

Ep. 15: A key spouse's story of resiliency

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Good day Gladiators, Frances Martinez, Director of Psychological Health for the 960th Cyberspace Wing here with a very special guest on the phone. We have Kristen Christy, Kristen, you're the key spouse for the five or the 53rd Network Operations Squadron at Peterson, correct? - I am. - Well, thank you so much for your participation today. I know that topics, you know, related to suicide are always difficult to talk about, but it's my understanding you have a great story about resiliency and that's what we're really looking forward to hearing today. - Yeah, hopefully, hopefully our story will be a beacon of hope for folks in the darkness. - Unfortunately, you know, I've received feedback from many people that, you know, talking about suicide is kind of like checking a box, right? You know, there's the detachment of humanity with it. When we're talking about suicide prevention, it's just like a slideshow presentation and there's no personalization to it. So, you know, having stories of people that have been through it, you know, last week we had Colonel Swanson on our podcast talking about his personal story with suicide. So now with, with this, we're looking at your perspective as a family member. And I don't think a lot of people that are really contemplating suicide or that have committed suicide really consider the effects, right, of suicide as a whole and how it affects everyone else. So, and I think that's why we have you here today to really talk about that side of it. - Yeah, our story is, is about the aftermath, but then about the hope that we have as a community. In that darkest hour, I think, you know, thinking of the aftermath and what's left behind is just not a factor that people think about. And we just want to give a different perspective on that and truly give people pause. It just takes a moment. It takes one sliver of a moment and if we can insert a memory or story, it is amazing how the brain processes things better with a story. I think I would have done better in calculus in college, if it had been wrapped in a story (Kristin laughing) instead of just the textbook, but the power of a story is amazing. And what I have found in telling our story so many times is that it's healing for me and it's healing for my children. So everyone has a story, no matter what it is, whatever the adversity, whatever the joy. And as we tell that story, we heal in telling it, and then the benefits are for other people as well, that they realize that they are not alone and that's pretty powerful. - Right, and you know, like people that have dealt with severe trauma, you know, we've are in the military world and we've had people that have dealt with, you know, significant PTSD and things like that. And a lot of people, you know, curl up and, you know, shut themselves out from the world. And that's a good thing to really discuss for mental health, right? Is narrative therapy, speaking your story, telling your story, writing your story, and then

finishing it out. And also prolonged exposure are some things that we utilize as clinicians to help people through their traumatic experiences. And so this is a way of doing that. And I know you said before we started the podcast, you've had 120 speaking engagements, and I know today, this is your first of three podcasts today, so really getting that story out there and sharing it and you know, it's really your own piece of therapy. - It truly, truly is. And that's not to say that it's not emotional and it digs at me. And you know, I'm a master resiliency trainer. I'm considered a resiliency expert by many and (chuckling) Frances, there are days where I don't want to get out of bed. And it's hard, but it's those days where I don't wanna do something that I know that I need to do, those are the days for than any time that I have to do it. (Kristen laughing) If I don't want to go to the gym one day, I know that because I have that thought, I need to go to the gym more than any day, the rest of the week. But yeah, there, there truly is therapy in telling the story and, and it can be just on paper, just tell your story to a piece of paper or dictate it on the computer. It does not have to, you don't have to be on a stage and speak to a lot of people. You can do it over coffee with one person. You could do it over Zoom but more importantly, just to do it for yourself is so therapeutic. - Right. And I personally have not heard your story. So I know Colonel Erredge and K.C. Erredge, our key spouse mentor for the wing have heard your story and told me you have to hear it. So why don't we get started and tell me, you know, the background and what led you to where you are today? - Yep, sounds good. So I grew up in the air force. My dad was air force. I met my husband, Don Christy at the university of Texas, and he was in ROTC. And of course that was my community when I went to UT, because I had grown up on military installations. I hung out at the ROTC building. I had a stroke in high school. So I was not able to raise my right hand to take the oath of service. So I said, well, I'm going to volunteer. I'm going to raise my left hand and volunteer with ROTC. I met Don, we fell in love, we got married, he was a missileer. We went up to Grand Forks, North Dakota, for four years and started our family. And we got embedded in our community there. And after four years we came to Colorado Springs, in 1995, he was stationed out at Schriever Air Force Base or, well, it was Falcon Air Station at the time and we were here for two years. He was active duty and he came home one day and he said, you know, "My career is not going the way I want it to. And so I really want to consider separating from the air force." And it kind of blew me away because again, I had grown up in the air force, had that ID card, was so proud on my 10th birthday when I got that ID card and felt like the ID card was part of my identity. I really had anxiety about it. And then he said, hold on, wait a minute. He told me about the Air Force Reserve. And so in '97, he transitioned to a traditional reservist in the Air Force Reserve and worked as a contractor. And then they were standing at the 310th Space Group, the first space organization in Air Force Reserve, and asked Don to come on as the exec. So he transitioned from traditional to full time. And as many reservists know, you all know there have been a lot of flip-flopping between AGR and ART positions. So Don did that a number of times in his career, in the Reserve, but he became a squadron commander for 19 SOPS. They help run the GPS system. And he came home in 2003, said, "Kristen, I have been tasked with getting volunteers to go to Baghdad for deployment", and he told me, and I just, I beamed when he told me, he was kinda asking my permission,

but he knew, you know, he didn't need my permission. He said, I don't feel right asking for volunteers unless my name is at the top of the list. And that's, that's when I saw that he was a true leader, a manager, a supervisor says go, and a leader says, let's go. And he said, let's go. He was the only one chosen. And he went to Baghdad for four and a half months in 2004. He was second in command at the Baghdad Airport. We did not have Skype back then, we didn't, you know, we got emails from him, sporadically, the boys and I did the best that we could here, we did not watch TV, but he would let us know when the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld came through, he met him on the tarmac. He would talk about the USO tours coming through, but he came home different and you hear a lot about deployment. He did come back different. He didn't have that sparkle in his eyes, his fingernails were bitten down to the nubs. He came home, he had earned the bronze star. And I know that you don't earn the bronze star by having Toby Keith take a nap on your couch in your office for a USO tour or Ted Nugent signing your gun holster. But there were things that he just couldn't talk about and it wasn't clearance related. It was just things he couldn't express. And so we, we communicated and he communicated that he couldn't communicate with me very well. And we had an understanding that those we call those sacred spaces. And then we had a great opportunity to go to army or college at Carlisle barracks. And we were going to the Pentagon afterwards. So back then in the Reserves, you could pretty much homestead. So we had built a custom home in Colorado Springs, planning on staying, but he was just, the trajectory for his career in the Reserve was going at a pretty fast pace. And we decided to sell our home, it's like, new chapter, right? You know, exciting, adventuresome and off the Carlisle we went, had a great year. I really thought that was going to be an opportunity to reengage with the family and reintegrate with the family. And there was some of that, but, I think our toughest PCS was after graduation at the Army War College when, instead of going to the Pentagon, they said, no, we need you back in Colorado Springs. So one of the mantras that my parents had taught us growing up was if you don't ask, the answer is always no. If you ask you have a chance, if you have a chance, take it, and if it changes your life or someone else's life, let it. So I had a chance to go back to our custom home that we built, and I rang the doorbell and asked if we could buy the house back. (Both laughing) The answer was no. (laughing) - Oh well. They'll never know, right? - So we, we started over in a new neighborhood, got embedded, but it was a really tough, tough PCS breath. I likened it to double Dutch jump rope, where you have two ropes going and you're tracing. And you're, you know, with your hands, trying to figure out when you're going to jump in without tripping- - I still don't know how to do that. - And we, what? - I still don't know how to do that. (Both laughing) - It's hard, it's hard. And we tripped. Four years after the deployment in April of 2008, the doorbell rang and it was the coroner. And Don had taken his life. - Were you- - It's been 12 years. Our, our boys were 12 and 14 at the time. Our family was decimated before that. I mean, we, it had just crumbled. Our marriage was broken. I remember, I remember that night so vividly, even 12 years later. Our neighbors came to the house. A lot of 'em didn't say anything. They were there though. They showed up and our community was there for us. And it was incredible. But, Ryan, our oldest son and Ben, they were in shock of course, but the choice that Don made in, and I will tell

you, I had, no one can make me feel guiltier than I already feel. And I've realized that it's not really guilt, it's regret. I have a number of regrets, I will for the rest of my life, but our kids have regrets and they felt guilty and they thought it was their fault. So the aftermath of the choice that Don made, our youngest son, Ben, who was 12 at the time, eight years later on his 20th birthday, he was at college in Tucson, Arizona. And I had a voicemail when I woke up in the morning, he had left it at 1:30 in the morning. And this is what he left. (Ben crying) - I miss Dad. (Ben crying) I miss Dad so much. I can't live without him. I can't, I need him right now. I need him so. (Ben crying) Life just is so hard right now, Mom. (Ben crying) Mommy. (Crying) Oh. I need Dad right now. I can't grow now. It's the hardest day of my life. (Ben crying) Mommy, I'm not okay. I'm not okay right now, Mom, and I really need help. I really need help, I really need answers. (Ben crying) - Wow, that's heartbreaking. - It's hard for me to, to listen to still. Our oldest son, Ryan was 14. On September 20th of 2020, it will be five years since I saw Ryan. September 20th of 2015, he disappeared. We have no idea where he is. He was diagnosed with bipolar at the age of 16, a little over a year after Don's suicide. And bipolar typically from what I understand presents itself in the mid to early, or the early to mid 20s, but his doctors think that the suicide triggered bipolar in him early and he got into meth and heroin and ran away. And he, he got clean. Our dentist redid his mouth because he had meth mouth. He had his own business and he told me he was going to go off the grid for a little bit to a retreat in Hawaii. And we found out later, he never showed up. He never applied. He used an alias for his bus ticket, and I found a book in his things on how to disappear and how to change your identity. Both of my kids have attempted suicide. I think, as a mom, now I'm not a therapist, Frances. I don't, you know, I've just, I've been through some things and adversities but in our family, it's contagious. And I just pray that Ryan is on this side of heaven and that as our story gets out more and more that maybe he'll see it. And he'll say, I need contact, Mom. - Yeah. I think some people don't realize, you know, the effects of suicide, right? If you are a survivor of suicide by a parent, you're, you know, more likely to commit suicide and people don't really consider all the risk factors involved. - Exactly, and I will tell you too, that a lot of people think that they are a burden to their family, that their family would be better without them. And I'm here to say, we would give anything to have Don back. And he was not a burden. You know, we, during, especially during the month of September, we are all, you matter, you know, get help, seek help. I want to kinda turn that a little bit too as please tell someone that they matter to you, don't assume that they know it. You will feel good inside and you will see their face light up. Another thing I recommend is in the military, you all wear uniforms. You all have nametags on, use the person's name, talking about identity. My identity was based on my ID card and all, but really our identity is our character. So we go through adversities and we can't compare each other's adversities to one another. But I really want us to take a look at the pain level. We've all been through adversities, we all have stories. I'm pretty darn sure. I can say we have all had a 10 out of 10 on the pain scale and it's all relative, right? It eases after a while and then something else will happen. But we've all been through that 10 out of 10 on the pain scale. And I think that because we go through those adversities, it helps create perseverance, in essence, perseverance creates character and character creates hope. And because

there's hope for tomorrow, there's power in today and living a life in the military, I have grown up with acronyms and hope is an acronym in our family. Hold on, pain eases. Some people will say, hold on, pain ends. But I think after hearing that voicemail, I think you'll understand that my pain will never end, but it does ease because I have people in my life who were my capital E in the word help. I remarried my new groom. So I used to call him my current husband, but it sounds so temporary and I'm not doing it again, Frances. (Both laughing) So, my new groom is secure, Sean Lang, is a tech Sergeant in the 53rd NAS. And he has truly been my capital E. I don't know many spouses who can live in the shadow of a previous life. But as I travel, I did 34 trips last year. Colonel Jones actually had me speak to the wing staff last year in 2019. And I've been so blessed to be able to tell our story and to be hopefully a beacon of hope to people and to help them pause. But Sean has been so supportive of my travel schedule. And even during this pandemic, we've been with each other all the time and we still like each other. So that's a good sign. - That's a good sign exactly. (Kristen laughing) - That's a great sign, but yeah, it's been 12 years, I think, we'll always live with that and we'll always have regrets. And I feel, I truly feel, I feel like I've failed as a spouse. And I failed as a mother and fail is another acronym, first attempt in learning or further attempt in learning, but never, ever final attempt in learning. Life as a tough teacher, we get the test first and then we learn the lesson. We always are learning lessons, right. And if we can impart those lessons to other people, man, for me, my life is, is so worth it. And the story, the heartache has been worth it in order to help other people. - And I think, you know, on a, on a closing note, you know, we have so many walking, wounded people, right? We don't know what the next person is going through or what they're contemplating. So if we can really, you know, interject a minute of your time and look them in the eyes, smile, you know, that one thing might help change, you know, their next planned actions. - Absolutely, and guess what we may never, ever, ever know, but it takes nothing away from us. There's the saying, it takes nothing away from a burning candle to light another candle. It takes no wick, no wax, no, I mean, think of Christmas Eve service, you've got one candle lit and then you pass it around and then illuminate the entire sanctuary. How can we eliminate someone's life today and tomorrow? And it makes us feel so good when we see someone light up and it's getting outside our comfort zone sometimes. And it's okay. - And again, it's- and again, it's spreading that awareness, you know, that's, that's where we are. And I feel like if we don't talk about these difficult subjects that, you know, we're kind of just pushing it back or sweeping it back under the rug, and we're trying to, you know, bring this out to the light so we can ultimately, you know, bring that number down to zero. - Absolutely, on the active duty side, I just had a conversation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff office last week. And our rates are higher this year than last year. And we're tracking military spouse. We're tracking dependence in fact, with, with COVID and all of my speaking engagements, and I was going international this year have been canceled. I've been doing some virtual, but I thought, what can I do? And unfortunately we've had four military spouse suicides here in Colorado Springs this spring. And so I'm posting a military spouse resiliency workshop, and it was going to be locally, but now I'm going to open it up nationally. So K.C. has signed up, she's kept it at 10, but we've got 20 guest speakers. And it's just, it's really equipping our

military members and their spouses and their family members with the armor that they need for this battle field called military life to feel protected, respected, and connected. And that's what it's about. How can we feel, make, you know, help each other feel protected in our community? How do we feel them, help them feel respected? Using their name is one, showing that we see them as an individual and then connecting with just one person, just one, that's all, it doesn't have to be a lot of people. 'Cause we're all wired differently. I'm an uber extrovert, Frances. I can walk into a room and just suck the air right out of it, introverts, run. And I try and temper that if I can, but that's the way I'm wired. - Well, Kristen, we thank you for your, you know, your story today. We'll definitely help distribute that information for your workshop. So we can ensure that everyone in the wing has that information if they want to attend. So gladiators, if you're thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or a loved one, or would like some additional emotional support. The lifeline network is available 24/7 across the United States, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1800 273 talk to reach a trained counselor. Use that same number and press one to reach the Veterans' Crisis Line. - And I am happy to say Frances next year, next summer, that 10-digit number will transition to a three-digit number, 988. It, that will be the National Suicide Hotline number, just three numbers to dial. And thank you so much for, for letting me talk to the fellow gladiators and just remember hope is not canceled. - Thank you, Kristen, for everything you do. - Thank you. (Upbeat music)