

Military OneSource Podcast — Foreign-Born Spouses

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

My guest today is Nikki Herb. Nikki is an Air Force spouse. She was born in the Philippines. And with her marriage, she found herself transported into military life, into a whole new world. There were ups and downs. And today, Nikki uses those experiences to help fellow foreign-born spouses as they adjust to life in the military. Nikki, welcome to the podcast. Great to have you with us today.

Nikki Herb:

Hi, Bruce. Thank you for having me. How are you?

Bruce:

I'm well. I'm really excited to speak with you today. Tell us a little bit about yourself, where you're from, and how did you meet your husband?

Nikki:

So, I am from the Philippines in a city called Manila. So, we met online back in 2015, but did not meet [in person] 'til 2017, and then we got married in 2019. So, I became an official military spouse.

Bruce:

OK, so that's when you joined the club. So, where are you now living, your first assignment as a military spouse?

Nikki:

Oh, my first assignment was overseas in Okinawa in Japan. So, right now, we are in Utah. We are connected to Hill Air Force Base, and this is actually my second assignment. That kind of feels weird to say, but I feel like that's how it is. I ended up in Utah because of my husband's assignment, yeah.

Bruce:

So, as a foreign-born spouse, and you're newly married, and you're living in a totally new environment, what are the things that you had to learn, that you had to get used to, that you had to adjust to? How did that transition work for you?

Nikki:

My first assignment, so that was overseas, so that whole thing was very unique. I had to learn the local culture, which was the Japanese culture on top of the military culture. For the Japanese culture, it was just how they treat their days and how they treated each other. And then for the military, it was the acronyms and the protocols.

Bruce:

You're sort of outside looking in. So, do you sense that there are some benefits to being a foreign-born spouse, or what would you consider being some of the best parts of being a foreign-born military spouse?

Nikki:

Not a lot of people have this kind of opportunity, like seeing everything, the benefits of it all, the beauty of each culture. I saw the beauty of the Japanese culture where they were gracious and friendly, and they found it so nice when you go out of your way to learn their language. That was one thing that I appreciated. It was never in my plan to live in Japan, and I never exposed myself in their culture. So, being put in that position to be in a country where I did not expect myself to be in, and embracing their culture, is really nice.

One thing I really loved about the Japanese culture is you just felt safe. You felt safe because you knew that no one's out to get you or no one's going to hurt you. I remember seeing children like as young as 4, going to school, walking by themselves, and no one was going to bother them. And you knew not to bother them because that was how they were raised. They were raised to be independent, and that was part of their culture.

Bruce:

OK. So, you're experiencing all this, you're watching all this, and interestingly, because you became an Air Force Key Spouse. So, first of all, tell me what an Air Force Key Spouse is, but then how did that experience of watching what was around you and learning from the different points of view and experiences, how did that play into you becoming a Key Spouse?

Nikki:

A Key Spouse is a volunteer for the Key Spouse Program, which is spearheaded by the commander of an Air Force squadron. We are basically, what I can say, described as, we're basically a bridge between the squadron and the civilian spouses. When a spouse has questions regarding the base that we're at, we're usually the ones who would try to

give them resources or show them where things are. For example, if we have a spouse who is a first-time mom, or a new mom, or an expecting mom, we usually reach out to them, welcome them, and give them suggestions or resources. For example, there's a new parent program on base, and we would explain to them what that is or when there is a deployment that would happen or will happen, we usually reach out to them and let them know, "Hey, if you need anything, we're here." That's the gist of what the Key Spouse Program is.

Bruce:

Well, I have to say, I'm thrilled that you're out there talking about the New Parent Support Program because I love that program. I think it's terrific. It warms me to know that it's being talked about like that. But let's stay on this for a little bit because you are talking to a lot of foreign-born spouses and you're helping them along and they're experiencing new things; they're new to the area or they're new parents. What should the rest of the community understand about some of the challenges that foreign-born spouses are facing?

Nikki:

Isolation is a huge one. It's a huge challenge because it can trickle down to a lot of things. I personally have experienced that kind of predicament. I remember when my husband had to go on a TDY, like a work trip, he left the car somewhere else that was not in our apartment because I couldn't drive. The thinking back then was I didn't need it because I didn't have driver's license, and that was a crippling experience. I didn't like it, to be honest. And I think, now, when we talk about it as a couple, he regrets doing what he did. Because we were newlyweds at this point, so he wasn't really thinking. And it's funny to look back now, but in that moment, it was just like, I remember thinking, "What did I get myself into? That doesn't make sense. How am I in a country that isn't my country?"

I can't drive. I can't go to the base. We lived off-base. So, that was another thing. My husband had an apartment off-base. It was five minutes away from the base gate, but I can walk to the base, they can let me in, but it's such a wide base. It would not make sense for me to walk inside of the base. But it's just those little things that we don't think about when we're in a comfortable environment. Like those little things... "Oh, it's nothing. I'll just go drive, go to the store. It's not a big deal." But when you are a foreigner in a foreign country, it's a new experience. And it's also because of the culture that you're from, too. If you're not from a country that heavily depends on driving and you depend on public transportation, that's where the culture shock comes into.

Bruce:

Especially in the U.S. In some countries, in some cities, mass transit is the norm. It's how you get around, and others, you're looking down a long stretch of road before you see anything. And so, it does seem like for a service member, there is a lot of learning by making mistakes as you are realizing some of the things that you maybe take for

granted. So, Nikki, to what degree is the need for communication to really talk about absolutely everything, even the things that you assume are settled within a relationship.

Nikki:

I think having those hard conversations, for example, when you're dating and getting to know each other, lay it out there. I remember my husband telling me, "Oh, I'm looking for a woman who understands that my career right now is my life, and that requires someone understanding we need to make sacrifices." And I remember reading that message and I go, "Well, that's not me." And having that hard conversation is one. And also, once you're in it, and you're engaged or whatever, talking about finances, moving me from the Philippines to Japan, it's not cheap. It was very expensive, and everything was out of pocket for us.

I remember, I only had two [pieces of] luggage with me, and I could only fit a few things there, and those were the things that were just essentials. Everything else, I had to leave behind, I had to move it all back to my parents' house. I didn't have movers take my things. Everything was out of pocket. And those are tough conversations to have. I deem them hard and tough because when we're dating someone or when we're engaged, we're in that honeymoon phase. We're in that fairytale land where, "Oh, I found the right one. This is my forever." And you kind of don't want to have those conversations with them because you don't want to ruin the moment. But, if you have that conversation now, it actually helps you guys in the long run, especially in the military.

Bruce:

So, Nikki is a Key Spouse, an Air Force Key Spouse. Are you bringing them to resources on the installation or what sort of resources are you putting them in touch with?

Nikki:

I usually put everyone with MFRC, the Military and Family Readiness Center, and also Family Advocacy.

Bruce:

So, you take them to the Family Advocacy Program and you take them to the Military Family Readiness Center.

Nikki:

Those are my two go-to's. As a Key Spouse, those are my two essential offices, buildings, agencies that I go to because I use them.

Bruce:

Well, yeah, and I bring that up because you and your husband have learned some really significant lessons, and you look back with a little bit of bemusement at some of the conversations that you had early on, and I get that. And I know you're trying to talk to your fellow foreign-born spouses about how best to proceed, but it does help to have a

little bit of help along the way. Is that some of the motivation behind directing them to places like the Family Advocacy Program?

Nikki:

Yes, it is, especially in the beginning of our marriage. We've been married for four years, but I feel like we're in it longer just because of the life experiences that we've had to deal with. I remember being so stressed out about my Green Card because we were counting down the days when we had to move, and we moved during the pandemic. So, that was another factor. There were just so many things going on outside of our marriage that it was affecting our marriage within. And I remember we went to some agencies and asked for guidance on how to work this around. And honestly, it has helped us. My husband's not a talker. I'm the talker in our marriage. And he would always preach like, "Oh, our marriage is going to be about communication."

So, I remember trying to look out for programs or anything that would help us. And surprisingly, he was open to it. My husband, because he's the one serving, he had that attitude where he's not open to communicating or going through counseling or workshops on communication because it kind of was deemed differently. This was a few years ago, and I would have to explain to him, "Hey, I get where you're coming from, but this is for our marriage. If you really want this marriage to last long while we're doing this military career of yours, you have to be open to this." And he jumped on board.

And honestly, our first workshop on communication, he did better than I did. Yeah. And I was like the one dragging him into this workshop, but I was the one who ended up closing up and he was the one opening up. And I go, "See? Oh, wait, isn't it nice we're here." Yeah. And that was essential in our learning, in our marriage, and we're still learning. We're still working on our communication and that this is all because of the resources that we have on base. One of the things that I had to go through as a spouse was when my husband deployed last year, we only had a certain number of months for his deployment that ended up getting extended, and I didn't take that well, and I ended up reaching out, and she was very patient with me, and we talk things out.

Bruce:

Well, I'm glad to hear that. As we try to wrap up this conversation, Nikki, I really want to thank you for being with us today. And I want to thank you for helping your fellow spouses and showing them the resources that are available to them. I would point out in the program notes of this episode, we have a few more. One of them is an article on Military OneSource U.S. citizenship through military service. Another is personalized support for military spouses because a whole other world that we can get into perhaps in another episode would be the Green Card, and the tax identification number, and Social Security cards and all of that. But it was really great to focus on some of the emotional issues with you today. And I wonder if you have any final words for a foreign-born spouse new to the military and trying to figure it all out?

Nikki Herb:

Being a military spouse is hard. Being a foreign-born military spouse is hard on another level. Please do not be afraid to ask for help. Ask how the military life works, ask about what your spouse does and get an understanding about it. And also, ask your spouse the hard questions. Ask them things like the finances, the communication, all of these things are very important. I know that certain cultures, that's not something that we talk about. But, in order for us to grow and learn within this military life, we need to ask the hard questions. And always stay true to yourself.

Bruce:

Nikki, it is so great to have you with us today, and I'm so grateful to get to know you and to know that you are a member of the military community. So, thank you for joining us today.

Nikki:

Yes, thank you for giving me this opportunity, too, and I am so glad that we met at the right time, at the right place.

Bruce:

Well, I know we have a lot of issues we didn't even touch on, so maybe we'll get together and do another episode with you.

I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we would like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Click on it and send us a note. Let us know what you think about today's episode. Let us know if you have any questions or if you have maybe an idea for a future episode.

And be sure to subscribe to the podcast because we cover a wide range of topics that help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for joining me today. Take care. Bye-bye.