

Kari Voliva:

Welcome, friends. I am Kari Voliva, and on behalf of all of Team AFA and our incredible F2 Task Force, I am thrilled to welcome you to a celebration of United Forces and Families. This is our first F2 event ever, and we have 405 people registered for this event. Whether you're joining us in the room today, from your corner of the world, or gathered with friends for a watch party (shout out, Team Buckley!), thank you for showing up for our mil spouse community. You are helping bring awareness to the quality of life issues our Air Force & Space Force families are experiencing. By sharing space with us, you are showing these stories matter. Supporting our Air Force family has been an important piece of AFA's mission since its inception in 1946. More than 75 years later, we remain committed to supporting all Department of the Air Force families.

We believe that consistent focus on improving the quality of life for all airmen, guardians, and family members is directly linked to United Forces Stronger Families and the mission effectiveness of our Air & Space Forces. AFA created the F2 Task Force to unite forces and families to strengthen quality of life for Air & Space communities. This is a forward-looking, impact focused group of advocates dedicated to bringing awareness, resources and solutions to some of the toughest issues impacting our military families. Our F2 vision is a culture where strong families continually build stronger forces.

It is my honor to introduce your moderator for today's sessions, Lyndsey Akers. Lyndsey currently serves as chair of AFA's F2 Task Force. She is the founder and principal of Akers & Co, a boutique public relations firm serving mission-driven brands and entrepreneurs. She's a proud Air Force spouse of more than 10 years to Master Sergeant Yale Akers. Hi, Yale. During their nine year assignment within the Presidential Airlift Group at Joint Base Andrews, Lyndsey received her master's from George Washington University, worked as a staff member on Capitol Hill, served as the public relations manager for AFA and led marketing and corporate communications initiatives for a global architecture firm. A passionate advocate for military spouse employment and entrepreneurship, Lyndsey pushed the corporate ladder aside in 2020 and has since helped dozens of military spouse owned businesses share their stories. Among her many titles, she is most proud of her role as mom to two young children, who always keep her on her toes, at their new assignment in Florida at Hurlburt Field. Friends, please welcome Lyndsey Akers.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thank you so much. This is such a full circle moment for me, and it is an honor and a privilege to represent our F2 Task Force this morning as we celebrate the diverse experiences and the unique journeys of military spouses. But before we introduce our esteemed panel this morning, I'd like to turn your attention to the video monitors for a brief video.

Video, President Biden:

I also want to recognize CQ's family, his wife, Sharene. She is here. Do you mind standing, Sharene? I know that's embarrassing you. And their sons, Sean and Ross. Throughout General Brown's stellar career in the Air Force, CQ and Sharene have always put family first. And they both know from their own experience growing up in military families that it's not just the person who wears the uniform and serves, the whole family, the whole family serves and the whole family sacrifices on behalf of the nation. Sharene, you and CQ are true partners and our dedication to the health and wellbeing of the women and men in uniform and their families. Five & Thrive Initiative is doing important work to address the greatest issues affecting military families, childcare, education, spousal employment, healthcare and housing. And I know that Jill and I look forward to working even more closely with you on these issues through her Joining Forces initiative.

Lyndsey Akers:

Incredible, and a busy week for you, ma'am. What an incredible honor, not only for General Brown and our entire Air Force, but for you and your Five & Thrive initiative to be recognized. Addressing quality of life issues is critically important to meeting the needs of today's military family. And the women on the stage beside me are carrying the torch for our Air & Space Force families today. Mrs. Sharene Brown, spouse of General Charles Q. Brown, Jr., Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Ms. Brown has accompanied General Brown on 20 assignments around the globe. Raised in a military family, she's an avid supporter of our total force and their families. Ms. Brown's mission 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 & Thrive Initiative designed to highlight preventative measures, promote best practices and foster community partnerships.

Ms. Jennifer Saltzman, married to General B. Chance Saltzman, the second Chief of Space Operations, United States Space Force. Born and raised in Bowling Green, Kentucky, she met her husband during high school and has been married for more than 30 years. Since then, Mrs. Saltzman has traveled the world marking their 14th move to the National Capital Region. Ms. Saltzman has long been a champion for military spouses and families working tirelessly to support them by promoting family engagement, building genuine connections, and creating a strong sense of community.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome two of our Air & Space Force's biggest champions, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Saltzman. Today, we're also joined by hundreds of military spouses here in Arlington, Virginia, and virtually, each with a unique story of their own. Some have been living a military connected life for a few months and others have been for a decade or two or maybe even three. Many of us had experiences and a vision for our futures that preceded military life. Would you share with us more about your life before you met your spouse and how that impacted your vision? Mrs. Saltzman, we'd like to start with you.

Jennifer Saltzman:

All right. Hey, everybody. Thank you so much for letting me participate with you guys on this panel this morning. Lyndsey, as she just mentioned, I did meet Chance in high school. We grew up together. He had gone off to college and I was just minding my own business. I was studying to be an elementary school teacher at Western Kentucky University. And a summer, I think it was I was almost going to student teach, I was almost done, and here comes, I don't know, this fresh out of college kid coming back home. And at that time, the military was kind of shrinking a little bit. It took almost a year. It was kind of delayed reporting. He didn't go to Vandenberg to do his missile training. He was home for that year.

And during that year is when we kind of reconnected and I thought, "Sure, that sounds great. I'll just move to Montana." Finished college in Montana and student taught in Montana with this missileer. But I guess it worked out for the best, 30 years later. I don't know. I'm sitting with these people and all of you guys, so yeah. No, I definitely did not have military family. I did not grow up in the military, didn't know what that life was about. And just thought, "Oh, he's really a cute, nice guy. Let's just do that. I've never been to Montana. Sure, that'll be easy. We won't do it very long." But I feel that's what everybody always says. It's like, "Oh, it's just a couple of years," or, "We'll pay back a commitment to this," and then all of a sudden you meet all these amazing people and you have all these jobs.

And I think one job would come and then it's like, "Well, if something comes up that doesn't sound great, maybe we'll do something else." Well, the next job sounded great, and you get to do something else, and then you get to connect with other people and meet new friends. And then all of a sudden you can't really visit a state anywhere without having some connection to somebody and a friend of a friend

or, "Oh, you were my neighbor," or, "Our kids played together." So I did not think that this would be the life that I had. Like I said, I was a teacher and I have done that just a few times during these last 30 years. And one of them was because I didn't know when I had kids that apparently before you even have them, you're supposed to get them on a waiting list somewhere for preschool.

That was a new thing to me. And so when we were in California and they said, "Well, wait, are you a teacher?" And I said, "Yes." And they said, "Oh, we'll get your kids in right away if you just teach." And I was like, "Okay, done." So this is definitely... I appreciate too all of the initiatives that everybody has been working so hard for because none of our forces can succeed without those things, right? Families, strong families, and spousal employment and childcare and where you're going to live and all of those things, that's the way that makes everything work or not. We've come a long way, but we have a lot more to go. But it's all people like you that are using your efforts and energies to make things better.

Because back in Montana in 1992 you were told, "Hey, if you want to get a job anywhere, you will not say that you're a military spouse. You cannot write that down. They will not hire you because they know that you're here for a very short period of time and they don't want to invest the time and energy into training you into doing something and then losing you right away." So I know that we always have a long way to go, but we've come a long way too. So I'm extremely proud and I'm very excited to be with you guys and let's let Sharene go so I can be done.

Sharene Brown:

Well, thank you for that segue. Let's see. Oh, my gosh.

Lyndsey Akers:

Mrs. Brown, you grew up in a military family and you kind of knew what this life was all about. But I believe, if I understand correctly, you met General Brown as you were in college or beginning your professional aspirations. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Sharene Brown:

Yes, I can. So yes, I did grow up in a military family, Air Force as a matter of fact. And I will tell you, we had a number of travels, I guess if you were to put it that way. But I was somewhat fortunate. I got that spark to travel in my blood early. And so we had an opportunity to travel to a number of different states and then live overseas as a young child. And I think it was there the travel bug and language and culture bug kind of bit me. But I will tell you though, we were living in Panama at the time, I was in middle school I think it was, and we came back to the US and I was a little surprised that we were coming back and we'd travel every so often. And I remember saying to my dad, "Hey..." Or rather he said to me when I was in seventh grade that, "We're going to be retiring. This is where we're going to be living." And it happened to be in the Tidewater area, and he retired out of Langley Air Force Base.

And so I said, "Okay, cool," not really thinking about what retirement meant. And so another three years goes by and I remember going to my dad and saying, "Hey, okay, where are we going now?" And he looked at me, he says, "Oh, no, no, no, we're retired. We're going to stay here." And I looked at him and I said, "What? I have to graduate from this high school? What?" Anyway, so I ended up graduating from that high school and ended up going to college and whatnot. But after I left college, I ended up going to DC, coming here to this local area, and found employment.

I did a number of different things because I was kind of on a search. I was interested in travel, I was interested in languages, and I wanted to find something in that regard. Well, as I met General Brown, it was sort of an interesting story because we kind of shared this a little bit with our leadership when we were down with our Wing Command course. And so here it is. I know this sounds completely ancient.

Back in the eighties, it was the holidays, it was New Year's Eve, and I had invited some of my college friends to come spend the time with me. We were going to have a party, New Year's Eve party, at my residence there in DC. And I invited a few other friends. It was a small deal, and I invited a few other friends, one of which was another airman who was here in the local area and then moved out to California of all places, but had come back because his parents lived there.

Well, as he showed up at this party at my house, he brought this other guy. Guess who this other guy was? So we got to talking during the party and whatnot, and he was telling me how he was going to have an assignment in Korea. And I said, "Oh, that's really interesting. Because I'm trying to get a job right now in Japan." And he looked at me like, "Japan? Really?" I said, "Yeah, because I am trying to further my career." I wanted to go to grad school, and for the course that I was looking at, I needed to have not only English as a main, my native language obviously, but I needed to have two other languages. And I already had Spanish under my belt so I thought, "I'm going to go to Japan and become immersed and learn Japanese."

And so as I'm telling him this, he said, "Wow, that's interesting." I said, "Yeah. Since we'll both be on the same side of the world the same time, maybe we should stay in touch." And that's his famous line, it was his in. His question was, "So what's your phone number?" So as a result of that, we ended up staying in touch. We went out on a couple of dates because he was there also. He was assigned to MacDill Air Force Base and he was just there for the holidays. So he was there for another week or so, and we decided we'd go out a couple of times, and then he shuffled off to Korea in March. I shuffled off to Japan in July, and we stayed in touch the whole time.

And so, believe it or not, if anyone ever tells you long distance relationships don't work, give it a second thought. So we managed to stay in touch. And his next assignment was going to be down in Homestead, Florida. I decided to come back and we ended up tying the knot, and here we go. So while I've had a military upbringing, yes, I did have an understanding of being able to move around. But if you talk to anyone who's had a dependent lifestyle as part of a military family, it is very different from being a military spouse. You don't really understand as a child or pay attention to all the little details that sort of happen behind the scenes. And so as a military spouse, we go through a number of different challenges, I think, with what we are looking to do in terms of our life purpose as we support our military member.

I often say to a lot of our... And I was one of these spouses when I kind of came into the military with my spouse, I was still hoping to have that position, that job, that would take me because I still wanted to go to grad school. And oh, by the way, this particular career endeavor was going to take me overseas and I was going to live and work overseas. And realizing being married to a military member who bounced around a little bit, that might be a little bit of a challenge. So I had to stop and think about really what I wanted to do. So I had to kind of recreate myself as I came into this union with him, as many of our spouses often find out. And I too thought, "Okay, well, he'll be doing his thing and I'll be doing my thing, and then we can kind of figure this out."

But what I've since learned, and I think many of our spouses learned, is that even though we want to be able to have that career of our own and go forward, we're kind of still joined at the hip a little bit because where the military member goes, the spouse usually follows. And so what that next assignment is going to look like could then determine whether or not we go into that position that we want to follow up with or not, because it changes a little bit as we go forward. And I too ran into the same sort of situation where I'm not really sure what I'm going to do. I want to be in an international realm, but in Miami, I felt like I was because it's very international there. But our next assignment took us to Las Vegas. And so that was very different. Very different.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Glittery.

Sharene Brown:

Yeah, very glittery, very highlighting. And by that time, I found out we were expecting our first and so life changed just a little bit. And I think along the course as we continued to move, I thought I was going to jump right back into finding employment soon after I had my son, but hopefully by the time he went to school. But again, life throws you these curve balls that you don't necessarily expect. And that's when we learned shortly after maybe a couple of years or so after he was born that he had some challenges and I was seeing that he wasn't developing in the same way that other kids were. And so the best advice that was ever given to me at that time was when you see something that is happening with your family, you need to take as much of a proactive stance as you possibly can, try to figure out what's going on with your children, try to figure out what you can do for your family.

And so living on those words, I bounced into the opportunity to take care of my son. And there's a process out there for when your children are very young to be able to learn if there might be some issues. And that's exactly what I did, which set us on a whole different course. And so there's a phrase within the special needs community that goes something along the lines of, "You thought you were going to Paris, but instead you got rerouted to Belgium." Meaning the journey is still there. You may not end up where you thought you were going to be, but the journey still allows you to discover so much more as a result. And so I decided to pay attention to my son's upbringing. I wanted to make sure that he was going to be a functional member of society and I dedicated the rest of our time to making sure that he was just that.

And as a result of that today, he lives on his own, works on his own, has his own circle of friends. Though it is quite interesting, I call him the town crier because he's always calling me to share what new factors and what new information he's learned during the course of his week. So we're really, really proud of that. So to all of our family members, I say to you, your family is really important. With all the things that are going on in a military life, you are thrown a number of different curve balls along the way. And it's not so much what you're thrown, it's how you handle them and how you're able to seek out those people around you and those resources that are out there for you. Because let me tell you, our military has a lot of resources from birth to grave, and we are just overflowing with any sort of information that we'd like to be able to share with you. So that's a snippet.

Lyndsey Akers:

Just a highlight reel.

Sharene Brown:

Yeah.

Lyndsey Akers:

Well, and exactly as you articulated, military or not, life throws us curve balls. And it is not lost on me, as Kari read my bio, that I was able to do a lot here with our uniquely long assignment here. But my life looks a little bit different now. I am home and kind of wearing all the hats. I'm trying to work at home, I'm trying to run my business, and I am the default parent. And truly, my military spouse journey began a little bit more so when I became a mom. That's when this impacted me a little bit more deeply. Because it was no longer about Lyndsey climbing a ladder or focusing on myself. It became much more about, and my children were born just before Covid, being the stability that they need through the many, many chapters of our life.

And Ms. Saltzman, I know that there was a time where you were teaching and then you needed to be more active or present at home. And that's what brings us home away from our jobs as well. Can you expand a little bit upon on that? I believe you said your daughter was in three different middle schools at one point in time.

Jennifer Saltzman:

She was. Absolutely. It is, and all of you guys have resilient stories and flexible... If there's any word that can describe a military family, it's flexible because you think you're going to go to one destination and you're not quite there. And we've all had, "Oh, this is our next assignment." And it's like, "Well, is it really the next assignment? Are we on our way there yet or are we going to divert to a different location at first?" So flexibility for sure. And yes, you do, you think you're going to kind of go in one direction and then your family needs come first. Because default parent, I kind of like that, that's a nice way to think of that.

Yeah, it was just our daughter,... Seventh grade, girls are mean, right? I don't know why. They eventually are lovely people, but middle school ones don't seem to always be that way. And so trying to always reinvent herself or do something else in all these different locations and states and places, I definitely chose just trying to make sure that they were as happy and healthy and successful people that they could be. And I just didn't want to miss out on those things because I knew in the blink of an eye, shoot, it's like you just get your furniture where you like it and everything's hanging on the wall properly and you're like, "Nope, let's go. We're going to go again." And you're like, "Oh, I really like it here."

So you do, you have to kind of... You can have it all, like we were saying that earlier. And you guys all can, you can have it all, but I just don't think at the same time. And there'll be different stages of your life where this is the priority, because there's only 24 hours in the day. Even though some of you use those a lot more efficiently than I do. Because I do, I see incredible people everywhere. And it's like, "How do you do that? How many jobs do you have?" It's like each kid is a job for sure. Being married, that's a job for sure. Any other career on top of that, that's a job. So yeah, you do, you just have to feel it out and feel what's best for your family at that time. And the support that I've always received from neighbors and friends, going through the same thing.

And I think that's always been such a nice thing, even in those moments where you think, "I'm the only one that feels this way," or, "I'm the only one." We've had that discussion too like, "Who's your emergency contact?" And it's like, "Don't have one. I just got here yesterday." I'm like, "I promise. Call me. I will be here." They're like, "Well, you have to have one." And so I think one time I made a person up. I'm like, "What's the area code here?" or whatever. I'm like, "Sure, it's fine. I'll just write a name." But there are other people experiencing those same things. And hopefully you can just find that network of people, because military families, and military kids, are the greatest ones out there. So I'm always been so honored to be able to be in that group. But yeah, you have to be flexible.

Lyndsey Akers:

You're leading right into our next conversation because it is PCS season and you two are no strangers to the challenges and emotions that come with relocating. Though we may not always recognize it in the moment, each base offers an opportunity to make memories. Can you think of any assignments that were particularly memorable for you? Were there any favorites or perhaps any surprising experiences along the way? Mrs. Brown?

Sharene Brown:

Oh my gosh. Well, just as Jennifer had mentioned, as I've travel this journey with my other half, I think there have been different points that stuck out in my life. The very first assignment in Miami obviously is trying to find a job. "Where am I going to work? Who should I talk to?" I actually had no idea. There was at that time the Airman Family Readiness Center. And so I did a lot of things on my own thinking that I had all the knowledge I needed to have in order to find a job. And you have to realize life was a little different back then because there was this thing called the classifieds, and so you went through that. Or you went through your friends or those sorts of things. And so it was very challenging.

And I think we've had this discussion where there was this prevailing thought if you weren't a teacher or a nurse, then the opportunity to transition to one place to another was challenging, was difficult, was really difficult to do. So I think while we were there I did get a chance to work, obviously not in the field I wanted at the time, but it was an opportunity to connect and meet with other folks, spouses especially, in the squadron that we were attached to. So that stands out. Interestingly enough, that particular location is no longer there because when we were leaving, it was four days out from Hurricane Andrew that wiped the base out.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Oh gosh.

Sharene Brown:

And we didn't have phones back then. And we were traveling from, as I said, Miami to Vegas. And when we found out that there was a hurricane, you can imagine the panic because we left a lot of our friends behind and, "What did that look like?" So we were desperately trying to get ahold of our friends and to see where folks were. Another place that kind of stood out to me was places that I don't necessarily think that I would be, or I had ideas about, but wasn't really sure. So I'm very much a big city girl. And we were living, I want to say, maybe either DC or Tampa. I can't remember which. And I had two boys with me and we were on our way to South Carolina, Sumpter, South Carolina. A little bitty town. And I remember we traveled down to the town to look for a house. We had set aside four or five days. We found a house in a day. That was most surprising, yes.

And it was a location that I was kind of concerned about because with two boys and plenty of Walmarts and Toys R Us at the time, there was just one Walmart. And I didn't know if we were going to be able to find what the kids really needed, but we did. What I did discover was the fact that people are people everywhere. We spent four years there and it was tremendously satisfying. I've met some friends that I am still friends with. It was amazingly the right place at the right time for my family. I remember my boys, we were driving down the street and I saw someone waving at me so I waved back. And my kids in the back seat, "Mom, who's that?" I said, "I don't know." "Well, why are you waving?" I said, "Well, I just thought I'd do that."

But I think then as we moved to this local area, I think our kids... And this is our fourth time here in the Washington DC area and I know that the schools are probably at the level that I best thought my kids should be in. And we were very disappointed to leave because the information and the attention to the academics as well as the social engagements were bar none. And as we've continued to move around, while we were here, I tried to soak up as much information about what schools should require or do require for students as much as I could, because I knew the next location wouldn't necessarily have all that information.

In fact, I remember my oldest was a freshman in high school, best year ever. But they were offering information about colleges, financial and otherwise, and he wasn't even close to that at the time. But I thought, "Oh, I better go to these, because I'm not sure of the next location," because you're always

thinking ahead, "Will this location have this information?" Learned so much, it wasn't funny. And then, I thought we needed to actually be back here when the boys were graduating from high school because I thought this was going to be primo, but as it turns out, the boys were in Tampa when they graduated high school.

My oldest, whom I thought would not do well with changing schools went to three different high schools. And then my youngest went to two. Very different people. As you well know your children are. The oldest is the one with the learning disabilities. And I thought this would be hardest for him, but as it turns out, it was the best, because now he has a high school ring that has all three high schools on it and couldn't be prouder of it.

Whereas my youngest, who interestingly enough, and we weren't really paying attention, the first eight years of his life had been in a different school every single year. By the time he was headed to eighth grade... I will never forget this. We sat down and we had that, you all know this, you have that meeting with your family to say, "Hey, we're getting ready to move. This time, we're going to..." And this time we were headed from this area to go to Italy. And how exciting was that? My oldest was jumping up and down. Why? He's a military buff. He couldn't be prouder, happier to be in a place where he's going to be there to see all the different changes in history.

Whereas my youngest fell to the floor and sobbed and all he had to say was, "I hate you. I hate this life." Why? As we found out, is because we didn't really recognize, we weren't really tracking. And how does that happen? That he had been in a different school every year of his life and he was missing his friends, not because of something that we had done necessarily, it's just the transitions from different places, from one place to another, or the natural breaks in schools.

And by the time he got to this location, it was the first time in Italy that he had two years of school at the same school. And then we moved to Tampa those last three years of high school and dad was going to have to move. We were, as a family, were going to have to move again. But he opted to do in a deployment, a remote assignment his last year, my son's senior year. And so, he missed out on all those things that go with your senior year of high school for his youngest. But we knew for our family that was the best thing for him to do.

So it's interesting, as we were coming along on the journey, I've learned so much from other parents about what they do with their children because they know their family the best. And I've heard some interesting solutions as to how parents kind of make sure that their children feel at home. Some parents have actually moved onto the next location and left their oldest, maybe with their senior year, with friends at that school. Or maybe some have placed their kids in boarding schools, believe it or not, so they would be consistent with the education and the friends that they've had. Or they've just chosen to move them all around.

So there are a number of different ways to do this, but I feel that you have to do what's best with your own family and you know your kids better than anybody. And so, how you choose to engage with your family, taking care of them, I think, is critical. Because you want your family to be appreciative of who you are as a family as you maybe leave this military life and move on, or you just want to make sure that as a heartbeat, that we're all together.

And so, I never want to judge anybody for what they choose to do as to how they engage with their family because I don't know what's going on with their family and they know best. So it's a trying time. And we do go through several different things. I think for both Jennifer and I, we see life just like you do, with a lot of different challenges. Just because we sit in these positions doesn't mean that we're special and we get special privileges that kind of are not immune to our family. Even to this day, I think just being able to be around our kids is super special.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:30:04]

Lyndsey Akers:

And I think that's the theme of our discussion today, is that we are all doing the best for our family in the seasons that we're in, and we're navigating that as best possible.

My experience was a bit of the reverse. I grew up in South Carolina for the first 22 years of my life, and our first assignment three months after we got married was here. So coming somewhere that had more than one caution light was a bit different. But again, as you heard from my bio, it offered a world of opportunity. I'm very, very grateful for that.

Ms. Saltzman, do you have any bases or assignments that-

Jennifer Saltzman:

I do. I echo, there are good things about all the places that we've gotten to live. I do have favorites and some that were harder, and it depends on why. Sometimes the location is awesome, but maybe the stressors from the kids are not great or you can't find work. But there's good things about all of them. So I would say, always try to quickly get out there, and whatever that area has to offer, there's something good.

But if I did have to say a favorite, Vandenberg. Now, Space Force Base, I can even say. It was Vandenberg Air Force Base, obviously back then when we lived there. But that time of life, and I think it was just a culmination of so many different things. Chance was newer. He had Squadron Command at that time and it was like... Again, I'm never good at years, I had to look, and I may get it wrong, I think we were there from 2005 to 2008. I usually always say, "Well, my kids were third grade to sixth grade." And people are like, "Yeah, Jennifer, that's not a helpful reference. I don't know... How old are your kids now?" But I was like, "Well..."

Lyndsey Akers:

Do the math.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Yeah, exactly. I'm like, "Okay, they're this old now, can you reverse it back?" But just time and life there, I loved that little 1,500 square foot house with the mint green tile in the bathroom. I was always so jealous of the people that had the pink tile. I was like, "It's awesome." This vintagey house where never had to close a door. I think when we had to turn in those keys, I was like, "Keys, did you guys give us keys?" I was like, "I don't know. We'll have to try to find those," because a screen door, no bugs, also a wonderful thing. Kids are in and out all the time.

And I think Chance was super happy with being a squadron commander and then the kids being those ages, I think they were allowed to be kids, play outside every day, walk to school, ride your bike to school and come home. And you just always heard kids playing and walking around. And Chance would come home sometimes from the club on Friday nights and he's like, "Oh my gosh, there's more people here than there are at the club." And I was like, "Well, you should have come home faster." I have the ability to have kids and I have pizza. And I'm like, "Of course, I'm going to draw pretty big crowd." So Vandenberg was definitely a favorite, because of all those things lined up that were wonderful.

But I could, there were places, if I had to tell myself before to just try to get in there and once you leave a place that's wonderful, and you always have that sad... I always say there's like a month before a move and after a move it's like a blur. I don't remember if I've even fixed my hair. There's just so many things

and you're ready to transition to the next one. I wish I would've been able to tell myself that, "Although you'll miss that one, the next one's going to be just as good or it could be better. So get in there faster and do it," because sometimes you only have eight months there, 10 months there.

And so, just to enjoy it because there's good places and bases everywhere, because there's people like you guys at all of them. So just make the best of all of them. But yeah, Vandenberg.

And I know there's a couple lucky people that are going to go there this move season, and I'm very excited for you for sure, and your family, because I know it was... Even though those little tiny houses, and I'm sorry to say that those tiled bathrooms that were mint green and pink are gone. I think we were the last family to live in it back in the day. And I was really sad. It looked like the Brady Bunch house, with the stone. It was awesome. It was little.

Lyndsey Akers:

And now it's a Space Force base.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Yeah, exactly.

Lyndsey Akers:

Well you're really, you're making these segues very smooth. As the newest service branch, the Space Force families face both similar and unique challenges as compared to their Air Force counterparts, particularly regarding deployments. So Ms. Saltzman, do you have any advice for Space Force spouses on how they can best navigate those unique challenges with and alongside their service member?

Jennifer Saltzman:

Yes and no. I think it is a different challenge, kind of deployed in place or employed in place is kind of a thing. So many of space forces, different missions in different places, guardians and their families, quick ops tempo, the tempo is so quick and they're performing all of these, a lot of times, missions that they can't share. So these service members come home from this very fast-paced that they can't unload on what's going on and happening. So the stressors I think that come with that are unique in that limited experience, or just my own experience when Chance was gone for a year, he was able to focus all of his energy and time. So, obviously, when there's stressors when you're deployed at all, but he didn't have to come home and show the rest of us that, or we didn't see him every day.

But people that are flying satellites all night, and again, things that they're doing that I don't even know what they're doing, they can't share those with someone they're experiencing heavy stressors.

So I guess I would always, or just to say that need to be aware that challenges are different and I'm not exactly sure. I mean, just to make sure that you're always staying connected and making sure that your service member is doing okay because there are a lot of things that could be going on that they simply can't share and that they're doing all those things and then coming home and having kids that want help with homework, and that they don't have an opportunity to take a deep breath and kind of decompress from their fast-paced, secret tempoed-work.

And again, there's no wrong way, I would just say stay connected and lean on friends and everybody's experiencing similar things and everyone in here is the best, and out there, are the best advocates for each other.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thank you. Mrs. Brown. I have a question for you. Prior to today's session, we were able to listen to some of the questions and concerns from our community of military spouses. And one of the things that we received, someone said that it's incredibly important for EFMP family voices to be heard. And I know that that rings especially true for you. Life as a military family is challenging and it's especially complex when a member of your family has special needs.

Ms. Brown, can you share with us your experience as an EFMP family and what of my advice you may have for families who are undergoing those challenges as well?

Sharene Brown:

Well, it is definitely that. I think initially when folks discover they have someone in their family who needs a little help, reaching out is probably the hardest thing to do initially. It's understanding what is kind of happening with you at that time, with the individual or the member in the family.

We've had some interesting situations just trying to understand. It goes back to, I think, just being proactive initially, understanding where you are and trying to figure out how to connect. Every location that you go to, there are going to be resources out there. I think reaching out, first of all, just to have that supportive voice. We have a number of nonprofits that are out there, EFM is one of them, and there are folks within different organizations that want to be able to reach out and help you through those particular challenges.

But you need to find the support initially, because I think taking these tasks on, knowledge is a little bit of power. And so being able to know where the resources are at a particular point where you are situated makes life a little bit easier. And if you have someone to connect to be able to hear what those situations are, you learn about how to be able to find out what's going on.

I was thinking about this earlier today, and I went back to what that one spouse had said to me initially. She really didn't know who I was. All she knew was that I was a military spouse and she kind of threw this out, I think because she was going through her own challenges at the time. And she had said, "If there's anything that you do as a military member, as a spouse in your family, if you recognize there's something that's just not quite right, then investigate, explore, try to figure out what's going on and be proactive."

Because ultimately, if you don't engage early enough, you'll be dealing with a number of challenges either early on or later on in life. And so the longer you wait, the harder the challenges become. Because your children and/or yourself may suffer some issues that you can't necessarily, had you started a little bit earlier, may have been able to sort of correct before you move forward.

So we were very fortunate to be able to engage with our son and the number of issues that he had had. Yes, it was a long and difficult road and trying to find those resources every place that we went. Times are a little bit different now, I think with the number of folks who are willing to assist you and there's strength in numbers and whatever information that you can document is also a positive.

How you're able to make sure that you understand what's going on with the system. Because a lot of times, I will tell you, there were times where I felt that this wasn't enough. Why aren't people helping this group of people out in a more positive, forceful way? But what I've come to learn is that I have to learn what's going on on the other side. How do these things with the different programs or maybe how they impact the military, are then reflective in these particular arenas?

So yes, EFMP is a strong issue mainly because we've had a number of voices raised to be able to get the military's attention to say, "These are things that are impacting our members. And our members can't be at their most productive unless they know that their families are feeling secure." So how do we help

ourselves? But also how do we hear what's going on on the other side? What is stopping folks from maybe progressing forward?

And the other part of this is educating ourselves about what is the issue that's happening with us? How do we engage when people maybe engage with us or push back and say, "We don't have the funding or this isn't the right time." How do we educate those who don't necessarily see the situation that we see ourselves? How do we share with them maybe, "These are the challenges that we have and here's how we could maybe rectify."

I will tell you that during the course of our lifetime when we've traveled with our son, we've tried to engage with as many people as possible. And at the time it was engaging with our school population, how was my son going to be received or how was he going to flourish? And so maybe being that advocate to stand up in the classroom and say, "Here, let me help you understand what this population looks like."

Or maybe finding those medical professionals who could speak on your behalf for your children so that others understand it's not just directly related to your child, but maybe to this current population of folks.

So the more education that you can dole out to others so that they understand what the situation actually is, I think it only strengthens that community. You want folks to be inclusive, you want folks to understand, but you also have to be able to give the facts as to what's going on.

It's tremendous. But like I said, there are resources that are available now that I don't know were necessarily available to me initially. I did a lot of reading. I felt like I was my own professor in this particular arena trying to understand how and what these things were.

We were in places where there were universities that would have these subject matter experts that would come and speak because we had groups that would share this information. Groups like STOMP, ARC that would share all this information that I would go to. And I soon learned in order to go to something that required some sort of payment, there would be a scholarship available for families who couldn't necessarily make that arrangement.

So there are always ways for folks to find out this information, but it takes a little bit of, I don't want to say "oomph", or it takes a little bit of energy and pro-activeness to be involved to find out what are the issues that are going on for our families.

But yes, I'm here to be able to share as much as I possibly can. Whatever the nonprofits are, please take a look at, well, since we were talking about our Five & Thrive, I have to throw that in there. As you know, we have a webpage, the fiveandthrive.org webpage, which has a number of different resources.

And for those who are not actually on social media, we do what's called a Situation Report where we send out via email. So if you go to that website and sign up for it, we will actually send you sort of like a newsletter that shares a number of the resources that you might be able to find for those five focus areas that we're trying to bring more attention to.

So like I said, there's strength in numbers and we want to be able to hear from you, but we also want to see what sort of advocacy you might do, because we feel that honestly, that as you invest not only in your own family, you'll find that others as you support them, brings you to a new level of interest. And as you engage not only in this particular area, you're not only building your community, but you're bringing awareness to that particular field or that particular area where you feel that it needs to be heard just a little bit more.

And so it's critical to hear the voices because for General Brown and I, we often say when we go out to see various people, we want to hear the good, the bad, and yes, the ugly. Why? Because we can't help

you if we don't know what those issues are. But we want to be able to hear from you. But we also want to see some of the things that you are doing as well in your local area. Because while information flows from here in DC out to your location, we may end up making decisions that perhaps if we didn't hear from you, sound great to us, but aren't really helping you in your local area. So to hear from you means all the world to us so that you can make the changes that are relative to your location because mission, location, and even where that particular requirement is for your family will look very different from one place to another.

As Jennifer was mentioning out in Vandenberg, how that mission looks there will look very different from what it does look in Shaw in Sumter, South Carolina. So as you engage with various resource or even how you would like to see things improve, they may be some best practices that come out of this. And so as you're able to share those, then we might be able to share with Vandenberg, "Hey, here's what we're doing here." But that may not necessarily fit completely, but you tweak them just a little bit and it might actually work.

So we're trying a number of different things we want to be able to hear from you. And if I can just real quick, if you think that our leadership is not really hearing from you, then you might want to think again, because I will tell you, not only is General Saltzman, but General Brown, looking at these quality of life issues, because you may be aware that recruiting and retention are a bit of an issue for the military.

And so as we look to these quality of life issues we're finding out from various reports, because they've heard from the survey that you all have contributed to, that quality of life is huge for our members. And so if the family's not doing well, then of course our members aren't able to have a very productive life in terms of the mission.

And so we have our Secretary of Defense, General Austin, who is a military member himself, veteran, who knows all too well about how quality of life is attacking our members. We want to be able to address these issues so that our members feel a little bit more secure in how their family is doing so that they can go off and do the mission as is required, as is needed. We want them to feel safe that their families are secure before they go out and do the mission.

Lyndsey Akers:

So thank you for sharing that. And that is the very reason why AFA has created this task force, and it is incredibly important. And I know that so many of us are passionate about making sure that that communication is both received and provided. And communication is such a theme of our conversation today as well.

And as we shift gears for the last two questions of this panel, I'm comfortable sharing that something my husband and I have incorporated into our weekly routine is every week on the evening we put the kids to bed, we turn the screens off and we connect and work towards protecting our connection and connecting emotionally. We might talk finances, we might talk meal plans. "I need some help here. I've got toddlers." But we use it as an opportunity to connect with each other and kind of do a heartbeat check, a pulse check.

And I'm curious, hearing from both of you, as you reflect on what's worked within your own relationships, what advice do you have for military couples navigating the unique circumstances of military life? Saltzman?

Jennifer Saltzman:

Absolutely. I think going back flexibility, what it looks like when we were 20, what we did looks very different and doesn't happen as late anymore as it used to. Definitely go to bed a lot earlier. But being

able just to make sure that you set the time aside because there's never going to be enough time. The demands of everyone's schedule and careers and is quite great. And if you don't schedule it in, it just doesn't happen. Which we know that for any relationship, you have to make it a priority and make sure that you say, "Yep," doesn't matter if we're tired or you just got back from this, a trip at 10:30 last night, which I did last night, that you have to, it's on the calendar and then you don't miss it because a week will become a month and then you just don't have that opportunity.

But I would say it just to make sure that you're flexible enough, it's not going to be getting dressed up and going somewhere and doing something. It is, "Hey, we have an hour and let's just go sit outside on the," which again, we do have a wonderful view right now, which is quite lovely. So anytime I get to go sit outside and just look at the water, it's relaxing. And if it's 30 minutes, it's perfect because you do no screens, quiet and let's just sit and relax. And I would say just to be flexible, but always make sure you create the time because it goes by really quickly and you don't want moments to be few and far between. You want to make sure that you always capture your connection first.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yes, thank you. Mrs. Brown?

Sharene Brown:

Oh my gosh. Well, it's really difficult with these devices readily handy so that you can just be entertained. And so I would agree with Jennifer. Just disconnecting for me I think is huge. It's too easy, I will tell you, my husband is come in the morning sometimes when I'm sitting there looking at my phone because I have a few extra minutes and I'm watching some reels and I've gotten addicted, and I just scroll and scroll and scroll.

But I will say that what makes you feel happy, I think is relative to who you are and where you are in life, right? Because you could have those toddlers and they run you all over the place, right?

Lyndsey Akers:

I'm tired, just tired.

Sharene Brown:

And so trying to take five minutes even to yourself, even if you're hold up in the restroom just for five minutes because they can't find you for a little bit, right? So it is huge where you find the place to feel a little bit centered, whether it's 30 seconds or 30 minutes, I think is critical.

We have a lot of programs out there that just ask if you would do maybe yoga or a little bit of meditation, and sometimes that's a great thing to do. But I will tell you some of the things, you know best what those things are for you. I find sometimes when I'm downstairs in the kitchen and I'm trying to put a meal together, I might be bebopping to a little bit of music and that brings happiness to me. Or it may be that today I go out for a walk. If I were to walk, we don't have a pet, but we used to. But to take my dog out even for a walk, that's an opportunity maybe to engage with somebody else that I haven't seen in a little bit or just see what our neighbor is doing.

But I would venture to say one of the things I think for our family members, or for everyone, is just to connect. If there's somebody that you can reach out to and say, "Hey, what's going on in your life today?" Because I think when you're listening to somebody else, the things that are happening in your life maybe disappear for just a moment or two. And so when you're able to connect with somebody, it

just feels like you have a little bit more energy. I realize that's not always the first thing everybody goes to because it might be that you just need to withdraw. And that also is something that I think is critical.

Don't be afraid if you just want to have a cup of coffee and a cafe for a couple of minutes or so. It might be that downtime that you need to just hear yourself breathe or just walk around and see what's going on.

I will tell you one of the things that was really interesting, when COVID first hit, we were in Hawaii, and I know that sounds like a hardship case, a hardship tour. But what I thought was most interesting while we were there was life was really busy. People were going a hundred miles an hour. And I am probably sure that there were a lot of moms and dads that didn't get a chance to see their kids as often as they probably could have.

When COVID hit and folks were a little bit, there was more downtime, remote work was coming into place. I have never seen as many families walking around our neighborhoods together. Mom, dad, pet, sister, brother, all the little toddlers and everybody walking to include the teenagers, which you know is a little bit tough to do. But it was so invigorating to see families walking around, couples walking around, holding hands. And so we need to get back to that in a little bit, in some way, shape or form.

I know that we're all starting to come back a little bit. Life is picking back up. I know spring has sprung for us too, and we are moving a hundred miles an hour, but if we can find the time, as my spouse says, it's not so much the quantity of time as it is the quality of time. So being able to reach out to engage with one another, I think, is critical.

Because we did learn and we knew this all along, that connection is the one thing we all create. And if we can have that opportunity, whether it's with our spouse, with our kids, with some friends, and I think for me, especially if I don't reach out and touch my friends every once in a while, because my spouse is busy doing a lot of things and I want to bring him home so that he can relax, but sometimes he's not always interested in the same things that I am. And that actually goes for my spouse because he just found out not too long, I found out not too long ago, that he wanted to connect with some of his old buds that are here in the local area. And so now they're going to plan a quarter doing a meetings so that they can kind of get together and just relax and have downtime.

Lyndsey Akers:

And you can have the same time. You map out the same timeframe.

Sharene Brown:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Jennifer Saltzman:

There's one more, there's one more really quick thing, it was time is definitely, we never have enough of it. And I think Chance had come home from a conference of some kind, and it was talking about how to connect with your spouse, and he said, "Every day," and now it's multiple times and it really is longer than you think and it's like, the speaker suggested, just to take a deep breath and hug your spouse for 20 seconds. 20 seconds. And you think, "Well, that's longer." It really is amazing. It allows you to take those couple deep breaths and then you kind of just recenter in 20 seconds. We've got 20 seconds. Now, that's kind of a thing if your head space is kind of, you're dizzy with everything that's going on. Now, it's just almost a call in the house sometimes.

Sometimes it's, okay, 20 seconds, and you just need that 20 seconds just to take a deep breath. That's been kind of nice. That's a fun connection one, but you'd be surprised if you really do count 20 seconds. It's longer than you think.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [01:00:04]

Lyndsey Akers:

It is.

Jennifer Saltzman:

It is because you're like, wait, are we still? Okay, all right.

Lyndsey Akers:

Especially if you make eye contact for those 20 seconds.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Yeah, no eye contact.

Lyndsey Akers:

Then it gets a little awkward.

Jennifer Saltzman:

That would be too long. That would almost feel like a stare down at a contest. It's usually, I don't know. You could do it as you will. You could do stare downs. That would be fun, too.

Lyndsey Akers:

I won't be able to forgive myself if I don't ask you ladies this final question. I know we're running short on time for this panel, but we have to know, if you could go back and share words of wisdom with your younger self as a military spouse, what would they be? Mrs. Brown.

Sharene Brown:

Yeah. Oh, gosh. Wow. I would probably say, get out and connect. Well, get out and explore. We tried to do that a little bit later in life as we moved from base to base, and coming from someone who is from a military family, I try to get out as much as I could because as Jennifer had mentioned, you never know how long you're going to be in a location, so I'd always try to get out and see as much of wherever I was living and to meet as many people as possible. I know that sounds crazy, but that was helpful for me because there's always information that I don't know about that I can't find necessarily, though today it's a little bit different, that people have that you may not be able to find on the internet. When I was in Sumter, South Carolina, I learned so much about not only that particular location, but where to find what in that particular city by connecting with different people. I say get out, investigate, and explore.

Lyndsey Akers:

Great.

Sharene Brown:

Yeah.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thank you. Ms. Saltzman.

Jennifer Saltzman:

Yep. Absolutely. Take advantage of every opportunity in every place, even if it was not your first choice and it was your second or your third. There's going to be something fabulous there for you and your family. You just have to go out and find it. Just take advantage of it quickly. I would tell myself, too, don't be disappointed or scared if there's a location that you're going to that you weren't quite sure about because they do, they all turned out great. Some better than others always, which is true, but I would say, just take advantage as quickly as possible because you don't know how long you'll be in the spot, and it's never long enough, and in a blink of an eye, I still act like I have little kids and they'll meet my adult children. They're like, do you have other children? I was like, "Well, no," but they're always your children, so it goes by really quickly and just enjoy every moment because there's military families and people are the most fabulous ones that you'll ever find, so connect with them.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thank you, both. Let's give Mrs. Brown and Ms. Saltzman one more round of applause. It has been a true privilege having you here on the stage to share your hearts, your journeys, and your wisdom with us. Thank you both so, so much. Before we move on to the next panel, I'm going to turn it over to Kari.

Kari Voliva:

That's right. Thank you, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Saltzman, and Lindsey for that awesome panel, and thank you for everyone in the virtual audience that is engaging with us. We did get quite a few questions in. We are going to make sure that we get answers out to that after the event. We want to make sure everyone, if you have other ones, keep putting them in, we will get back to you. While you'll see some of my teammates setting up the stage behind me, we want it to take a few moments so everyone could meet Dr. Kendra Lowe. Dr. Lowe is a psychologist, author, and military spouse. She is the founder and CEO of Thrive On and is committed to helping cultivate social and emotional health within military families.

Previously, she was a school psychologist for the Department of Defense, adjunct faculty for the central Texas College, a columnist for military spouse magazine, and an active duty airman. She currently resides in Virginia with her husband and three children. AFA is pleased to be providing the first 200 milspouse registrants a copy of Dr. Lowe's book, *Wake Up, Kick Ass, Repeat, A Guide to Self Perseverance Within the Military Spouse Lifecycle*. Many of our friends in the room today have already had a chance to meet Dr. Lowe at the book signing we had earlier. For our virtual friends who will be receiving a copy of the book, we'll be sending those out next week. Dr. Lowe, welcome.

Dr. Kendra Lowe:

Wow. First and foremost, thank you for this incredible team for putting this on. I had so many individuals this morning say, "Thank you for coming here," and really all I did was show up. Definitely a round of applause to you all. This is incredible, what you're doing for our military spouses and our families, and truly an honor to be surrounded by individuals here, incredible spouses and those that support military families. Again, thank you so much for the invite and allowing me a chance and a moment to speak to you all. To give you a little bit of background, as it was mentioned, I transitioned

from active duty service to the sole role of a military spouse, and I was naive. I thought it was going to be seamless and an easy transition, and I was so wrong. I was hit very quickly with many of the challenges that we talk about, and that ended up fueling my 15 years of research.

I wanted to know, am I the only military spouse struggling? Is this unique to me or are there more spouses that are having just as difficult of a time as I am? It fueled those 15 years of research. I wanted to know how significant is our stress as military spouses, and what could be some of those contributing factors to the stress that we're experiencing. What I found was, at any given time, military spouse stress is double that of what our civilian population is, and I get a couple head nods. Yes, I feel it, and some are surprised and some aren't surprised by that statistic. When we were in Okinawa, Japan, I had the opportunity to start sharing some of that research and I could see visibly this relief wash over spouses when I shared that because what, you are not alone that many of us face challenges and stress as part of this unique but awesome culture and community.

I then had several individuals come up and say, "Can you give presentations and talk more about it? Give more validation to our spouses." I was able to do that and it was incredible, but I wanted to give back more, so we were in Okinawa getting ready to come back to the States and we were walking our golden retriever, having him lose 10 pounds before he got on the aircraft because he had to make weight, and I said to my husband, "I just want to reach more spouses," and he's like, "Kendra, our bandwidth, you can't do presentations all over the place." And I said, "How do I get to the spouses I'm most concerned about the ones that are isolated, the ones that maybe aren't comfortable coming out to events like this, the ones that are in an unfamiliar community." Patrick turned and looked at me and he said, "I think it's time to write those books."

The book that you received today is a way to increase communication, connection, to have some of those difficult conversations. I've had spouses all throughout the globe start book studies with it, gift it to neighbors, to friends, or to offer that individual support for them. It's my why. It's my why as being a military spouse of what I want to do to give back to our community, and I'll share this quick story. We are getting ready to go to Korea in three weeks, so back over the long trip, and we're sorting and packing and sorting and packing and selling. I had a set of mirrors up for sale and I had an individual drive up to purchase them and she said, "Thank you so much. These actually aren't for me, but they're for my daughter who's in the passenger side," and I said, "That's so exciting. What's your new adventure?"

And she said, "Well, I just married an airman and we're going to Alaska," and I was like, "Okay." I'm 18 and I'm a little scared, and I said, "Wait just a minute. I might have a book for you." I ran inside, I grabbed her a book, signed it. She found me on the web, and this was just recent, two weeks later, wrote me an email and she said, "Thank you so much. I feel better prepared for some of the challenges that I'm going to be facing for the first time in my life, but more than anything, I'm excited about this adventure." I leave you with, support one another, lift each other up, and embrace this awesome journey and experience you have as a military spouse because it's one chapter and it's your story, but I hope that it's the best chapter that you all have. Thank you again.

Kari Voliva:

Thank you, Dr. Lowe. To steal from the title of the last chapter in Dr. Lowe's book, it's time to go do epic things. Lindsey, back to you for our next epic session.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thanks, Kari. Our second panel includes a World Series champion, a WAF, and a Wounded Warrior caregiver, each with incredible stories of their own. Please join me in welcoming Nicole Murray, Kirstin

Navaroli, and Aaron Evenson. Aaron, who is best dressed, obviously. Nicole, can you start us off with some brief remarks and introduction?

Nicole Murray:

Sure. My name's Nicole Murray and I am a Space Force spouse now. My husband was an Air Force Academy guy, so I actually met him when I was 16. I knew his family, and to echo, I think everybody here as we talk about this today, had no idea what I was getting into. I don't think he did either, but that's okay. I have been married to my husband, I've been living with him since 2005, but of that time, we probably lived together more before we were married than after due to different PCSs and Geo-Batching. I have been with the Washington Nationals Baseball Club for 14 years, 14 seasons. We measure things in seasons in baseball, and I do the military outreach for the team. I'm actually, after 14 years, I'm leaving next week. We're PCSing to Hawaii. I know everybody feels very bad for me, but as part of that job, I've gotten to do really amazing things doing the military outreach, and really using baseball to help make military families make their lives better, and that has been such an honor. Yes, World Series champion. COVID happened. I picked up my World Series ring in the parking garage, but resilience.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yes.

Nicole Murray:

And flexibility, but that's my story. Thank you, Nicole. Kirstin, over to you.

Kirstin Navaroli:

Yes, I am Kirstin Navaroli. I am an Air Force spouse. We've been married six years, and I guess my story kind of starts with a nice Google search. When I first met my, then boyfriend, in Iowa, which I like to brag about because not a lot of people may meet their spouse in Iowa, I don't think, especially active duty military. I'm Googling what is it like to be an Air Force wife? I met with a lot of negativity and humor that was very self-deprecating, which did not mesh with my personality at all, and when I got to my first assignment, I'm looking around. Where are all the people that I want to hang out with? I'm just a girlfriend, so I don't get the plug quite yet into the squadron. I'm trying to Bumble BFF, trying to find friends.

And then, I met my first assignment best friend, Jen, who was the one I co-founded Wives of the Armed Forces, previously Wives of the Air Force. We just expanded this year and we realized very quickly that we were not alone in our ideals, and that we wanted to thrive in this lifestyle, and there was a large network of military spouses out there that believed in that and wanted to be behind that and be a part of that, and the internet was lying to us, and we had the opportunity to create a platform that brought in all of those incredible voices, and to the earlier speaker's comments, we were able to make that community for ourselves and really empower and lift each other up to embrace this lifestyle and thrive in it.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thank you. I'm going to point out that your husband and your little girl are here in the back watching and supporting mom, so hi Carmen. Aaron, you want to take us over?

Aaron Evenson:

Yeah. Hey.

Lyndsey Akers:

Welcome.

Aaron Evenson:

I'm Aaron and I take photos, so we're going to do one real quick.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yes.

Aaron Evenson:

Livestream that. I don't know if I'm the best dressed, but I know I got the best beard on stage.

Lyndsey Akers:

Arguably. Arguably

Aaron Evenson:

Semantics. What was the question?

Lyndsey Akers:

Tell us more about yourself. You're a Wounded Warrior caregiver, an avid outdoorsman.

Aaron Evenson:

Yes.

Lyndsey Akers:

Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Aaron Evenson:

My name's Aaron. A lot of my friends call me Evo, so you guys can call me Evo. My kids say I'm a mushroom because I'm a fun guy, but I told you. It's going to happen. I was Active duty myself for a while, for just under 11 years. Interesting thing about me, I was flight 666 and we graduated Friday, September 13th, back in 2002, so it's kind of a weird number thing, but I was married mil-to-mil for a while. My wife recently retired. She was Air Force when Space Force with the flag. Her retirement ceremony, they said she's the first Air Force retiree. We don't know if it's true or not, but you can't find a Space Force retiree head anywhere, so we're rolling with it for now. Full-time dad with two kids, 13 year old daughter, nine year old son. I suppose I could go on more, but I think that's, and I like being outside, so outdoors.

Lyndsey Akers:

Awesome, and we're so glad all three of you here again, with unique stories and experiences of your own, which is the exact opportunity that we're trying to harness here, and I think I would argue that one of the most beneficial experiences that we can have as a military spouse is being able to hear from

people that have come before us and learning from them, and that's the very opportunity that we've had today, so thank you. Nicole, we'll start with you. What is the best piece of advice you've received from a military spouse who was ahead of you and how did that shape your military spouse experience?

Nicole Murray:

I think it was when we were doing squadron command. We were doing squadron commanders course out in Colorado Springs, and one of the leader spouses there was talking. I'm a competitive person by nature, I will say that, but talking about a team and being a team, and so we are Team Murray and it was sort of the idea that, let's set each other up for success. It's not a matter of who loves who more or I shouldn't have to remind my husband of this. If he really cared, he would remember. If I want him to remember to do something, I tell him. I ask him, and then I remind him five more times, and that's how it goes, but over-communicating, not just communicating, but over-communicating, connecting. We're talking a lot about connecting today, but that idea of we are all on this same team. We're all going to get through this together and we're going to thrive together. Especially now, we have two young boys. Bringing them as part of the team and letting them think that they have a voice and feel like they have a voice in everything we do. It's been a huge part of what has helped get us here today.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yes, and I think that's the value of the Wives of the Armed Forces, Wives of the Air Force community is that, Kirstin, you have the unique opportunity of representing thousands of military spouses around the world and you hear from them directly and probably very candidly as well, which is of benefit. Prior to today's events, we asked those very spouses what they wanted senior leaders to know. If you were having coffee with a senior leader spouse, what would you want them to know about your life? Similarly, what would you want the advocates to know as well? Kirstin, can you talk about some of the challenges that hear most about from the community, but also, how you connect them to resources?

Kirstin Navaroli:

Yeah, yeah. I think it's not going to be a surprise to anyone in this room that childcare, military spouse employment, those are probably the two biggest hitters, and those work together. Without childcare, it's hard for the default parent to work, but I would say that the more nuanced approach is military spouse mental health and wellness overall. We don't talk a lot about that. Mrs. Brown hit on it great earlier of, without that stability at home, it's really hard for the service member to go do what they're called to do with confidence, and that puts everyone at risk, afar, here, everywhere. I think that is one of the biggest factors that we're trying to bring a lot more light to in our community and really embrace that and empower military spouses to ask for help and accept help. I know that, that was something that I struggled with. I'm a hardworking lowan at heart and I wanted to do it myself. I wanted to figure it out myself. I could do this. Others had done it.

What I realized is that the best way for me to do it was with the help of those around me and the incredible community that has built. I'm really grateful for my partner, Jen. Her and I are yin and yang through and through, and that's what makes it a beautiful community because I think it's really representative of this diverse military spouse community, and we can get along and we thrive because we lean on each other's strengths and help build up each other's weaknesses, and we see that a lot in our community. Their voices are really powerful and everyone has these really creative solutions for how to get things done, and we hear those and we pass it along, and that's really where resources take flight.

Lyndsey Akers:

If you're not familiar with Wives of the Armed Forces or Wives of the Air Force, they bolster a community of 10 to 20,000 military spouses around the globe, and I consider myself one of them. It's so awesome being a part of that community and feeling like you're being seen among your peers while also learning from each other, but I think the approach in this kind of modern day contemporary military spouse world is that you guys are finding great success, and I'm curious what you would attribute that to. I have an opinion, but I'd be curious what you attribute that to.

Kirstin Navaroli:

I would love your opinion. I think it's probably pretty aligned-

Lyndsey Akers:

Probably.

Kirstin Navaroli:

... with mine, which is my husband and I are often called pushers in our friend group because we're always pushing people, come have dinner with us, come do this with us. Jen and I have the same approach with this community and it's very relational. I worked previously in jails and prisons doing reentry programming for men and women that were reentering back into the community, and it was the same approach there as it is here, which is humans need the warm handoff from point A to point B. They want to know who they're receiving the information from. Is it trustworthy information? Is it going to actually matter to me? And then, you want to grab that hand and take them to the next trustworthy person and give them the resource that they need and desire that's actually going to help.

We've seen that work time and time again, so while it might be silly to some, when they stumble across our page and see us recommending dry shampoo and why you need a certain moisturizer when you PCS from Del Rio, Texas to Washington, D.C., dry to humid. It matters, and it's building rapport and trust in a way. I'm not going to recommend a product, just like I'm not going to recommend a resource unless it's something I see value in and I trust. And I know that there were some WAF recommended products that were being used. We were discussing in the restroom earlier. It's always fun to see those things come full circle, but that's what I would say. It's very relational.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yeah, and it feels very genuine. You are very, very connected with the people who are a part of the community, which I've always been so appreciative of, and there is such power and opportunity embedded in having strong communities. Aaron, I know that you feel that way about the AFW2 community that you're a part of. Can you tell a little bit more about your experience with AFW2 and how that's helped you as a caregiver?

Aaron Evenson:

This is Vodka. Just kidding. Yeah. It's a first. You're going to like me or not. I don't know. I don't know if I'll be invited back. The AFW2, Air Force Wounded Warrior program. First off, sitting on stage with national championship and then you got your own, I don't know, I'm just a dude, and so, thank you for this invite and I think, surround yourself by lift yourselves up, so it's nice to share the stage with you guys and I'll try to catch up to you.

Lyndsey Akers:

Likewise.

Aaron Evenson:

The [inaudible 01:21:41] thing, I think I've said that before, but the AFW2 program is a Wounded Warrior program for the visible and invisible wounds. I was injured a long time ago, but the program wasn't around when I got injured, so when my wife started going through her problems, I made sure she got into that, and it's been a journey, but going through that, the Air Force has a caregiver program that not all the other branches have, and I think they're trying to learn from us. Tanya, Patrice, she's not there anymore, Bonnie, and Jamie, and Christine Brown, she's out here somewhere, but she's a lot with AFW2. Oh, there. Yeah.

Another set of powerhouses just like on this stage, and they dive into each everything, the caregivers, because I think the caregivers... You're trying to find your friends in Iowa and I don't really know. Well, there's Wounded Warriors out there, and then they have spouses, and spouses don't sign up for that, but then they continue with that mission. I think if you don't know about it, you need to look into it and support it however you can, but if you have questions, ask. That program, it's amazing because I've seen turn things around for a lot of those warriors and then the caregivers get together in the way that Tanya and them do it for us. We made songs. I walked out with, I forgot the guy's name, but he's famous.

Lyndsey Akers:

I forgot it, too, but I do know which one you're talking about.

Aaron Evenson:

Yeah, it was awesome, right? But then, we make our own networking thing. And I think what I've heard here, and the senior spouse has said, journey. And I think journey, everyone has their own journey. My journey, your story, your story, journey, and our, O-U-R, our journey is in the middle of all that, and I think people need to remember that and can't always dictate what the cards are dealt and what your journey is going to be, but you just kind of take control of it, and there's a lot of good programs like the AFW2, and of course F2. Maybe we'll talk about that, but how we're your help, too.

Lyndsey Akers:

I think I've heard you say before that a dead battery can't jumpstart a car, which anyone who becomes a caregiver, I don't think that they expect that to be their role. I know that you take that very honorably and seriously, so I'm curious, what do you do to help yourself stay centered throughout this process alongside your spouse?

Aaron Evenson:

Dead battery can't jumpstart another dead battery. One thing they say with us caregivers, like a quick show of hands, how many people flew in today or yesterday?

Lyndsey Akers:

Four.

Aaron Evenson:

Raise hands. Yeah, just a few of us. How many have ever flown on a plane before? Only 10 of you. Okay. Well, I don't know if you guys listen to the flight attendants. The flight attendants say, put your face mask on first, then help someone else. It is hard to do, I think sometimes, as a caregiver, but you have to take care of yourself, otherwise you're not going to be able to help your Wounded Warrior or your friends, family, spouses, your network of people. You have to rejuvenate yourself so you can actually help that because if you just get burnt out, then you're not doing nothing for nobody. What I do, I like to go hunting or fishing.

Most of the time I'm taking my weapon for a walk because hunting in Alabama is a little different than Montana and Wyoming, but sometimes it's just that solitude that I need to refresh my batteries to go back, and then I got the kids, and I remember the wife being deployed. I got two kids, one in diapers, one out, full-time school, working on Masters, all this other stuff and staying up late, getting three hours of sleep, and now maybe I'm starting to recharge my batteries, but I think it's important as that spouse, as that caregiver to take care of yourself. That way you can jumpstart those other batteries.

Lyndsey Akers:

Yeah, that's a great point. May is not only Military Appreciation month, but it's also Mental Health Awareness month, and I think as military families, we encounter a lot of stressors, but even the general individual, buying a house, changing jobs, raising kids, moving, those are stressful things in and of itself. Nicole, you're kind of doing all of that at the same time and you are soon beginning a PCS. This is not your first PCS?

Nicole Murray:

No.

Lyndsey Akers:

Okay.

Nicole Murray:

No.

Lyndsey Akers:

It will certainly be a change, and though all of the hats that you wear, mom, military spouse, professional military advocate, that has to have been incredibly rewarding, and also very challenging. Can you talk about how you've navigated all of those competing priorities?

Nicole Murray:

Survive, not thrive. No. Yes, there's a lot of stuff going on in the Murray household right now. I said, we're PCSing to Hawaii soon. I've been here for 14 years, and that comes with five years of Geo-Batching, which is never something you think is going to be five years. It's a year at a time. It's an assignment at a time.

Lyndsey Akers:

Can you give an example or can you elaborate on what Geo-Batching is?

Nicole Murray:

Sure. When you are geographically separated from your spouse, so for example, when Amen, my husband got stationed, he was going to Colorado Springs. We were here, he was going to Colorado Springs. We thought he was going to be deploying after that. Well, I have this wonderful job. I'm not going to go to Colorado Springs for a year. That doesn't make sense. One year became three, and then we thought we were going to Menwith Hill, England, talk about plan B to plan Q. They said, "Oops, our bad. We're not going to England. You're being selected for school down in Alabama." Montgomery, Alabama, not the same. That was a year in Alabama. Well, I'm not going to leave for a year, and then he got picked up for another year in Alabama for SaaS.

He said, "Well, Nic, I'm going to be here for 18 months. Why don't you come down?" and I said, "Okay, we can do this," and then we got some news that I was pre-cervical cancer and if we were going to have kids, we had to do it right away, which is a hard conversation to have on a phone call, but we knew that if we were able to get pregnant, the best doctors were going to be here, so we ended up staying here, so we were separated for five years and that was a lot. Particularly once the baby was born. My oldest is six. My husband was spending astronomical amounts of money, flying back and forth from Montgomery to, 36 hours on the ground to see the baby. Me too, but also the baby.

That's a little bit about the Geo-Baching, but we are in the middle, like I said, I'm leaving my job after 14 years. I don't have a natural deputy that I'm downloading my brain into, so it's sort of going out into the ether right now, but preparing for that transition, we say that my boss and I are going through a divorce. It's very traumatic, but we're also PCSing and packing up house, which you all have gone through. My husband left this morning at 3:00 AM for a TDY, so for the next two and a half weeks, I have two kids. Thankfully, spring sports season is wrapping up and I'm not going completely crazy, but at the same time, this Friday is Navy Day at the ballpark where I have all of this Navy leadership coming in to celebrate the US Navy, while my kids' daycare at Belvoir has a training day. My mother-in-law is flying in Thursday night and helping us out, but it takes a village and our village has come through.

Lyndsey Akers:

Well, and our F2 task force was recently very fortunate to have a conversation with General Robin Rant who-

... Was recently very fortunate to have a conversation with General Robin Rant who simply reiterated that the military family today looks very different than it has in the past. We're incredibly diverse. More families live off base. More spouses are not only wanting to work, but I think the need to be a dual income household for anyone is incredibly important, but certainly for military families. And might I add that 24% unemployment rate is unchanged for military spouses over the last 10 years. And Nicole, to your point, it takes a village and sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't. But Kirsten, can you talk about what your support system looks like?

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:30:04]

Kirstin Navaroli:

Yes. It changes every day, I think. And I think that's the best thing that you can do is have a really holistic support system around you. You can't only rely on the military spouses around you. You can't only rely on your partner. You have to get creative. We're very lucky in this neighborhood that we moved into to have awesome civilian neighbors that are very supportive and they have an older child and we have two little ones, and they think it's the coolest thing to be able to help out with our littles, which has saved me time and time again. When he's on the road and I have a sick little one that needs to go to urgent care, but my older one, I don't really want to drag out of the house at 8:00 PM on a Friday. They come

and hang out with her and it took one text and they were knocking on my door. We're here, we've got you. And that type of support, we're talking about being relational, those are conversations happening.

When we moved in, my husband backs in the U-Haul and they're like, "What are you doing here? Who are you?" Building relationships and building trust so that when you need that text to go out and you know it's going to be answered. And then obviously building out your military network, taking advantage of all the resources that we have access to listening and communicating to people. The best way to get access to resources is word of mouth. You really know what you need and what you're getting. You're not looking at a landing page on a website trying to decipher, is this something I qualify for or not? You're talking to a friend that's been through it and that makes a big difference. And then I would say additionally, relying on familial support, whether that is by blood or not, you build that out. You said your mother-in-law is flying in. I have made that same call of desperation when my dishwasher is leaking all over our kitchen floor that we're supposed to be renovating in a few weeks.

And my husband is gone on the three-week training, and I have a five-month-old baby and a two-year-old, and I'm looking at FaceTime and my dad, showing him the dishwasher and I'm like, "Can you please just get on a flight and come help me?" Try not to cry. So having those resources as well, I think that's the village. And everyone's going to look a little bit different. You got to get creative with what that looks like. But it's really a powerful thing to be able to ask for help and be in the season of receiving help versus giving help and acknowledge that. And then in turn, flip the script. Now I'm in a season, I can give a little bit more help than I'm asking for. And that feels really good too.

Lyndsey Akers:

Well, maybe this is something to expand upon, but I'm open to whoever wants to take the lead on this, but there are civilians who truly value the contributions of military families and they want to support us in meaningful ways, but they simply just don't really know where to start. And they may not fully understand our lifestyle very much. But I think that support could look like in employment or being community partners or simply being a good neighbor. But what would you say are some of the most helpful ways that non-military members can offer support to military families?

Hire us. Sorry.

Nicole Murray:

Yes, hire us.

Kirstin Navaroli:

We're opening a can of worms.

Nicole Murray:

I'm looking for a job you all. So please hire me. No. I think it goes back to reaching out a hand, whatever that hand looks like. Making friends in your 40s is really intimidating. And hey, we're moving to a new place. Rather than me put in all the work, like if you see somebody, if you civilian people out there see somebody that is a military family know that they've probably got a lot going on, but walk over, say hi, ask questions. One of the things that we hear so often is, "Oh, you're a military spouse. What does that look like?"

And people have this preconceived notion. Let's have a conversation about it. We love talking about it. So there's that education piece and that awareness piece. Really great around here in the DC area because it is so military connected. But I love it when my kids are at the playground and somebody will

walk over and say, "Hi, I'm this person, and why are you new here?" And things like that. So being able to make that connection and be proactive about it because a military family already has a lot going on.

Kirstin Navaroli:

I'm a big advocate for getting involved in your local community and with that Del Rio might as well have been a death sentence for us according to everyone else in the military. And it was our favorite assignment so far, and we were at McCord prior to, and obviously we're here now and we cherish that assignment so much because of the community and we immerse ourselves in it. We started going to church. We were going to bible studies with people that were not military affiliated at all. We were connecting with people at local restaurants and sitting down and having drinks and dinner and hanging out and getting to know people, getting involved in local business.

Anything we could do to immerse ourselves in the community. And then that builds that trustworthiness, that rapport, and then they're showing back up for us in ways that they didn't know they could. Now we're hosting squadron Christmas parties at this local business, and they're cutting us an awesome deal so that we can have all these great raffle prizes that go back to military families. And it's little things like that that add up and that relationship has continued. We've now left two years and it's still going. And that is a really cool phenomenon to see.

Lyndsey Akers:

Aaron, has anything stood out to you?

Aaron Evenson:

A lot. I was just thinking when we got to Alabama, someone talked with someone they... My wife answered the question and that someone said, "Oh, so you're a transplant." And that upset my wife for, still, she was just talking about it yesterday. And so I don't care. It's just a thing. But I think it's the mentality like, "Oh, you're just passing through. You're not as important as all these other people." I know in our little community, we have no friends. I mean, we have some friends. I meant no family.

We have some friends that are like family, and there's been a couple of times this past year it's like, oh, we got to be in five places. There's four of us, same time, and some of our neighbors. And just kind of tipping into that friendship and asking for the help because we always take care of ourselves, but sometimes the civilians, the neighbors, they've seen some of the people come and go, "You're the third person in the house this year, blah, blah, whatever." But I think entrusting in that relationship with some of those neighbors is important. That's something I'm trying to redo.

Kirstin Navaroli:

I think this the pushy civilians. That was my neighbor, he saw me trying to carry my groceries in with a kid in the car seat in the driveway, and the other one's standing there waiting and he just walked over and started grabbing bags and taking them up to my kitchen. I didn't ask him to do that. I probably would've said no. He didn't ask if he could do that. He just helped. And that in turn builds that relationship. Be a little pushy sometimes.

Nicole Murray:

I would also echo, just talk to your kids about it too. My kid came home from school maybe a month or so ago, and he was all upset because some other little kid in his kindergarten class said, "You're in the military, your dad's in the military. Oh, he's probably going to get shot." It's like, that's a conversation we

need to have now. Well, he's six, but they're young. It wasn't mean spirited by any way. But those are conversations we need to have with our kids and civilians need to have with our kids because you're growing up together. So making those efforts as well.

Lyndsey Akers:

Gosh, that was not something I had planned on having a conversation with my kids about, but duly noted. Thank you. Nicole, you mentioned to me before that you felt like you're a better military spouse because of your job and you're a better professional because you're a military spouse. And I'll make note of your impressive coin collection, but can you talk about those parallels and how they impact each other?

Nicole Murray:

Sure. So I'll talk about first the idea of being a better military spouse because of my job. And I think Mrs. Salzman talked about this earlier, particularly in the Space Force. And my husband when he was in Air Force was missiles. Not a lot of jobs that he has had that he comes home and he talks to me about. And he's pretty reserved, and I think he always aired on the side of, I'm not supposed to be sure what I'm supposed to say or not supposed to say, so I'm just not going to say anything. So especially as a young 20 something spouse, girlfriend, whatever, I learned more about the military, especially the joint community, by doing my job and building the National's military outreach platform, by meeting leaders and families and meeting MSOs and VSOs. And I have just a more depth of knowledge than I think I would had otherwise.

And then on the other side, when I started with the nationals, and I don't expect all of you to know everything that we do, but it was pretty limited. I was hired to do half player relations, half community relations, and then on top of that, build the military program. So yes, that's more than 100%, but that's the military spouse life. But no, so just being able to take the business objectives and the strategies and the mission and goals of an organization and then translate it for a military community, I think makes me better at my job. And knowing what I know about the military culture and being able to translate that both ways has absolutely made me a big asset for the organization. And just as I go about my professional career.

Lyndsey Akers:

You did compare coin collections with your spouse, and I think you've had a number of opportunities that might rival your spouses. Is there any moment that sticks out to you from your experiences or the opportunities that you've had? My gosh, a world series winning team, hosting All-Star Week, and again, your involvement with the military community. Any favorites that jump out to you?

Nicole Murray:

Well, I would say pretty early on in my career at the NATS. Last year, we sang Happy Birthday to General Brown on his birthday which was Air Force Day. I thought he was going to kill me, but Mrs. Brown said it was okay. So we went with it. But we had these opportunities across my career, and we were at my desk when my husband was coming to the game, and he went to get something out of one of my drawers, and he's like, "Nic, you have a sleeve of coins from the Secretary of Defense."

I said, "Yes. What?" He says, "Well, I've been in the military for a decade. You've worked for a baseball team for four years. What's the day?" So I'm the head of military outreach, but there are a lot of people behind the scenes that work on all of the things that we do. So a lot of times when senior leaders come through, they'll give us extra coins to give to the people that they won't interact with. So I had a sleeve

from the secretary, a sleeve from General Dempsey who was the chairman at the time, and they sat at my desk until they needed to be distributed.

Lyndsey Akers:

Great. And keeping with the theme of transition, Aaron, you medically retired from the Air Force in 2013, and your spouse also recently retired from the Space Force. What advice can you share about navigating transition as a military family to civilian, both perhaps as an individual and as a family?

Aaron Evenson:

My transition was hard. And so when it came to hers, I did my best to make sure she wasn't the same. And I think some people I transitioned abruptly, and that's a whole different ballgame, but if you see it coming up within a year or two, you could start planning for that. Of course, there's taps and there's all this other stuff, but I think the best thing that really worked is the experience that I had networking with other folks, and that I was able to guide her through the best I could. That's the same with anybody else that's getting ready to separate is there's all the advice. You can read these books, forums and all this other stuff, which is great, but the advice is network because there's always someone that's been there before you.

And has done that. Every time we've PCSed, we have found that one spouse that knows the current information. Our last time was in Germany, we call her Mayor of Der Owl. Her name is Carrie, and she'd been there for the longest time and gave us a lot of good information. And I think it's the same thing with the separation. Oh, well, think of this thing. Well, I didn't even think about that. All these other things and these programs, and it's come a long way since I've been out to where she's at now. And so I don't know. Advice wise, I always say keep a journal, log things and keep copies of everything until you get it official and then you can burn it.

But the VA process, that's come a long way since I've been out, but...

Lyndsey Akers:

It's not easy.

Aaron Evenson:

Yes. And I think, thank you, the transition, it can kind of depend on if someone's wanting to stay in and then they're kind of forced out, that could be a dark time for somebody. So if someone's looking forward to getting out or it's definitely time, or I'm going to commit this to my family, then it could be happy time.

Lyndsey Akers:

Well, in so many of these decisions along our military journey or military family journey, they are more often than not joint decisions that happen within the conversations of your marriage. And we are no strangers to stress as military families. So Kirsten, I'm curious if you can share with us what helps you and your spouse navigate these challenges together?

Kirstin Navaroli:

Do you want to get up here? He's like, "Please, no." Communication. And that was the pillar of our relationship from the very beginning. And I look back, I'm so proud of 24 year old us for realizing that, and I credit a lot of that to our parents. We have wonderful in-laws, and I have two wonderful parents

that have really beat that into our brains. And we have then hopefully started to pass that down to our children. And we echo that a lot in our community that, to your point earlier, you cannot communicate enough.

You can't set enough time aside to take time to prioritize communication and sitting down and really having those important conversations when there's no distractions. And then also I would say advocating for yourself as a military spouse. There's so many things because my brain is always working a mile a minute. Questions I've asked my husband, he's like, "Never thought to ask that, never thought to look into that." And that serves him just as much as it serves me. It makes him a better airman because I'm pushing on the backend for some change, or I've got a key spouse meeting and we don't have childcare because it's a training day. Can I drop her off at your office for 30 minutes?

Can we get created with some solutions here so that we're not having to pay out of pocket for a volunteer role in our squadron? And we've had really good support from leadership for things like that. So just because we asked the question and he always tells me the answer is no until you ask. So communicating my needs to him and then him advocating for me has been a huge asset to navigating some of the things that would otherwise be really very stressful.

Lyndsey Akers:

Great. Nicole, anything to expand upon that? What's worked best in terms of navigating so much of the stress and challenge together with your spouse?

Nicole Murray:

We talked about communications. I said over communications, but I think it's also communicating your priorities. And we talked before about the seasons of your life and your priorities at one season is not your priorities later. And knowing that depending on your priorities, something's going to have to give, there's only so much that we can take on. So you're going to have to offload something or you're going to have to give yourself grace. And No, I'm not going to be at my kids' hockey game on Sunday because I have to work or because I have to do this. And that's okay. And what you're willing to put up with changes especially as you become a mom or a parent.

I don't think that I could have done the job that I have now with kids 10 years ago. It's incredibly high tempo. And when my husband is also incredibly high tempo, there's only so much, but you have to talk to each other. If it's really important to my husband that we are always at our kids' hockey games or tee-ball practice or something like that, then let's talk about it and let's figure out a way to do it. But if I don't know that it's a priority for you, then I am just going to operate the way I'm going. So having that conversation, having very candid conversations about it. And with my kids, that's really a part of it too. We've been talking about this PCS and my kids, they're excited, then they're triggered by something and whatever we had planned for that night, that special couple us time, that's now gone away because Rory is upset that he's not going to play for the same tee-ball team.

We're going to just spend a half hour on that. But keeping them and being able to react to those things in real time, and all of that has to happen with this basis of communications and trust. This was a big thing for us is just because my feelings aren't your feelings doesn't mean that they're not authentic. You're feeling them. Same thing with my kids. Just because I don't understand why you're crying about X or whatever, that doesn't mean that you're not feeling it. So I have to be respectful even if I don't agree with it.

Lyndsey Akers:

So well, and I love that you emphasize the importance of focusing on your priorities, because I hope what people take away from this session today is that your journey does not have to look like anyone else's on this stage, in this room, and your experience or your journey can be based upon the priorities that you have. If you feel called to be home with your children, that is what you should center your life around. If you want to climb a ladder corporately and focus on your career, if that is afforded to you, do that.

If you want to do all of those things at once and wear all of those hats, trying to make that work for the best needs of your family, but just because it doesn't look like one of these does not make it any less valid, and we encourage you to continue doing that and we champion you through it. For our final question today, just like we asked Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Saltzman. Aaron, we'll start with you. If you could go back and tell your younger self as a military spouse, give yourself advice, what would it be?

Aaron Evenson:

I'm not gonna... I'll go the second answer.

But the advice, one, I would say start saving, investing better. But one thing that I've done is I take pictures and a lot of times people will give me a hard time like, "Oh, you take big puff and hey, can I get a copy of those?" I'm like, "Of course you can." But it's all those times. So those places, experiences. I don't know if I ever see you guys again, but it's capturing those memories, that green tile in the house. Do you have a picture of the green tile in the house?

Jennifer Saltzman:

Absolutely.

Aaron Evenson:

See? We went to the same college. That's kind of weird.

Lyndsey Akers:

Western Kentucky?

Aaron Evenson:

No. University of Great Falls. Exactly. So small world.

Lyndsey Akers:

So document, keep lots of pictures.

Aaron Evenson:

Yes, document, pictures. It's kind of looking back. Every house that I've lived in, I've left a time capsule for my kids and they're going to go find it someday if they ever want to.

Lyndsey Akers:

That's cool.

Aaron Evenson:

But I guess save money and take pictures. That's great.

Lyndsey Akers:

Save money and take pictures.

Aaron Evenson:

It's digital.

Lyndsey Akers:

I think I have 20,000 pictures on my camera roll from many years ago, and I need to organize my pictures. I've got them. I need to organize them.

Nicole Murray:

Same.

Lyndsey Akers:

Kirsten.

Kirstin Navaroli:

To my earlier point, ask questions. Your voice is valid. You're a military spouse. That doesn't mean that you just have to sit behind the scenes and obey. You get to have a voice and you can just speak up and advocate for yourself, advocate for others. Your partner doesn't know what you're struggling with if you don't vocalize it. So give them the opportunity to connect you to the resources they should know, even if they're not the best at always passing it along. Because they get a million papers when you in process. Ask questions. Always ask questions.

Lyndsey Akers:

Thanks. Nicole.

Nicole Murray:

There's a couple of things I would say, and one is your village can never be too big. You can never have enough people around you that care about you and want to support you. And especially as we get older, it's harder to make new friends, the people I've met who are new or it's all situation based, "Hey, I moved in," or "Hey, my kid's on your team," or "Hey, we're on PTA together," or something like that. So your village can never be too big. My funny story is that I was on the field in Houston for game seven, getting drenched in champagne because of a relationship that started with my husband's whiffle ball team. So that's a whole other story. But there's a power in network and there's a power with people.

The second piece is more about that mindfulness. To your point, taking the moments and celebrating, giving yourself some time. I always say for the people who work with me, opening day or big games, take 30 seconds. I don't care what else you have going on for the rest of the day, you can be scrambling. Take 30 seconds and take it in. So next week, I'm saying my last game is UK US day. I'm working with a British embassy. It's a whole big thing. I need to find 30 seconds and just absorb 14 years. And I know myself as in you all do this the same way. We'll go, go, what's next? Take the time, whether that's professionally, with your kids, with your spouse. Take the time and just give yourself the moment to reflect and to celebrate and give it its due because you never know when you're going to be there Again.

Lyndsey Akers:

Incredible way to end the session today. I personally just feel very, very, very grateful to have shared this experience with you, with Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Saltzman because the words and guidance that we have shared and expressed today are going to impact the people that are in this room, that are watching virtually and who will be able to see the recordings. And I hope that we can take that out in our communities and embody that even further. So I would like to turn it back over to Kari for closing remarks.

Kari Voliva:

All right friends, let's hear it one more time for all of our speakers today. They're all yelling, I promise. A reoccurring theme of today's celebration has been community and the importance of finding your village. Events like this don't just happen. So we'd like to take a few moments to say thank you to our AFA village that made this event possible. First of all, to our amazing speakers, thank you for sharing your truest selves and welcoming us into your lives. This event today was the first of its kind for F2, and I can promise you it won't be the last. AFA's F2 Task Force put their hearts and souls into getting us here today. We couldn't have done it without our fearless leader, Lindsay Akers.

Got way too many emails from Lindsay between the hours of 2 and 4 a.m.. which I think is the only time she had to work on this. I have toddlers too, and I go to bed at nine. I do want to thank our chairman of the board, Bernie Skoch and the entire AFA Board of Directors who have put their full support behind AFA's growing support for military families. To our President, CEO, Orville Wright, and our Executive Vice President Doug Raaberg and Mrs. Raaberg, thank you for your vision and your heart for our military families, and thank you for always saying yes for every crazy idea we bring forward.

To Christine Brown and the entire AFA team, thank you all for making the magic happen behind the scenes. I appreciate you all and love you more than you know. And finally, thank you most importantly, to every one of you that showed up today, whether you're sitting in this room out at Buckley, hey, or from your own corner of the world, thank you for sharing space with us. Thank you for celebrating United Forces & Families. You are building a stronger village. This concludes today's event and we can't wait to do it again. Thanks, friends.