

"WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO ACCEPT THE PARADOX OF MILITARY LIFE"

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The Military REACH team at Auburn University is on a mission to connect with military families. When I accepted their invitation, I was already an avid REACH fan. I discovered Military REACH two years ago and instantly appreciated their mission – to make research about military families accessible and practical. Their monthly newsletter and the included TRIP (Translating Research into Practice) reports provide smart and succinct summaries of current military family research. Readers also get an objective evaluation of the research and a snapshot of the implications for military families and those who support them. Each month I find information that resonates with issues I see daily in my work with military families and even in my own family. The work of Military REACH helps illuminate a clearer line of thinking and formulates ideas for tackling tough military family issues. If you do not already [subscribe to the newsletter](#), I recommend you start today.

The Military REACH team's emerging effort to connect with military families adds exponentially to the importance and value of their work. To explain, I'll share my experience as a military spouse.

My name is Lauren O'Donnell. I am a proud military spouse of nearly 30 years. My daily work involves advocating for military families by listening and learning, referring to resources, and influencing decisions in the interest of military families. I work to build community among military families wherever I am, encouraging other military spouses to step into the responsibility and privilege of building relationships and guiding and supporting other military families. My husband is an active-duty Army officer serving in units at the tip of the spear in support of our national defense. In June he returned from a five-month deployment with the 82nd Airborne Division, his eighth deployment. I proudly supported him by managing the decisions and the work at home while also supporting other spouses of deployed Soldiers. I have two children, 20 and 17, who are resilient and proud of their father's service. They embrace military life and identify as military

children. We are an Army family and the military mentality of strength, courage, perseverance, and service runs strong in our blood.

I am also Lauren O'Donnell, a driven professional frustrated by an inability to reach career goals thwarted by frequent military moves. I empathize with military families who struggle to overcome the tough obstacles of military life such as constant relocations, separations, disconnection, and danger. I mourn the strained relationships, the divorces, the identity crises, the injuries to body and mind, the exhaustion of caregiving, and the pain of losing a loved one. I feel guilt when passing the yoke of volunteer expectations to other spouses because they are tired of the tremendous sacrifice those expectations require. I worry about my husband and the toll the military's relentless pace has on his body and mind. I am exhausted by the thought of continued service -- more deployments, more responsibilities, more "going it alone." I am concerned about the effects of this lifestyle on my children, who lack educational continuity, the steady support of a two-parent home, and a friend-group that shelters them from feeling isolated and alone. I believe that our military mentality is not always understood or appreciated by our civilian family members, neighbors, and communities. This causes anxiety for me as our family looks ahead to assimilation into a civilian community after leaving the military.

Like most military families, my family lives, works, plays, and plans in this antinomy between pride and frustration, courage and fear, strength and exhaustion, and togetherness and isolation. To continue, we have no choice but to accept this paradox of military life. After 30 years, I see clearly that military families cultivate a tolerance for this discomfort and accept this unending tension. We learn to sacrifice, compromise, and adapt to the pervasive push and pull of military life. We accept the challenge, lean on one another, and hope that others, especially those entrusted with supporting military families, recognize, understand, and help us overcome the challenges inherent to military life.

Thankfully, a growing effort is underway by government, research institutions, think tanks, military-connected organizations, non-profits, and corporations to better understand and act on the needs of our Service members, Veterans, their families, and our military communities. From health care to employment to education to civilian-military connection, there is a continued

commitment to address problems faced by military families.

The rigorous efforts of these entities to produce worthwhile data, formulate solutions, and generate results to improve the lives of military families is tremendous. As someone who has experienced military life firsthand for over 30 years, I also sense a tension between the binary outcomes of data collection and the multi-layered personal stories of military life. I wonder if the research is getting to the heart of the perspective we need. The truth is, the research often leaves me feeling boxed in, left out, and misunderstood. As I've learned from my military lifestyle, the best solution to this tension is the hope that we can work together to find a better way.

The Military REACH team is intent on achieving this goal. In their work to elevate current research about military families to something more meaningful, useful, and transformative, they want to link research with experience, data with stories, and those who analyze data with those who contribute their lived experience. Through this undertaking and connection, we gain greater perspective and a deeper understanding of military culture, military life, and the needs of those who serve and their families. The knowledge from both research and experience will lead to new and better-informed ideas to create ground-breaking change in the lives of military families. Military REACH is taking substantive steps towards this goal. Let's join them.

If you are a military family member who would like to connect with the Military REACH team, [complete this brief survey](#). [Subscribe to the REACH newsletter](#) to get their important work delivered right to your inbox. You can also follow Military REACH on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), or visit the [Military REACH website](#).



Lauren O'Donnell & 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