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Voiceover:

Spouses in the Fight, Advocates for Change. Mrs. Susie Schwartz has long been a champion for military spouses and families. She is the spouse of former chief of Staff of the Air Force, Norton A. Schwartz. Mrs. Schwartz works passionately to support spouses and families in achieving their goals by promoting selflessness, teamwork, and a special sense of community. She is active in numerous organizations that support our military and continues to work hard every day toward finding solutions to those challenges that affect our military families.

Mr. Eddie Mentzer is Associate Director of Military Community Support Programs for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has more than three decades of experience supporting service members and their families. A senior leader within the Department of Defense, the spouse of an active duty Air Force member, and the parent of a military child. Mr. Mentzer brings a unique perspective as a military spouse. He is focused on easing challenges faced by our military families.

Mrs. Kathleen Hedden, is a board certified acute care nurse, practitioner and spouse to the United States Air Forces in Europe, Air Force's Africa Command Chief. She collaborates with leadership in each wing to find possible solutions to challenges in military spouse employment, childcare availability, and other quality of life initiatives. Mrs. Hedden has a heart to advocate for military spouses and families, especially those living overseas.

Mrs. Heba Abdelaal is the Armed Forces Insurance Air Force spouse of 2022. For nearly a decade, she worked as a congressional staffer and policy aid in the United States Senate. Once she became a military spouse in 2018, Mrs. Abdelaal developed a passion to empower all service members, spouses, and families to use the tools of advocacy and civic engagement. It is this passion to improve military family quality of life that gives her purpose.

Mrs. Melissa Shaw is a communications professional serving clients nationwide in her role as Vice President of Digital Solutions at Pioneer Utility Resources. She leads multiple digital product offerings, manages a large remote team and advocates for fully remote spouse employment opportunities. Mrs. Shaw provides a unique perspective on what life is like as an interservice transfer spouse from the United States Army to the Space Force. Her experience and desire to help others will support spouses for years to come.

Kari Voliva:

Welcome friends. We are so happy that you're here. I am Kari Voliva, AFA's Vice President for Member and Field Relations. I'm honored to introduce our moderator for today's Spouses in the Fight panel, Mrs. Sharene Brown, spouse of Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Charles Q. Brown, Jr. Mrs. Brown has accompanied General Brown on 20 assignments around the globe. Raised in a military family, she is an avid supporter of active duty, civilian, Air National Guard, and Air Reserve Airmen and their families.

She understands the valuable contributions of a military spouse to the Department of the Air Force. Mrs. Brown's mission is to bring awareness to the quality of life challenges that impact military families, particularly in the areas of childcare, education, healthcare, housing, and spouse employment. This led her to create the Five and Thrive Initiative designed to highlight preventative measures, promote best practices, and foster community partnerships. Mrs. Brown, on behalf of the entire AFA family, welcome.

Sharene Brown:

Well, thank you, Kari, for that warm and welcoming introduction, and also for all the work you and your team has done to make this happen today. I'm especially grateful to the Air and Space Forces Association for this opportunity to host our series, One Team, One Fight, to include our spouses, families, and communities, as well as our Space Force Panel, People's First Session. Addressing the quality of life issues for our Department of the Air Force is not only relevant but significant to our Airmen and Guardians and their families. A special thank you to my Thrive Team for their work on all the things working for Airmen and families.

So it is my honor to be the moderator for this panel. Spouses in the Fight, Advocates for Change. Thank you for being here, especially our spouses, both in person and online. There is no doubt our spouses make a difference and serving alongside their Airmen and Guardians every day, you our spouses are often the agents of change and I'm excited to hear from our panelists today on the ways our spouses are in the fight too. So let's get started.

So Mrs. Schwartz, this first question is for you. A working spouse on your Air Force journey, a strong advocate for our Air Force community, you bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to our panel. As we come together to celebrate 75 years of our Air Force, we see many examples of our spouses, both past and present, both continuing to add tremendous value to our rich heritage. As I'm sure you've witnessed firsthand, it wasn't always easy. And in many instances, spouses have had to fight to improve childcare, education, healthcare, housing, and spouse employment, since the very beginning.

Your contributions as a military spouse have clearly made a tremendous impact and you've played in a critical role in various efforts, including the service wide establishment of the Key Spouse Program and the Center for the Family of the Fallen, located at Dover Air Force Base, just in name a few. What contributions are you most proud of to date?

Susie Schwartz:

Thank you. I think she might have said them all. No, just kidding. I've been racking my brain trying to think about what am I'm most proud of and I'm proud that I fought to be able to go to work. I got in trouble for it, but we've survived and that's not an issue anymore. I'm proud that I stood up for families and I tried to have a voice. When we were at Hurlburt, I got a drop in daycare center built, if you can imagine, for families who the mother or the father didn't work and they could drop in their child. But I think the day that Norton and I drove out of town, they reverted it back. So it only lasted... They were doing the dance of joy as we drove out of town and they got their break room back after we left Hurlburt.

But I'm joking, but not joking because it was very successful. But mostly what I'm proud of, I loved Dover and I love McKee's Spouse Program, I love EFMP, I love that I got my husband to agreed to have a school liaison officer at every base and he did it in front of a group and surprised his staff. Not sure it was a good surprise, but I'm proud of that. But for the lasting legacy or the part that I think about now is that I'm glad I took the opportunity when I had it to try to make a difference. You only have a short time. And yes, I worked until my husband was a three star. It wasn't the most successful career because I went back and forth when he had a command and I wasn't working, when he came up here, I could work and I worked until he had his third star.

And I went down and I said... it wasn't that I couldn't work anymore, it's just that it wasn't fair to my employer. The last job I had, I was only there for eight months and I just couldn't do that to them anymore. But I'm proud that when the opportunity presented itself, I knew my mind. I wasn't afraid to speak up and I made a difference.

I heard from someone at the Warrior Games and she came up to me and she said, "Ma'am, I hear your voice in my head all the time." And what I had said to her was, "If everyone likes you, if you're not

making some enemies, then maybe you're not doing your job right." And as a spouse, that's even harder to do because you only get things done by convincing others. You can't tell them to do a darn thing. So I'm proud that I was able to find my voice, take the hits, and believe me, there were many. I'm sure I made many enemies along the way, but I don't regret any of it. And at the same time, I hope, and I believe, and I know that I inspired others to find their voice and do their best to make a difference. That's what I'm proud of.

Sharene Brown:

Thank you, Susie. Susie, you have so much to be proud of and we're so grateful that you're still in the fight. So one more thing though. Can you tell us what inspires you to continue fighting for our military families, especially our military spouses?

Susie Schwartz:

Sure. Two things. Norton and I chose to stay in the DC area because it makes a difference. Air Force general officers tend to run to Colorado Springs or to San Antonio, both lovely places. But to be supportive, and we swore we would be supportive, we would not be the person that sends nasty grams to the current sitting Chief of Staff of the Air Force. And I think we've been successful. I don't think we've sent any snot grams to anybody.

But I chose to be involved because I thought I could still make a difference. There's a brief moment where you still got the contacts, you can still make some calls, you can still be involved, you can make a difference. And the greatest gift that was given to me, I say it was a gift, and one of the MSOY said, "No, ma'am. This was not a gift. You earned it." When I was asked to be a part of the Armed Forces Insurance Military Spouse of the Year program, and I think I have some in the audience of my MSOY family, I am proud of them because they make a difference across so many different areas. And I was their mother, maybe now I'm their grandmother, I don't know, I don't care. But I love to see what they have accomplished.

I love to watch them when they get an award and maybe five years later, oh my goodness, they're everywhere. They're doing EFMP, you have a three digit suicide prevention number thanks to an Air Force spouse, they're just everywhere. And one of them now... Anyway, I don't want to say... I don't want to go down the road to what they're all doing because they're doing great things and they make me proud every day and I'm still out there trying to make a difference.

And at the Warrior Games, if you guys have not gone to Warrior Games, you all need to do it. It is so fun. The Air Force has the best team. I just want to say literally and figuratively, we have the best cheerleaders, we got the best outfits, but we win, you guys, we win. And if you've never been, you have to do it. It's a great thing. So you can tell my passion is still there. I still love it. And why not?

Sharene Brown:

That's awesome, Susie, that's awesome. You are an inspiration to us military spouses, and thank you for doing for what you do. All right. So this next question is for Heba. So the goal of my initiative Five and Thrive is to highlight and promote best practices that foster community partnerships, so all military families have the opportunity to thrive. Through this initiative, families continue to reach out to me and share their challenges.

As the military spouse of the year for 2022, your platform speaks to spouse advocacy, particularly improving the quality of life for military families. So how has your experience as a congressional staff member influenced your personal advocacy as a military spouse?

Heba Abdelaal:

Oh, thank you for that question, Mrs. Brown. Well, I'll tell you what it didn't prepare me for, and that's to be on a stage, anywhere. But I had the incredibly fortunate opportunity to work for two United States senators that really believed in this aspect of when you take care of people, they'll take care of the organization. And so when you're working with constituents and constituents are reaching out to you, and most of the time they're reaching out to you because everything has gone wrong, everything's gone sideways, they don't know where to turn to for help, you're their last resort. And, "Gosh, why has it taken this long, 8, 9, 10 months to get a reimbursement?"

It's things like that that really... That's what families would reach out to us about. And that's when we'd start digging and say, "Okay, well is this an issue? Is this a larger, widespread problem? Is this something that needs to be solved by technology? Is it another resource problem? Do we need more staff? Do you need more personnel?"

And so you really learned pretty quickly on that all of those issues do have an impact on people. They have an impact on their day-to-day ability to do their work and to go in fully prepared, fully ready to meet whatever mission or whatever job requirements they're going to have for the day. Something else that really prepared me for, I think, becoming a military spouse. I was a congressional staffer long before I became a military spouse. And so I would see and hear these stories from military families and yes, we knew what we were signing up for, to come into the Air Force.

But at the same time, you learn that there are no easy solutions anywhere and there's no single solution that's going to solve or be the 100% solution for any one issue. And so not only did we have to get creative working with other members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, on both sides of the capital, but we had to get really creative working with MSOs and VSOs and community partners to really try to find those 1%, 2%, 3% solutions.

And while they seem small, the impact that they could have on a family and an individual was going to be huge. So I think that is what I learned most from being a congressional staffer, is that absolutely everything that we did touched every single individual's life in some form or fashion. And for every decision that we made, there was going to be an equal and opposite decision on the other end. And how do we move forward, share best practices, share ideas to make sure that we are serving as many people as we possibly can. That's really what my congressional staff experience gave to me.

Sharene Brown:

Wow, that's wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. I especially love the fact that you recognize taking care of the people than results in people taking care of the organization. So to that, let me just ask you, where do you encourage families to go when they have a quality of life issue and they want to be heard and addressed?

Heba Abdelaal:

Thank you again for that question. And I'll actually say, this was really a product that came from your initiative, Mrs. Brown, Five and Thrive. And thanks so much to the Thrive team. I hadn't met any of you, but I knew you were working quietly behind the scenes just like a congressional staffer would. So thanks for all of your hard work. Thanks for all of your support. I really cannot tell you how much your encouragement has meant to me. And because of the five big quality of life pillars, Mrs. Brown, that you helped us identify through Five and Thrive being the childcare, education, housing, healthcare and spouse employment, we have started, we have initiated conversations and dialogue about an initiative called the Family Life Action Group.

And the Family Life Action Group, or FLAG, is going to be a tool. It is going to be a tool for everyone, for all of us, for uniformed personnel, for family members, spouses, dependent, survivors, retirees, civilians, all of us that are affiliated with this military life, with the Department of the Air Force to help communicate best practices, opportunities, the solutions that you have found in your communities that work, help us scale those. Let's talk about it. Let's pitch them like Shark Tank. I think Mrs. Brown, you and I had this conversation many times. But hey, could that be an opportunity, something that works at Tinker Air Force Base, could we scale that and go send that somewhere else? Does it work at Edwards? Who knows? Let's have those conversations, let's have that dialogue, and we're just really, really excited for this to get off the ground.

Please, please, please, my co-leads would absolutely kill me if I didn't mention that we have a website where you can go to find more information. We're hoping to be fully operationally capable by February 2023. But I'm going to ask for your help. I'm going to ask for your help because when it comes to the five big Rs that the Department of Defense cares about, it's going to take every single one of us. And those Rs are going to be your recruitment, your retention, your readiness, your resilience and retirement. And so it's a military life cycle and it's going to take every single one of us in this room to help make it happen.

Sharene Brown:

Thank you, Heba. All right, now we can see why you're a shining example of our military spouse, and we're fortunate to have you as our military spouse of the year. All right, so let's jump over to Eddy now. Eddy, you ready?

Eddy Mentzer:

I'm ready.

Sharene Brown:

Okay. So thank you for being here with us today, first of all, and then having recently PCSd with your family and continuing to work remotely, you are a representative of an uneventful, if it can be said for a military spouse to transition and maintain employment. So in the most recent Blue Star Family Survey, respondent shows 63% of employed military spouses are under employed. Additionally, military spouses face unemployment rates that are four times the national average.

Although we have made great strides in our military spouse employment over the years, these statistics show we still have a ways to go. Eddie, as a military spouse and an associate director of our family policy for DOD, how have you seen employment opportunities for spouses improve and what still needs to be done to allow spouses to find a meaningful and fulfilling employment?

Eddy Mentzer:

Absolutely. Very good questions. And first, Ms. Brown and Ms. Raymond, thank you so much for putting this together, AFA as well. Having military spouses have a voice is critical at every aspect. And when we look how full this room is, and it's not all military spouses that are here, there's a lot of uniforms in here as well where their spouses said, "You will go to this forum." And so that's critical. The challenges that we talk about, whether it's spouse employment, whether it's childcare, these are challenges that are not new challenges. These are challenges that have existed for our military families for a long time.

But as we look at what the Air Force, what the Space Force, what the department is doing, there are so many new opportunities for it, we are in a new age and new opportunities and we know that Covid proved that there are opportunities much more than we ever anticipated for remote work, so that's one

of the areas that we have to continue to focus on. We have to continue to focus on that with our employer partners that have made these commitments to recruit and hire and retain military spouses, but we also have to do it in-house.

We have to look at ourselves as a preferred employer. And when I say ourselves, I'm talking the Department of the Air Force, I'm talking the DOD, who better to work across all of the challenge that we have, than military spouses themselves. When we look at the five colleagues that are on the stage with me, and I say colleagues, because I see each one of us as colleagues, because we are part of this fight, part of educating not just those that are here in the audience, the leaders that we have today, because I'll tell you, every one of our leaders understands the challenges.

This is not new to our leadership. Everybody gets it and there's a lot going on. One of the things that I'm very excited about, especially when it comes to that underemployment issue that we talk about. In calendar year 23, we are going to be launching, and we'll have more information on this coming out in December, we'll be launching a DOD funded Spouse Fellowship. This is a fellowship where military spouses will be placed into corporations, into companies, and they will be compensated. That means that they will have paid fellowships.

Now, there are organizations out there that are doing this right now and they've had amazing success hiring our heroes at the US Chamber are doing great things around this, but the fact that the department with congressional assistance is able to build onto what's already happening is huge. So if we can place our career ready military spouses into those employment opportunities, but here's the key, it doesn't help us if we place them in there for a 12 week period and they get hired at the end and then they PCS a year later and they lose the job, that doesn't help us.

We have to keep them employed. And that's really what we are going to focus on is finding employer partners that not only are committed to bringing in a paid fellow into their organization and then hopefully transitioning them into full-time employment, but keeping them employed as we move forward over time, as that family PCSs. And for the department, I can tell you across the board, whether it's our leadership in the Air Force, whether it's our leadership within OSD, we have a focus on these challenges. There is so much more to be done. There is no doubt whatsoever.

We also have to understand that we as a community, as colleagues have five amazingly successful women on this stage with me today. There are many other military spouses that are in the crowd right now that are watching us online that are extremely successful. Why? Why are they successful? What do they have? What are they doing differently that others may not? So how do we share that? How do we create forums like this? And this is one forum, we need more than one forum, but how do we share that success that has been able to... For me as a federal civilian for 32 years, how have I been able to carry that for 32 years with a successful military spouse that just graduated Wing Command? So how do we continue to carry that forward?

We have to have opportunities to share and spouses across the board have to continue to advocate and to articulate and it's more than just identifying the problem, it's also identifying the solution. And we have a lot of solutions out there.

Sharene Brown:

That's awesome. Thank you, Eddy. I'd like to say I appreciate your insights as well as your encouragement for all of us to continue working toward this issue. The other thing, I've heard a lot of spouses who reach out to me who are overseas and are talking about some of the difficult challenges that they have. So from your perspective, are there efforts to address those unique challenges our military spouses face while living in another country?

Eddy Mentzer:

Absolutely. One of the greatest challenges, you can look at spouse licensure when you cross state lines as a challenge. But when our spouses have to go overseas, we know that there are very limited opportunities. Not just in the communities that they live and thrive in within the installation, but outside as well. I'm sure we've got folks here that are from Aviano and Italy, and we know that the challenges that are presented living in Germany, living in Italy, living in Korea when it comes to employment. So the department is very aware of these challenges and looking incrementally at what can be changed, what can be done? I do think that in conjunction with that, it's very important to understand that that's not a Department of Defense challenge alone, it's also a Department of State challenge.

When we look at the rules that are in place in every country, of course every country is different. There's no standard anywhere, and it does become a challenge. We have to recognize that challenge. We also have to look for the opportunities. I think more and more you're going to see a greater utilization of non-competitive hiring authorities in overseas locations. We're already seeing a couple installations that are piloting, trying to use those authorities more. There's an Airman that I've been pen pals with or email pals with for about a year and a half that has really taken this on and the challenge that his spouse faced when they were in the Pacific. And so he's looking at solutions as part of his work and his efforts.

So there's a lot of people that are focusing in on this overseas challenge. I think there is some good news on the horizon. One of the things that we're very aware of and focusing on is what are called Digital Nomad Laws. And Digital Nomad Laws are being picked up across Europe. And really what it comes down to is the realization in Europe that non-residents can work remotely within countries. And we've seen some very positive movement in allowing for remote work from the states or from other locations. So I think that's something that if you're a military spouse that is overseas or is looking at moving overseas, the first thing you look at is, what is doable?

And the best thing you can do is to contact the Employment Readiness Office at the gaining installation because they are going to be the experts. If you're looking at your own business or if you're looking at working remotely for a company that you're already working for, you also want to check with your JAG. And at the gaining installation, they're going to be best positioned to tell you what is doable, but keep an eye on those digital nomad laws because I think those are going to have a resounding impact on our remote workers that are looking at moving overseas.

Sharene Brown:

Oh, that's awesome. It's great to hear that we have an overall view or a top down view of some of the things we need to look at, especially when you look at overseas assignments, the department of the state and just this digital nomad looks like it would be very much interest to a lot of us. So thank you for sharing that, Eddy.

So this next question is for Melissa Shaw. I'm so excited that she's here with us today. She's our representative from Space Force. Thank you for being here today. So our Air Force Family Tree has grown exponentially over the years and we are so happy to have with us today our Space Force representative to celebrate the last 75 years. As you may know, our force began with the US Army Air Service and became the US Army Air Core in 1926. In 1947, it became the US Air Force. Most recently, in 2019, our service tree expanded to even more with the Space Force. So Melissa, as an army spouse newly transitioned to the Space Force, were there any prior spouse experiences or insights that better equipped and prepared you and your family for this transition?

Melissa Gilliam Shaw:

Mrs. Brown, thank you for having me and it's an honor to represent the Space Force today. We are a very proud Army family. We have taught our kids well. If we say, "Go Army," in our house, they respond with, "Beat Navy." The 15 years of active duty that my husband spent in the Army also included two years at the Pentagon helping to stand up the Space Force. He started there in January 2020. He was one of the first 12 officers at the Pentagon helping stand things up. And I would say that the years we spent in the Army, we were not married for all of his time, he did two full deployments before I ever met him. But by the time I met and married him, he was teed up for his third deployment. And so at the end of our first year of marriage, he had been active duty seven years, and he had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan for 36 months of that.

We've been married 10 years now. We have three kids, born in two countries. We are on our sixth home. We have been stationed all over the place. We've had great experiences in adventures as I like to call them. And I think that some of the things that has taught us, one thing is it has taught us that we are in this together. I am never a victim to this lifestyle. We make every choice that we make as a family together. So every opportunity he gets in the military, we discuss it. Obviously there are times where he doesn't get a say in what he does, but when we're presented with choices, we make those choices together. And that makes me feel very empowered. And I would encourage the spouses in the room to do the same. That's something that I take from those years of constant change in the army.

Another thing that we take away from that, he is currently in command of a fairly high ops tempo deployment, Space Force Squadron. Not a lot of our squadrons deploy as frequently as his does. And so I feel like that our experience having... We were married and three weeks later he was boots on the ground in Afghanistan and the first person died in his unit a week after that. And so I've been there, I've made the lasagna, I've taken it to the other families, and I've lived that life and I think that the deployments that we support in his current squadron are not typically as dangerous as the deployments that he was on in Afghanistan.

However, I can relate really well, very firsthand to what it's like to be a newly wed and have your spouse leave or to try to hold down the fort when they're not there. I think that the Department of the Army has done a great job helping folks be able to, and I'm probably not going to use the right military language for this, but to be ready to move quickly. And so that's something that we're trying to help our families be prepared to do within our sphere of influence in this Space Force as well.

Those are a few of the things that we bring. It has been an absolute honor for us to have a front row seat to the development of this space force. Some of the spouses in the room today have taken me under their wings and helped me learn the way, and I have a lot of hope and excitement about the times that we have in the future as well as my gratefulness for years in the Army before.

Sharene Brown:

Oh, this is awesome. I'm sure that your experience will benefit so many of our folks and the folks who are transitioning from other services will benefit from your experience as well. So let me just ask you, moving forward, what role do you think spouses can play in contributing to the overall culture of the Space Force?

Melissa Gilliam Shaw:

I think that's a great question. One of the things that... anyone in the room who's touching the Space Force family at all right now, it's not a surprise to you that we are shaping the culture every day. Things are happening and changing the last 12 months, how many small changes have been made to uniforms? We're talking about the Key Spouse program. There are so many things that we are doing that we have an active opportunity to shape a brand new service of the military. That's a responsibility, and it's such a

fantastic one. Don't take it for granted. If you have the opportunity to contribute in a positive way, you don't have to have a mindset of changing something. You can just bring what you bring, bring your unique skillset, bring you, be authentic, bring that to the Space Force community, and we're going to grow.

We're going to end up even greater than we already are as a community of family and Guardians. I think that that opportunity exists every single day and we're having those conversations, for two years now, two and a half years, we've been having those conversations at our dinner table, two or three, four nights of the week we're talking about, "And this has changed and this has changed and this has changed." It's a fantastic time. And we all have, all of us who are in the Space Force family or who are even in influential positions within the Department of the Air Force, have an opportunity to have a positive impact.

Sharene Brown:

So thank you for being here today and sharing your perspective. It just seems across all services that the one thing about the military is that change is constant. So thank you so much. And so next on our panel, Kathleen, Kathleen Hedden. As a military spouse living overseas, there're incredible opportunities to travel, experience new cultures, and build an old [inaudible 00:34:24] community. However, there are also some unique challenges that come with living abroad. So as a working professional in the medical field, healthcare system, a key spouse mentor, a volunteer spouse advocate in your community for many of the Five and Thrive focus areas such as healthcare, childcare, and spouse employment, can you share with us how you find creative ways for military families to support one another through these unique challenges?

Kat Hedden:

Thank you for having me, Sharene and thank you AFA. So I have to say, be careful what you ask for. This is still fresh for me because we've never lived OCONUS before. And I always ask my husband, "Get us overseas, babe, please." I didn't ask for it in the middle of a pandemic or at the end of OAR. So be careful what you ask for. A lot of unique challenges, to say the least. And I have to say, I'm not one to reinvent the wheel. I really like to use programs that have already been in place. And so a program that I really want to talk about is our sponsorship program. It's been around for a long time, and I think PCSing is one of those areas and all of us, it's a rough one. It's probably one of the most difficult things as military families that we go through is PCSing.

And our sponsorship program has been around for so long, and I think we can just do it better. I think that there's opportunity to reach out to families early on, share things like, "Hey, you're going to need a two phone authentication or multi authentication. Once you get OCONUS, you gave up your US number and now you can't get into your bank account." I think somebody very close to us, he might have a couple stars on his sleeve, just went through this himself personally. So it reaches everybody at every level.

And I think that sponsorship program, we can just do a better job at reaching out, connecting families with other families that have something in common. If you have children, connect them with another family that has children because they have questions like, "What school am I going to go to?" Or, "I'm a nursing professional." And so, "Okay, I have questions about licensure, reciprocity, all of these things."

And I wish that someone would've reached out to me and said, "This is the expectation." And I think expectation management is really big. And if we can just get over that hurdle together a little bit better. Another thing, another program is Heart Link. I absolutely love me some Heart Link, Heba knows this because I invited her to Heart Link with me. And Heart Link it's very close to my heart because in the

beginning it was for spouses who, "Oh, you didn't know about the military and you just wanted to learn how to be a spouse." OCONUS it's so much better, it's great. It develops you into culture. It tells you about when you get a ticket for your first time. Cheese, German camera, that first flash you get on the freeway, you're like, "What just happened? What just happened?" I looked over to my husband and he was like, "And we just got our first ticket. I hope I looked good."

And just those conversations, and again, you don't know what you don't know. And I think just sharing your experiences and sharing what you've gone through. And I still feel I'm going through it. It's been 13 months, but I still feel like we just got there. I have to share, a person to reach out was a really good friend. Even closer now, but when I first got there, I was so jet lagged. Our family was so jet lagged. We had one of those amazing experiences with our transition and our flight being canceled twice. Two young children, our four year old, our 10 year old and a dog getting on the plane, off the plane. And then we landed, we got into TLF, I didn't know what to do first. Go pee, empty the groceries. What do I do first? Everything was very overwhelming.

And we get a phone call and it was, "Hey Kat, you're going to get in my car because I'm going to take you to the commissary." I was like, "Huh, go shopping now. Is that what I need to do? I don't know. I'm so tired, I'll figure it out." So she literally, she put me in the car, she took me over to the commissary and I'm going through the motions and I just put things in the cart and she put things in my cart. I didn't even know if I was going to need them or want them, but we were going through the motions.

And that kindness, that personal touch, it meant everything to me because when I woke up in the morning with at least six hours of sleep, I was so grateful to open my fridge and have things that I wanted, to have things for the kids. So it's things like you just don't know what you don't know moving overseas. And it's just that personal kindness that I think we lost during Covid and I think we need to get back to a little bit better. And so yeah, kindness is free. Give it out, plentifully.

Sharene Brown:

Well, thank you so much for sharing that invaluable knowledge. Just the opportunity to share some of your realities and the resources that are available to our community is important for all of us to hear. So with that, let me just say I want to thank our panel for being here today. General Brown and I, are so proud of the work our spouses do to support our military families and communities. As a military spouse, I am truly honored to be among you. Such great advice from our wonderful panelists.

As is evident here today, our military spouses have so much to offer Air and Space Forces as well as their local communities. I hope our panel discussion encourages us all, including our military leaders, to continue recognizing the value of our military spouses and the strength they bring to the fight. Living in collaboration with a theme of the United States Air Force's 75th birthday, We are and we will innovate, accelerate and thrive. Thank you for being here today. We couldn't have done it without you. Thank you.

