

Try to be intentional, as the other ladies here have said. You do really have to be intentional. I have found that during the times when I'm not as intentional, it can make you feel like you're on an island at times to where maybe you don't have that community, but it could possibly be that you need to have some more intentionality or maybe there's a shift and you're looking more to your immediate community.

For us, we're about 30 minutes off post, so it's not always easy to get onto post for socials or things of that nature, which are great things. I think they're great opportunities, but we do our best. I do my best to be involved in the things I can right there in my own immediate community as well. We go to a local church there. I help to volunteer in the nursery so I can help out in that community and still share the little bit of extra time that we may have to build a community right there near us, physically near us, geographically near us. So sometimes it might be a mixture.

Sometimes your community might be even more of the people off post than it is the people on post, and that's okay too. It's important to have a community one way or another, I think. So, if it needs to be closer, then that's what ...

Bruce Moody:

It doesn't mean coming to a base and making friends with absolutely everybody. There's going to be small groups in between and that's natural in the way it's supposed to be. Any final thoughts as well?

Kristen Gilbert:

My husband is currently deployed, and I am just so grateful for the military spouse friendships that we have been able to forge fast. And each duty station that we live at is temporary. Whether it's one year, three years, less or longer. We really can do everything in our power to make it a great assignment and one that is full of making memories with friends.

And so, I'm really grateful for the spouse friendships that we've made. Even during difficult chapters with deployments, we are able to do hard things and we can surround ourselves with military friendships that understand us and support us along the way.

Bruce Moody:

And to bounce off that, again, for those who are new to the military, just so you know, the more difficult the chapter, the harder the lift, the more stress you're experiencing. That's where the friendships that really make a difference, that really last. That's where they happen. And so, if you're in a tough spot, guess what? You're in some really fertile ground for making some amazing friendships. I'm going to give you the last word.

Shannon Lazarchick:

Okay.

Bruce Moody:

Alright, there you go.

Shannon Lazarchick:

I heard someone do a cheers, and it was very well said, how they came into a new community, got a new job, and somebody was celebrating the christening of a baby. And they felt a little left out because everybody knew that teacher and they had all seen that baby be born, the marriage and all of that stuff. And she's like, they have a history here and I don't have this.

But then she thought of her military spouses and we all have a history. As soon as we meet someone, we're friends. If your child needs something, if you need something, your service member needs something, we have your back. So, we're military strong.

Kristen Gilbert:

As a testament to that, on the day that my husband deployed, Shannon sitting next to me here offered a lasagna fully made for our family. And I think that we've experienced so much goodness out of this community and it's unlike any other.

Bruce Moody:

Any secret ingredients or special to your lasagna?

Shannon Lazarchick:

I'm from New Jersey, so we do Italian well.

Bruce Moody:

All right, good, good. All right. We'll end it on that New Jersey lasagna note. All right, well, thank you to the three of you for being part of this conversation. We really appreciate it. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can make a question or comment about the conversation that we've had today.

If you have an idea for a future episode, again, that link is there for you. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast, this very, very podcast, wherever you listen to your podcast, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.