

“THERE IS NO COMMUNITY LIKE THE MILITARY COMMUNITY”

June 2020

This month we interviewed Holly Nusom, Research & Evaluation Associate at Penn State University and active-duty Army spouse. Holly shared with us some of the challenges and benefits of being a military family and how she and her family have navigated military life for the past 17 years.

What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced that are unique to being a military family? The constant moving. Just when you feel settled in your home and community, it seems like it's time to pack up again. I wouldn't change these experiences, though. Each duty station has introduced my family to wonderful people, new experiences, and made us more resourceful and resilient. Sometimes, the moves lead to more (or less) family time, or more (or less) desirable weather and amenities. We've always lived far away from extended family, so we've built our own "family" networks with neighbors, friends, and people in my husband's unit. I've learned to dive right into the new community upon arrival, sometimes even before we get there! I know to search for the local gym, the spouses club, sports and activity programs for my kids, and venture out to local events to help us get a feel for and get involved in our new community. And I make myself aware of the new military families coming in. Not everyone dives right in, and many just need a warm welcome or invitation to come explore with you.

What are the most helpful benefits you receive from being a military family? The community. No matter where you go as an Army family, there is a community. Sometimes it greets you upon arrival, and other times you have to seek it out. We tend to prefer to live on post, where the schools are often within walking distance, parks are nearby, and the neighborhood speed limits of 15 are strictly enforced. My school-age kids are able to play without direct supervision or coordinated play dates. There is a sense of safety and belonging that is unmatched outside the gate. What we may give up in home size far exceeds what we often gain in community. Now, we live in a newer neighborhood in town that has a strong military presence, with many active-duty and retiree families. This has offered a bit of the best of both worlds for my family—a home that fits us all and the friendly, supportive community. I do miss those speed limits and the convenience of a nearby commissary, though!

Tell me about your experience with PCS moves. We have moved every 6 months-3 years since my husband joined the military. The prep and planning has been more challenging as we've grown our family, but we've learned to embrace the changes. Living on post or in a military-heavy neighborhood means that most of your friends and neighbors are also military families, so they are continuously moving in or moving out, too. Moving is normalized—it's sad, but also exciting. As my kids get older, moving has been harder for them,

especially as they make more friends from civilian families. Social media and video messaging helps. I'm sad to leave my friends, too, but more and more, we have friends to reconnect with waiting for us at our next duty station. I suppose that is a benefit that comes with being a military family for so long.

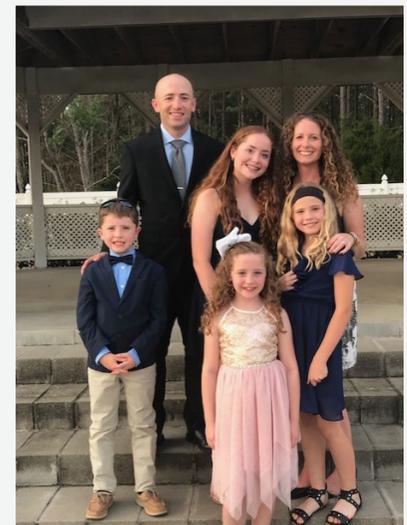
Tell me about your experience with Soldier and Family Readiness Groups? I have seen SFRGs serve as a source of community, support, and encouragement for most of my husband's military career. During deployments, they're the main source of unit-related information, but they've been so much more than that. An SFRG is a group of Soldiers and families all experiencing military life in a similar manner—the OPTEMPO training (e.g., pace of training, unit activities) and deployment demands are the same for most everyone in the SFRG. Gathering together with the SFRG has been awesome for my kids as well. They see that other kids have a parent deployed or away training, and they often look forward to the "meetings" where families gather, kids play, and meals are often shared. I've seen SFRG events and fundraisers shine a spotlight on the organizational abilities, creative talents, and leadership skills of many military spouses who may have found their careers put on hold due to family responsibilities or limited career opportunities in the area. Most of all, I have experienced the vital relationship building among Soldiers and family members that demonstrates our commitment to caring for one another.

Tell me about your career. How has military life affected your career? What resources have you used to assist you in your career? What project (from work) are you most proud of? How has military life not affected my career?!? LOL. I will say that the greatest impact to my career has been how we grew our family early on and the repeated moves. I know that our stay in any one location is limited, sometimes to only a year. Sometimes, we are unsure just how long we will live in a particular location. However, the moves have made me a flexible planner. As a military spouse, I was able to take advantage of the MyCAA program when it first rolled out to help me take the courses I needed to renew my teaching license. An unexpected pregnancy with twins(!) made heading back into the classroom a hurdle I wasn't interested in overcoming, so I spent a number of years volunteering on the installation within the SFRG and with the American Red Cross. These volunteer experiences kept me engaged with my community, allowed me a nice respite from kid care, and provided me with some work-related experience that I was able to put on a resume. This, combined with my education, has kept me competitive for employment.

When an opportunity came available a few years ago, I applied and was offered the position (Research & Evaluation Associate, Penn State University). Thanks to an understanding employer, I transitioned into a remote role, where I continued working for another 3 years. Meanwhile, I also carved out time to volunteer in meaningful roles in my military community. I recently accepted a new position in my current community and am now transitioning into that role. Leaving a remote position was a tough choice but was necessary due to some of the limitations of being remote.

Each experience, whether it has been paid work or volunteer work, has helped me advance in my professional life. It has not been easy, but we've made it work, and I think having to navigate the challenges has made me more confident and competent. I see many military spouses doing the same! Having a support network of other career-ready military spouses has been helpful to me as well. There is no hurdle that another military spouse hasn't had to overcome, and many are willing to share their hows and whys. We learn from and encourage one another, and recently, many employers have taken notice of the value a military spouse can bring to their organization. The career opportunities for military spouses continue to grow and we are ready to meet the need!

What do you want civilian families to know about military families? We want what you want: safe communities where we—service members, spouses, and our children—can belong, learn, and grow into productive members of society. We may not be in your community for long, but we will leave a positive lasting impact if you let us. Say hello, invite us into your circles, and wish us well when we leave. We will miss you, too, but it will be worth it.



Holly Nusom & Family



The purpose of Military REACH, a project of the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, is to bridge the gap between military family research and practice. Our team critically evaluates and synthesizes research in order to make it practical and accessible to military families, helping professionals, and military leadership. USDA/NIFA Award No. 2017-48710-27339