

Ep. 5: Key Spouse Program

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Welcome to the Sword and Shield Podcast, episode number five, I'm Colonel Rick Erredge. - And I'm Chief Master Sergeant Chris Howard. - With us today we have - K.C. Erredge, 960th Cyberspace Wing Key Spouse mentor. - Thanks for joining us today, K.C. - You're welcome. - So today we're really excited to have you, and we wanna talk a little bit about the Key Spouse Mentor Program and some specific things that we feel like are important to getting out to some of our members in the wing. So can you tell us a little bit about the Key Spouse Program in general and maybe put some of those myths to rest 'cause I know some of our unit members and their family members maybe have a preconceived notion of what the Key Spouse Program is and how they can participate in the unit. - So the Key Spouse Program is a commander's program that it's not a social club. A lot of folks think that it's just another spouses club and that is definitely not what it is. Key Spouses are officially a part of the leadership team. We're here to support the families of the members of the 960th Cyberspace Wing through multiple different things. We disseminate information and support during crises. - Yeah, I know we had a situation with our, when you're a Key Spouse and one of the units, previously and somebody was deployed and the family member late at night had a plumbing issue and they thought to call you first. - Yeah, yeah, we're here for anything, to assist. Previously we've had a spouse with that wasn't mowing the lawn because they were allergic to it and their spouse was deployed and they were getting nasty grams from the HOA. And just off the cuff mentioned it to somebody that was happening and lamb we had somebody there that was more in her yard for her to take the stress away. So trying to find ways to help families to relieve those stressors, whether their member is deployed or here even. - Yeah, I know this is a great program. I've seen it work quite well on a few other units. Are there any requirements to be a Key Spouse, by chance? - There are no requirements to be a Key Spouse, except that you have a family member that is in the military. - We actually have some Key Spouses that are civilians as well, that don't have a military member. They- - Civilian employees - This is civilian employees, yeah. They have access to the base that they would not be able to, if they're just a civilian, they would not be able to participate in the program during the work hours, they have to do it on their own time, but in for the most part, it's just got to be someone that would like to help other family members or help family members of the folks within the unit. - How are we doing here in the wing, across Wing? I know we got a bunch of GSU units. That's been a little bit difficult to get some units involved and what would you, kind of how we doing and how can we help them find the Key Spouse for the unit? - I think the key part is to get out there and chat with your members and talk to them about how their family may be, could be involved, someone in their family that might be interested, could be involved in

the program. - And it's not like they have to be a part of the command team, like they're coming to work every day, right? - Right, right. - It could be anybody and actually, we'd love to have volunteers from those lieutenants or senior airmen to get a diverse set of folks helping. - All right, so I think that that diversity is one of those key pieces too. I know in a previous unit, one of our tech sergeants wives became a Key Spouse and then I know that in the past, in some units that they've had males as the Key Spouse, as well. I guess, a question I have is how much interaction are you seeing from some of the male spouses? - Right now, we don't have a lot within the 960th Cyberspace when we don't have a lot of interaction from the male spouses. We do have one unit that does have a male Key Spouse here at JBSA Lackland. He's former military and has stepped up to help his spouses unit, but overall, he's the token male right now (laughs) - All right. No, a little known fact is back in 09 and 2010, I was a Key Spouse as when I was at TR for a regular AF unit. It is kind of daunting. It does seem a little bit scary at first, but once you start to learn about the program and learn about some of the ins and outs, and it was still in its infancy back then, I think, more so than it is today. It wasn't as well structured as we see today, it wasn't as much training, and I went to be a Key Spouse, both at Travis and at Scott, so I got to see the transition from no formal training of, hey, you're here. You're a Key Spouse to where Scott had a much more formal program. Where they set you down and you got a binder and produced a lot of good information. But the key points I remember then, maybe you can help me with his the importance of just being engaged and I think those stories that you were saying were some good examples. So when an individual is deployed, how do we stay engaged with that spouse? When they first moved to an area, how do we stay engaged with that spouse? And again, it's male or female, because there's a lot of transition change that goes there. For instance, my wife now has a teacher and having some of those interactions is very helpful when other spouses might be teachers I know what that process is for certification. I didn't know if you had any thoughts on that, man. - Yeah, that's definitely something that we want as we mature the wing Key Spouse Program that we want to make sure that we have the Key Spouses in those contexts, interacting with folks as they are new to the unit and coming in and asking, are you a teacher? Are you a lawyer? Are you a nurse? Do you have some licensure issues and we can help you on how that works in Texas or whatever state you happen to be in. - I know there's a number of initiatives right now from many different levels about what's going on to try to help our families and spouses specifically are transitional. Recently, they created a Key Spouse PPP for if they're a civilian employee, they get pushed up on the list further to help them military spouses get hired for federal civilian employees. Are there any other initiatives right now that maybe are in the news or people are talking about? - So there is a military support initiative that's taking place since COVID started and they offer a... it's through the Blue Star Families, and they have a weekly survey to ask how your family is adapting and coping with the situation with COVID in place. They're talking about finances and education and healthcare. And they do town hall meetings like once a week on a different pain point. So they'll look at the pain points that come out of these weekly surveys and then they'll put some topics out that are related to that. - What other kind of pain, points do you hear from families and spouses specifically,

about what they need help with? - I haven't had a lot of contact with a lot of the families within the Cyberspace Wing here. We're kind of new and growing and I don't have a lot of contact points. A couple that I have spoken with; it's primarily education and healthcare. - Yeah, those are pretty, pretty normal standard things, especially when I move as much and try and make those. I know we personally have struggles with kids' education and transition between all the States we've lived in the last five years. - And we've been talking about school records; we talk about what school districts, especially for anybody moving into the local area. I know in the reserves, it's not as prevalent, but it's still fairly prevalent on based on the transitions of other military communities. And then, some easy things like, well, who's a good pediatric dentistry and who's a good orthodontics? Who's not gonna take you to the cleaners for an oil change? (laugh) It seems like simple stuff, but I'll be honest with you, I just went looking for a car and now I'm looking for some camping areas and how do you interact with individuals and get that information. And then with COVID currently, how do I even have that simple conversation? So I think that some of these entities like the Key Spouses, key there, because if we have that communication already, then it might be just a quick call through a network and who knows what you might find? - Right, and that's what I tell the folks a lot of times is that I may not have the answers, but I'm what I like to think is fairly well connected where I can, I know who I can call at different bases and I can find the information. So I might not have the information, but I darn we'll find it for you and help you get your issue solved or your problems, your questions answered. - So - - And that's, regardless of, even if you're at Scott. I've got a network of folks that I can get you an answer it's that if it pertains to you there, or if it's nationwide. We've got so many different resources and so many networks of people that the Key Spouse Program has connected us with that that family members might not know even exist. - All right, yeah, there's so many, I feel like I'm overwhelmed but at sometimes with the known resources there. And so the Key Spouse is somebody that can maybe understand how to use all those resources and find information and be able to feel comfortable sharing that in a way. So how do you normally communicate, how do you prefer to communicate with your Key Spouses and your family members? - So I have established a Facebook page and when I, I primarily post a lot of JBSA stuff on it because that's where we are, but I have set it up so that if I get information from other bases where our other units are. I can post that information there as well. And I post it, I don't just post JBSA stuff on there, there's a lot of nation wide things that I get that I'll post on there, for example, like scholarships. That's something that applies to anybody regardless of where they are, so I use Facebook a lot. I have created a group on AF Connect. We haven't had anybody showing interest in it yet, so there there's... I haven't posted anything there, but if folks are socially, they don't wanna deal with the social media. That's definitely, there is a group sitting there waiting for me to put out information to and NAF Connect. I've tried to work on Instagram 'cause I know some of the younger ones like the Instagram, but Instagram and I are not seeing eye-to-eye on my name. (laugh) And it tells me that the name is taken by somebody which is me, but yet when I tried to log in it doesn't like me. (laughs) So, I'm still working on Instagram, trying to get a different say, to get another a different way- - And I know you do a lot of email too, and you get a lot of

them. - I get a lot of emails. I try not to send out so many emails and overload everybody's inboxes, but I will forward, if it's something urgent that comes out, I'll forward, something that's hot, short notice or whatever. I will send it to the email contacts that I have I'll forward it to the Key Spouses that we have at units and ask them to forward it to the family members that they have contact information for. - All right, so I'm gonna ask a little bit different question. We talk about that being a key resource for knowledge how do we get that to really mesh at the unit level. So what's that relationship look like from a Key Spouse at a unit level and how does that affect the airmen in that unit by chance? - So the way that it should work is that there's Key Spouses at the units now. Not all of our units have Key Spouses. They're getting support from either me or a local reserve entity or active duty entity. So they should be getting information. The key sponsor should be working with the unit commanders. The unit commander should be forwarding the information that either comes from me or through the Wing and getting the information to those Key Spouses and then the Key Spouses would disseminate the information to the spouses that they've been able to engage with. - Now, I know when I went to the Wing commander course, back in January, that they brought in a command team and the Key Spouse is part of the command team. And I think that's one way to look at bringing that person and making sure their critical Lincoln Pieced of entire family as well. - Right I know when I was part of a, when I was a first Sergeant as part of that triad, it was an additional leg within the triad, So now we are instead of just three legs, now we have four legs. We talked about the balance between family and the workload and civilian life, having that Key Spouse input and perspective. It was definitely a key in some decisions, especially when we look at surge capacities, when we look at large issues, COVID is a good example. All right, so when we go to tailor this out, make this decision, how do you think that's gonna affect this population or you, the spouses, and the families? I know when we were talking about search capacity within the different campaigns within the war, what does that look like to that family? What does that look like when we increase these deployments? How what's that that tail end because we'll get busy with doing the mission inside of the house. We need to make sure that we have that other piece there to make sure we're wrapping in. I know as a Key Spouse, that's where I came into play and we were doing barbecues and picnics and making sure that we were engaged at the base level, so that we were constantly bringing those families in from our unit to make sure that they were getting them things like free oil changes, making sure the loans are taken care of, making sure that that family wasn't forgotten during those periods. And I think that that's a very important part of- - Yes, I think it's another perspective. I've been in a unit before the commander that hasn't had kids and you don't wanna go 24/7 ops, and we're gonna exercise, we're gonna do all these things and wasn't thinking about Dual Spouse Military folks, and is the child case, aren't gonna be open at six o'clock at night overnight, so I have a place to put my kids when we exercise and we go 24/7, so just having somebody there to just say, hey, have you thought about, or what about this is really helpful? - Thanks - And the Key Spouse is a good liaison between the family members and the leadership. So like if the family members are having concerns, then they can go to the Key Spouse and talk to the Key Spouse about it and then that Key Spouse in turn should be sharing

those concerns with the unit leadership. - And it can be anonymous if you want to, I suppose, - All right, yeah. - Yeah, you can just bring it as a concern and that way they don't have to worry about having their military member try to bring that and they feel like there's maybe gonna be some retaliation or put that military member in a bad light when really it's just some information is maybe not clear - May be data points. It's similar to how we've leveraged the happier or not if we're just taking it as data points versus specific individual concerns. Then now we have another piece of data pool. Well I've got six or seven different spouses asking why are we not trimming down the office staff during COVID? Are we not putting ourselves in danger or has the base addressed the CDC issues during the COVID? Now, I have like 15 spouses asking about this. So I agree that that data point is definitely a key piece from a leadership perspective and making sure that you as a commander can make a decision with as much information as possible, so you can make the best decision at the time. - Yeah, and I think sometimes too, we rely on; at least, I rely on K.C. to push information from the organization to other base organizations. For instance, we got some information COVID about, hey, ask him about the gyms. Hey, one of the gyms gonna be available with family members, so she can take that to her contacts at whatever base, and then build a, bring a concern from entire wing as well, not just inside the unit, but have some influence outside the unit, into our environment to try to start to shape it for what we feel like is something that's important to us and our family members. - Oh definitely, yeah. Anything that we can do to help by the community. I did have one other question too. It sounds like it's very time intensive at times, but what would you say is the time requirement for a brand new Key Spouse to commit to this program? - So the primary time commitment is the training that the Key Spouses, although they're volunteers that they are required to take training. So the initial training is approximately six hours with COVID right now, they do have a virtual training available. So you can do it on your own time at home, on your own computer. You do have to arrange that with a local, I shouldn't say, because not everybody has a local Airmen and Family Readiness Center, but you have to arrange it through in Airman and Family Readiness Center and then at the end you speak to one of their Key Spouse program managers to ensure that training is complete. So that's the initial requirement. Then you have to go through, I think it's like monthly. At least annually, you have suicide prevention training, and sexual assault training that you have to do and those are like an hour or two a piece. So for training, it's maybe 10 or 12 hours initially to get in and then maybe another 10 hours, like every year, because you've got to go. They like you to go through training every couple months, just to sit in on some classes and get some refreshers. As far as the time commitment, once you're in and through the training, it's really up to you and your commander and what the commander would like you to accomplish and the time that you're able to give. And maybe you're not able to give a lot of time. I always like to tell somebody if they're not comfortable doing it alone, find a buddy, and then they can split the time. If you've got two of you, then you can share the workload and a lot of units. Now, I know there's some units that we have that deploy folks more than others, but definitely if you're one of those units that has a lot of deployments, it's good to have a buddy because you could have 30, 40, 50 people deployed and that's a lot for one person to stay in touch with all those families that

in those units where there are a lot of deployments than I highly encourage more folks to maybe consider stepping up and being a resource for those families. - And certainly I think there's a lot of additional training that if somebody wants more they can find more. And we're bringing, we're allowing our family members to come into a lot of our normal kind of training sessions that we're doing, especially virtually now, too. - And I know the Airmen and Family Readiness Center at JBSA has offered like the last refresher training they had for Key Spouses. They invited any spouse to attend just to get in and share the knowledge that's being shared. - That's really good, so this is your chance for a sales pitch. So if somebody out there is maybe on the fence or somebody that's maybe just new and listening, that hasn't really heard much about the Key Spouse Program, what will you tell them? And one, I guess, two questions. One is why it's important, second one is how, if they want it? - So why it is important? To me it's important to me because when I first came into the military, I was brought from Minnesota to Tucson and left alone. (laughs) - You're welcome. - I wasn't introduced to anyone. I didn't know anyone. This program didn't exist back then. And so this program didn't exist actually until we were about halfway through where we are currently, so I do it because I don't want someone else to feel kind of alone and not know anyone in a strange place like happened to me. So I do it to help, hopefully, let folks know that you might be in a strange place without your biological family, but we, as a unit are a family and I want them to make sure that they understand that they have a family in us. And how is talk to your member or ask them to get in touch with the commander, or just talk to the commander directly, or give me a call. - How would they contact you and what what's the best way to get ahold of? - So you can call me, my cell is 6513361614, can email me at 960cwkeyspouse@gmail.com. - Can they message you at anywhere on the- - They could request to join the 960th Cyberspace Wing families Facebook group and join us there and contact me through that. - Through the Air Force Connect app as well there's an opportunity to engage, I think even through some of the chief. - Great you can easily ask me a question. I think there's a public affairs block there two, about ask a question or share and through the, what do you call that, the family page on the Air Force Connect app, as well? - Yeah, no, you can't. - That doesn't work - No (laughs) - There's always, if we forget all of those things and if we just don't find any of that, you can email or call us- - There you go - And we'll put you in contact as well. - (mumbles) - And I think that key piece there is it, it can seem daunting, but the impact you have as a Key Spouse for the amount of work that's required is really a minimal amount of work for a maximum amount of impact. If you need that or want that to be the part of that family and be engaged, it's really not a lot of work. And when it comes down to it, when you start engaging with those families from a personal perspective both as a provider, as a Key Spouse and as a receiver, as a deployer it can make a huge difference in a successful deployment and in a successful assignment as a whole. That family orientation, that family connection is just, it's what you talk about 10 and 15 years from now, not necessarily what happened the office on Tuesday. - Yeah, and just the personal satisfaction, being to help people out, help the family out when they need it. Alright, well, thanks for joining us today. - Glad you've been, thanks for having me. - We I appreciate it and thanks for everybody listening, and we'll see you next time. (upbeat music)