

## Military OneSource Podcast — Spouses Grow Together in a Collaborative Workspace

### 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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we are talking with folks at Travis Air Force Base in California, and we're talking about something that they've got called SPRIING which is an acronym, and it stands for ... Standby. It's Spouses Professional Reach Innovation Inspiration Networking Gateway. And again, they just collapse it down into being SPRIING. And that's what we're going to talk about today. I've got Keith Burgess with me, and I want to introduce Keith. And then along the way, as we have this conversation, we've got some military spouses. They're going to join us. We'll introduce them as we go along. But Keith, why don't you jump in and tell us a little bit about yourself and then we'll get into talking about what SPRIING is.

#### **Keith Burgess:**

Of course, Bruce. So, as you said, my name's Keith Burgess. I am actually the integrated prevention and response director here at Travis Air Force Base. So, all that to say my job is to oversee all aspects, whether it's how we get after primary prevention and preventing harmful behaviors to actually that response component if something were to happen and how our agencies move out and provide after action care.

#### **Bruce Moody:**

Okay. Great. Great. So, we're talking about SPRIING with very, very high confidence that nobody outside of this conversation knows what that is except for people perhaps at Travis Air Force Base. But again, it's Spouses Professional Reach Innovation Inspiration Networking Gateway. SPRIING. And so, let's just get right to it and talk about exactly what this is.

**Keith Burgess:**

Yeah. It's a space that I am proud to say it's for spouses, made by spouses. And all that to say, instead of trying to predict what a spouse needed, we brought spouses to the table from day one of the conversation. And they're still part of the conversation how we execute operations day to day. Really the space is to foster a culture of family readiness, whether that's through networking with others while their kids are playing, achieving milestones in their professional career or being inspired by various events happening within this space. But ultimately, it's literally in the title, Bruce. We're looking to improve that professional aspect for them, reaching new bounds, creating innovative ways to get after the thing, inspiring things through events and things happening and getting our spouses to network and build ultimate community as we move things forward to try to enhance our family readiness.

**Bruce Moody:**

Oh, great. And with that, we're going to bring in our first spouse and that's going to be Kristen Johnson. The reason I want to have this conversation today is twofold or maybe threefold, depending on how you bracket things. Maybe as a place, as a function, other bases, installations may hear about what you've got going on at Travis Air Force Base and say, "Yeah, we can put something together like that." Another way of listening to this podcast is to listen basically to the spouses. How are the spouses working with each other? And maybe just the character of that interaction and support that spouses are providing each other, maybe that's something that would be a takeaway from this discussion. And in a more broad way of looking at this, we really look at the understanding that strong military spouses, strong military families contribute to strong military warfighters. And that's really what it's all about. That's really why we're here. So, Kristen Johnson, why don't you maybe introduce yourself and then talk about some of the challenges that military spouses face in their careers, and how do you address those challenges by using SPRIING?

**Kristen Johnson:**

Well, yes, thank you, Bruce. As you said, I'm Kristen Johnson. I am an Air Force veteran of 20 years, but I am now a full-time military spouse. My husband is still serving. So, we've kind of spanned the whole gamut of active duty and then the dual military lifestyle and now, like I said, I'm a full-time military spouse. All my time serving, I thought I understood the challenges of a military spouse and the challenges that they face, and then I became one and I realized just how real those challenges are. With reference to the SPRIING space, obviously historically our military spouses experience a greater rate of unemployment than our civilian peers, but more importantly to me, it's also the underemployment of our spouses. Most of the time our spouses are highly

educated and they're moving potentially to different locations. Maybe that specialty area isn't there. But also, the workforce is changing. There are more remote operations and places to work, but also the spouses are in many different phases of life, so many are going to school or they're studying different programs that again, are online.

And what we found during COVID was these spouses are feeling kind of isolated and they wanted a space to call their own. So, with that, the SPRIING space can step in and many times spouses don't feel or don't know that they have a space that is theirs on a base. A lot of places, whether you're a spouse or not, if you're just a civilian, you don't know if you can enter this certain building or what resources are available to you. So SPRIING can bridge that gap.

Here at Travis, it is co-located with the Military and Family Readiness Center, which has tons of resources. But again, if you don't know that that's there, it's hard to just walk right in. It can be intimidating. So SPRIING can bridge that gap. And like Keith had mentioned previously, SPRIING is built by spouses and for spouses so we can tailor what this space looks like. And that's the same for each individual base. This population here at Travis may have different needs than a different base at another location. So that's the beauty of SPRIING space. It can adapt to what the spouses need where we are. We can essentially meet our spouses where they are. It goes beyond the four walls of the SPRIING space. It also goes beyond the gates of the base. Our community is invested in this space and they're also invested in spouse employment. So, we can use this platform to not only connect our spouses to the community, but more importantly our community to our spouses. Let them understand the needs of our spouses and get them plugged into our community both personally and professionally. There's a lot of different ways that SPRIING can be utilized to network within our community and grow and strengthen that military community.

**Bruce Moody:**

The aspect of the buy-in for spouses seems to be a unique aspect to SPRIING, but maybe Keith, you can talk about when we look at some of the other programs that are already available on base, where does SPRIING land? What makes it unique?

**Keith Burgess:**

Yeah. I think that goes back to what Kristen was talking about, is what makes the program unique is the full collaboration. We have strong community leaders that are highly involved to get this moving forward and are constantly providing that aspect. But what makes it even more unique is the aspect of the Air Force as a whole always has all of these resources, always has all these programs, but our spouses don't always fully understand if those can be utilized and accessed without their active military spouse being there. So SPRIING is really that touch point to start to bring those resources to spouses in a place that they feel comfortable coming to attending and they know it is for

them because we purposely put it in the name to lessen those barriers and really drive towards changes.

Because as we all know, readiness and resilience starts in our homes. If our big A Airmen cannot have a stable home life because their spouses are dealing with not able to get a job or childcare, healthcare issues, etc., we're experiencing that in their day-to-day job and when we talk about sending folks down range and executing the mission, those all start to be hindrances in the back of that airman's mind that are not allowing them to be a hundred percent safe on the job. So all of these components tie together, and that's really what makes this so special is that, again, we are bridging that gap in so many ways here with SPRING space, whether it's with the professional space co-located in our MFRC, our connection corner co-located in our chapel that has a play center for families to reach our spouses at any stage of their life, any milestones that they're trying to get after, but ultimately letting them drive how this program changes and adapts to the needs that they need here in California at Travis Air Force Base.

**Alicia Meiers:**

This is Alicia Meiers, and I am a military spouse and I'm just going to hop in here a little bit and offer my point of view. I guess I would ask the audience to think about what it would be like in their current job or position or career path to have to pick up and potentially move geographical locations every two to four years like most military spouses do with their active-duty member. And that's really, really challenging. A lot of the times it can affect the career path that you're on. It can also change the career path or your trajectory in general and that's honestly what happened for me. My bachelor's degree has absolutely nothing to do with the work I do now. And I graduated in 2012 with an interior design degree. I got offered a full-time position as an entry-level designer right after an internship and then we backed that right up with orders to England and I had to turn it down, and we left and we went to an overseas location. And at the time it was just my husband and I, but we definitely had a hard time finding a place for me to follow that same career path there because certifications and degree conversions and everything like that are very different in the UK versus the United States.

And so, I ended up diving into the world of marketing via the Department of Defense for the 48th Force Support Squadron and that's where I got tied into marketing. And then from there, realizing that is a very compatible career path for remote work. When we PCSed again in four years, we ended up at F.E. Warren in Wyoming, and we lived in Colorado and I was able to hop around to different marketing agencies that I felt were the sort of businesses that I wanted to be working for and that has guided me on a path to be able to work in a remote working field where I can continue the same sort of career path. But I'm very cognizant that that's a very huge privilege that a lot of spouses don't have. If you are in nursing or ... I mean, there's so many different career paths where you have to go into a physical location or maybe your employer isn't as apt to let

you work from any state or any location. There's a lot for spouses that that interrupts your entire career path. You have to find a new job every two to four years and that is a heavy load, especially when you tie in if you have children, if you have sports and education, self-improvement and mental health. Those things are really, really hard to keep on one steady path if you don't have a consistent job.

And some moms are stay at home moms, but even that is such an isolating thing sometimes. And so I think having SPRING space for working in general or just having the space to work where ... My husband and I looked at renting a space for me to work, just a single office cubicle, and that's a very big, incurred cost that not everybody could afford and sometimes those spaces are anywhere from six to \$1,000 a month and that's not feasible. So, to have a space like this that from an interior designer is very well-designed, it works very well for video calls and it's very professional looking. But then also having that adjunct space in the chapel where at some point my daughter, and I did go there and play because before she was in preschool, that was a great space to let her utilize where I could sit on my laptop on the floor and I could get stuff done and she was occupied.

But there's also other spaces over there where you can work it out in the foyer. But that was just such a great space to PCS to and immediately have available to be able to not feel like I was stuck yet again where I had to figure it all out yet again. It was just a very cohesive ... Helped our family life and my work life sort of flow into the PCS and then get settled and then re-situate. It just made that whole transition much, much easier.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thanks, Alicia. That's really interesting because there's a whole lot more than simply job placement. It goes beyond that. There's where do you work? There's how do you balance all of the other stuff that you absolutely have to balance if you're a military family? And maybe Kristen or Alicia, if you want to talk about what that means. And maybe the way I want to ask the question is in the idea of creating long-term professional relationships and opportunities for spouses. When you're looking beyond job placement, what does SPRING bring to you?

**Josie Jones:**

Hi Bruce. I'm Josie Jones. I am here as well. I'm also a spouse here at Travis Air Force Base. I'm a stay-at-home mom. We have been here nearly a decade. So, when it comes to PCSing and things like Alicia was speaking about ... Finding a new job every two to four years, I have not had that experience because we have been here so long. But I will say SPRING has been amazing as far as the opportunities to meet other moms with children. I have a wonderful one-year-old and we utilize the playroom all the time. We're there nearly every other day. And it's been something for being a first-time mom and not having any friendships or not having anyone that can relate to your experience

of not having family with you when having a child for the first time, I have built a village through those other moms I have met through the playroom. So, I've been very grateful.

**Alicia Meiers:**

That's huge. It really is.

**Josie Jones:**

It really has been amazing. It's always clean, well-kept. The toys are amazing and versatile. Kids as small as three months old and as big as five years old. I've met all sorts of moms and dads. Some working, some not. Some who do utilize the working space, which I think is amazing, while their child plays. Yeah, it's been great. I'm very grateful to have it here at base.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thanks, Josie. So that makes ... Everybody's in the podcast now. So, we're all together. We're all in this conversation and everybody just feel free to jump in when you feel inspired, but I'll go back to Keith for a moment and just kind of get your sense of what it means to you. What are some of the more rewarding aspects to working with military spouses and how does it maybe change your view on professional growth?

**Keith Burgess:**

Yeah. I definitely would have to say one, I've worked with three phenomenal command spouses that constantly drive it. And as we get deeper into the ranks and talking with more spouses and those in the room with me today and so many others, it is 100% evidence of true resilience, Bruce. To hear their stories, to understand what they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis. I speak from being a prior active-duty person. I definitely was naive in the aspect of being fully focused on the mission and knowing I need to go and fly another mission the next day and what that required or focusing on my deployment and X, Y and Z and forgetting about all of the things that my wife took care of in the home life.

And now being on this side of it and having this awesome opportunity to connect with spouses and hear their stories and see, it definitely has broadened my perspective on things that I definitely took for granted. So really, I share that in the sense of this space is really to get after all of those aspects. It's to identify the amazing behind the scenes things that our spouses do every single day to make this mission happen. And when we sit here and talk about success, whether it's getting 30 aircraft off the ground in less than an hour and X, Y and Z or supporting a POTFF mission, it's really the spouses behind the scenes that truly made that mission happen that are often forgotten about. And I

think that really comes down to why this initiative of SPRING matters so much. It really lets them know that they are important because they truly are, and that we would not be successful as we are without everything that they do day in and day out.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, a question for Alicia and Josie, what are some of the biggest challenges or barriers that you've faced in advancing your career or connecting with others as a military spouse?

**Alicia Meiers:**

Absolutely. I can touch on that. This is Alicia. And I would say, I don't know if it was you or Keith that had mentioned it, areas where we belong. Like sometimes we could go, and we could work at a coffee shop, we could stay at home and work from our kitchen table, but having a space that's dedicated to us just allows us ... Same as any active duty member. You want them to be focused on the mission. We need to be focused on our work if that's what we've chosen for that career path, and we need a place where we can set everything else down and focus on that. And I think part of it for me was staying at home and I can certainly work from home, and I definitely do. I mean, my daughter's in speech therapy; my son's in karate; he was in soccer. Those are a lot of scheduling juggles to handle and in order for some of that to not fall onto my spouse.

Or my spouse is coming up on a deployment. Sometimes it is just me and oftentimes it is just me. This has given me a space to be able to put down worrying about my kiddos because I know that they're at school or they're at preschool or the CDC or what have you. To be able to put down any housework, put down any meal prep, put down any of the appointments and the scheduling and the schedule battle and just be able to focus. It's a space where clear mind, clear focus, and you can definitely utilize this space to do that. You're not sitting at a coffee shop; you're not paying to rent out a separate office working space. It's just a space where you can come and do work. And honestly that sounds like such a simple concept, but you would be surprised how much of a struggle that is for a military spouse. There's so many other balls in the air to figure out where everything's going to land, and this just sort of helps take care of one of those. So, I'm just very appreciative of the space.

**Josie Jones:**

Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more. I mean, there's no doubt that our active-duty spouses, their job is incredibly hard. I mean, they never know when they have to pick up and go or deploy, anything. But the mental load of the spouse who has to move along and change their life in so many different ways and keep up with that, keep up with the household tasks, their own personal growth and career and making sure that they don't get lost in it, that's something you can easily fall into. So just having, like you mentioned, a space where you could come meet other spouses, network around base, possibly pick up other opportunities in the area and around base, it's amazing, and I definitely have taken advantage of that with the playroom and the SPRING center.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, I want to hear more about the networking and the mentorship and how they work together and how you're supporting each other.

**Kristen Johnson:**

As you've heard, it is so much more than just a professional space or a place to meet. It is about the mental health, it's about the connections, defeating isolation, that resilience. It's about all of those things. And the networking. Because it's in two different places, we have the flexibility to create networking opportunities. Recently we did at the beginning of the year, an event called Revive and Thrive in our space that was for spouses to do just that. How are we going to kick off 2025? So, events like that can bring our spouses together. Also, the mentoring. As I mentioned earlier, there are spouses in all phases of life. Yes, I have been around a while. I am seasoned, if you will, but I have been through a lot of these situations and some of our spouses who have less experience in this military lifestyle, it's hard. And getting to get together in a place that is comfortable and welcoming, and we can all share those experiences is to me what this space is all about. And making that connection and realizing that we are not alone in all of these struggles, if you will, as we go along, and we can celebrate one another as well.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, you described yourself as seasoned. We'll leave it at that. But probably somebody who has some been there, done that kind of opportunities to pass down lessons learned to folks, spouses who are new to the military or maybe new to the next twist and turn in the military life journey. What does that mean when you're all together?



**Josie Jones:**

It means just talking to one another and being open and honest about the mental health aspect and how nobody grows up expecting to start a family thousands of miles away from their mom, who you always assumed would be there for you. And just having each other's back and asking each other how you're doing, what do you need, being each other's support and meeting in these spaces where you can talk and let your children play and just enjoy that moment together. It has been terrific on my mental health, I know and many moms across base.

**Alicia Meiers:**

It's also just a space where I think you can feel validated. You don't have to explain your struggle like you would to a friend or family or a friend that you maybe met on the street or somebody else in your career path because you are completely seen, you are completely heard, and you don't have to explain the backstory because these other military spouses get it because they're living it. And I think that's what's really hard for a lot of military spouses is to feel connected and to feel understood and to feel heard and we are completely seen. And it's just a space that, I think it offers a lot of other opportunity for networking, yes, but also just the camaraderie. Like other people who totally get it. They get the crap that you are walking through every single day and it's hard sometimes. And if you think about it from like the active-duty side of things, different shops talk to different shops and you all get each other's struggle, right? You can complain about the same things, or you can problem solve towards the same things.

It's the same for spouses. We are all going through the same stuff. We understand the same struggles, whether that's scheduling, trying to work, trying to increase your income, trying to find enough time for mental health and food prep and work time and investing in relationships or maintaining relationships from a distance. All of that is work. All of that is adding to the mental load. And this is just a very simple, easy solution at no cost. I think that's also one of the points I don't want to have go missed is just that these spaces are totally free for spouses to use. There is no charge for childcare. Obviously, you are there with your child. They're not providing childcare, but it's still an open playroom space for you to use. Or the SPRING space here at MFRC is ... There are open office spaces, there are closed office spaces. You can adjust the lighting. You have a little bit of autonomy over this space. But also, it is an opportunity to meet new people and it is an opportunity to network with people who understand and are going through the same struggle or are in the same stage of life and share their wisdom if they're in a different stage of life. And I think that that's just huge.

**Bruce Moody:**

It would be really neat to hear if any other installations listen to this podcast episode and try to replicate what you guys are doing at Travis Air Force Base. Keith, I have a question for you. What role do innovation and adaptability play in SPRIING's approach to supporting military spouses with their professional goals?

**Keith Burgess:**

That was the discussion from day one and that's how we created it. SPRIING is made to adapt based off constant input and feedback. And I believe Kristen said it best in the beginning is that we have different spouses in different areas of their life. And we also know eventually time is going to demand something different, whether it's telework one day to back into the office the next, and the list goes on and on. And we created this space, again, for spouses by spouses to hear from them, always a seat at the table on how we need to constantly get after issues and adapt this program, adapt what we are doing to make sure they receive what they need. So again, we put that into the framework of this program from day one to make sure that we can navigate any channels of waters we need to ensure they have what they need to be successful.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, Keith, when you talk about adapting, how are you looking into the future? What do you envision the future of military spouse development to look like and how do you see SPRIING as poised to help out?

**Keith Burgess:**

Yeah. I'll answer this question in a sense of the conversation, because this definitely is not a Keith's vision. This is a group discussion with spouses involved, our community involved of what they see that future to look like. And really what we're trying to hone in at is getting aspects, whether it's, "Hey, this is what certain events looks like," so our spouses put together the Not Your Mama's Ball. And that gets into those aspects of their formal military events and our spouses may not have the experience to understand the nuances that come with those. So it's one of those ...

**Bruce Moody:**

You're talking about a service birthday ball, for example.

**Keith Burgess:**

Yes. Exactly, Bruce. So, there's so many things that happen and go on where our spouses may want to support their spouse and go to an event, but they're nervous about, hey, what is the expectation? Or, "Hey, how can I really access this resource?" And the list goes on. So, when we talk about that adaptability, it's bringing those components to our spouses in spaces that they are comfortable, which is SPRIING. We listen to their needs, they have a voice, we bring those resources and activities to them to continue moving forward.

**Bruce Moody:**

This is really interesting. Kristen, maybe to wrap this up, you could share any examples of spouses that you've worked with and stories you can share.

**Kristen Johnson:**

Sure. I've got a couple that I would like to share. One, starting off with a brand-new military spouse, also brand new to marriage and so all kinds of new things coming at her. She got involved with a standup of a SPRIING space. So, through that whole process where she was in and around other military spouses, she was formally, informally being mentored as we went through this process. And she went from, like I said, brand new military spouse talking to somebody about how the design was made on the wall or where the logo came from, which yes, that's important, but she went from that to briefing a two-star general on this is why this space is so important and this is the impact it has made on my life. So, she has come full circle from within a matter of months just not knowing where she fit in and not having necessarily knowing her role, if you will, to having the comfort to be able to stand in front of this military officer and tell him how empowered this space has made her in just the confidence in navigating military life.

Two other examples. Two military spouses came to the installation and didn't really have the specialty area that they needed for employment in the local community. So by going through SPRIING space, they found resources that gave military spouse scholarships for certain courses so they could advance their career through some additional professional development and both of them now have different jobs as to what they came in and thought they were going to be doing, but are making it work with their new skills that they were able to, like I said, find those resources through coming to a SPRIING space. And then you've also heard about the entire package, the resiliency and the mental health aspect. One of our spouses was coming to a book club that was happening in the community space and when it came around to her, she said, "I'll be honest, I did not read the book, but my family and I just recently went through a miscarriage. I knew this was happening today. My spouse is gone and I didn't want to be alone and I knew I could come to this space and find support." So, all of those things to

me, wrap up really what SPRIING is and what it can be. It's not about the walls, it's about what happens with our military community and our military spouses within those walls.

**Bruce Moody:**

Nice. Thank you for sharing that. And I would really be interested in hearing from installations that are hearing this episode and interested in replicating what you guys are doing. To find it online, again, it's SPRIING. That's SPRIING with two I's because it's an acronym, which means Spouses Professional Reach Innovation Inspiration Networking Gateway. So, I just want to thank you all for being with us. Josie Jones, Alicia Myers, Kristen Johnson and also Keith Burgess. Really appreciate you all taking time to be with us today.

**Josie Jones:**

Thank you.

**Keith Burgess:**

Thank you.

**Kristen Johnson:**

Thank you for having us.

**Bruce Moody:**

Absolutely. And I want to remind everybody 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 send us a question or a comment or maybe an idea for another episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, which includes YouTube, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.