

# **CREATING HOME**

GOUCHER COLLEGE: CAPSTONE

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FALL & SPRING 2014

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**THE ART OF BEING A MILITARY WIFE**

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this capstone is to document and analyze the ways in which military spouses sustain family culture in the face of constant change. When one's housing location changes every three to five years, maintaining a sense of home can be hard. It becomes the most difficult burden carried by a military wife. Previous studies have been conducted on military service members returning from deployment.<sup>1</sup> However, few studies have been done on Military Wives.

Therefore the selected target population for this study is wives of United States military members, although this study included one male interviewee. The study concludes that spouses use coping tools to help sustain the family unit during times of struggle. Tools discussed are: family rituals, communication, holidays, religion, faith, support groups, and self-care, as well as others that became apparent through interviews. This study was conducted by directly interviewing individuals, unlike most such studies which rely on second hand information.

The ultimate goal of this capstone is thus to provide the reader with an understanding of the experiences and difficulties of Military Wives and the tools they use to recreate a home environment due to deployment and relocation; to provide information to other military wives that will help them to successfully deal with deployment and relocation; and to suggest ways that the public can be made more aware of the needs and experiences of military families.

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Marnocha, "Military Wives' Transition and Coping: Deployment and the Return Home," *ISRN Nursing*, Volume 2012, Article ID 798342; Keith Keshia and Trent Nguyen, 2012. "The lived experience of military wives with children during multiple deployments," *Scientific Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences*, Vol. 1, No 3.; and Allyson Sherman Grossman, "The Employment Situation for Military Wives," *Monthly Labor Review*, 1981.

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# **CHAPTER ONE:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

When I first started my research on military spouses through scholarly sources, it was disappointing to learn how few studies have been done on military spouses. After learning this, I found motivation and incentive to educate readers on the culture of military spouses.<sup>2</sup> By researching and understanding the tools military spouses use to cope with the stresses faced during deployment, we may be better able to help others who experience similar situations of displacement. Since there were few scholarly sources that addressed the culture of military families, I began posting on the Internet, searching for Military Wives who were willing to be interviewed about how they maintained family culture. I received a positive response. Through the course of six months, I collected information from libraries, online journals, surveys, and personal interviews.

With my personal experience, through my family, with the military lifestyle, in combination with the information I gathered from the interviewees, I will attempt to educate the reader on the commonalities, parallels, and differences that military spouses experience due to a lifestyle of constant change. The goal is to present a fundamental understanding of the tools used to sustain the culture of the military family and recreate home. In order to accomplish this goal there will be four main sections of discussion: Methods, Literature Review, Analysis, and Practical Applications.

The trait shared by all of these spouses is their marriage to a military member. Although their lives and personalities may be diverse, their marriage means that they're subject to the decisions of the U.S. Armed Forces. Due to the nature of a military member's vocation, military spouses are required to change duty stations approximately every three to five years. When the families begin to integrate into a new environment,

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<sup>2</sup> Marnocha, *Military Wives' Transition and Coping*, 8.

many changes must take place. Because of the need for community and the continued unification of family, adjustments can be difficult, but are fundamental in helping to sustain the family structure.<sup>3</sup> Researching the well being of military families is integral, as it is an indicator of the well-being of the overall force.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of mental and physical wounds soldiers receive during deployment, the comfort a military spouse provides is a crucial component to the sustainability of the entire nation vis-à-vis the protective force the military provides.

Family cohesion cannot be accomplished when surrounding changes occur unless an individual develops an understanding and acceptance of their new situation and adjusts accordingly. Being strongly rooted in ones cultural identity is essential in order to fill the necessary gaps, whether emotional or physical, brought on by relocation. These gaps are filled through shared ideas, memories, traditions, and objects. These communal qualities support the ability of a family unit to remain separate while still remaining part of a larger community. Military wives must understand what sustains their personal family identity and find ways to sustain this identity with each relocation. Some cultural groups find common traditions in the new environment and pull out the parallels of their home in order to construct a new appearance of an older tradition. This is a characteristic that can also help maintain the stability of military families and help them to adapt their culture.<sup>5</sup>

Interviews were conducted to find which tools Military Wives use to maintain their families upon each move. A number of commonalities were found and will be discussed

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<sup>3</sup> Keshia and Nguyen. "The lived experience of military wives," 105-118.

<sup>4</sup> Grossman, *The Employment Situation for Military Wives*, 60-64.

<sup>5</sup> Keumjae Park, 2007. "Constructing Transnational Identities without Leaving Home: Korean Immigrant Women's Cognitive Border Crossing." *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 22. No 2. (2007) 200-218.

in the analysis section of this paper. The analysis section will cover deployment, autonomy and community, holidays and foodways, family bonds and communication. When military families transfer duty stations, they take their values, habits, traditions, and memories of previous experiences. The dynamics of location-to-location interaction through migration directly affects all forces and actively changes the way life runs for the military families as well as the military member. The process of changing locations requires individuals to balance personal autonomy and community involvement. An example of this can be seen in the form of a quote taken from one of the conducted interviews; "If you see someone walking down the street, Smile! It doesn't take much to make another person happy; sometimes it's just a smile. So get outside yourself. Because whatever you give to someone else you put out and it multiplies."<sup>6</sup>

The paradox of autonomy is that, in order to remain autonomous, there must be a sense of community. Community involvement and the knowledge that military spouses are not alone in their suffering seemed to be the most beneficial concept for any new resident. Community is formed through the sharing of ideas, such as food, religion, music, and even common child rearing. Each interview conducted with a military wife also revealed that one can not simply receive support from a community; one must also give back to said community.

Most elements of culture are reinforced deliberately and subliminally through common gathering and celebrations.<sup>7</sup> The holidays are a special time of the year that allows families to establish yearly rituals and solidify belief systems through physical

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<sup>6</sup> Ashley, Phone Interview, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Chacko, "Identity and Assimilation among Young Ethiopian Immigrants in Metropolitan Washington." *Geographical Review* 93 (4): 491-506.

demonstrations. Holidays provide unity and togetherness, which has a strong symbolic meaning to military families.

Studying food in order to help understand the process of filling the spatial divide has been done by numerous researchers.<sup>8</sup> Many Americans can relate: Perhaps when they have homemade apple pie, it brings back memories of their grandmother's cooking, or eating a funnel cake allows one to reminisce about the time when they were 12 at a local carnival. Research shows that families who constantly move often combined host and home ingredients, ultimately resulting in the formation of multicultural dishes.<sup>9</sup> Military Wives take a special interest in holiday foods. They turn the preparation of holiday foods into a family event, creating a tradition of special family dishes that can be recreated regardless of where in the world they are stationed. The taste of food really is communication without words.

Many studies have found that children have the ability to adjust to change more easily than adults. However, this may create a cultural gap between children and their parents.<sup>10</sup> Children additionally have to balance traditional ideas with fitting into mainstream society, or otherwise risk feeling isolated from both communities, which can result in misunderstanding by their parents.<sup>11</sup> Compounding this, many times in these

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<sup>8</sup> Sidney, Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating Culture and the Past*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)

<sup>9</sup> Chacko, *Identity and Assimilation*, 491-506.

<sup>10</sup> Martica L. Bacallao and Paul R. Smokowski. 2007. "The Costs of Getting Ahead: Mexican Family System Changes After Immigration," *Family Relations* 56, 52-66, and Hernandez, M., and McGoldrick, M. *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives* (New York: Allyn & Bacon Publishing, 1999) 164-184.

<sup>11</sup> Chacko, *Identity and Assimilation*, 491-506.



families the father is absent, and the mother becomes a stronger figure in the children's lives.<sup>12</sup>

It generally takes several years upon arrival to adjust to the new living conditions, especially due to the hardship of not seeing extended family.<sup>13</sup> Creating strong family values and communicating with old friends and family members can solve this problem. Strong family values can be passed down from generation to generation and military families tend to stay with family traditions with a little help from modern technologies. Facebook<sup>14</sup>, Skype<sup>15</sup>, and Kaoka Talk<sup>16</sup> revolutionize the way we communicate with friend and family, both foreign and domestic.

The preservation of an individual's roots is of utmost importance to the individual's identity. When one's cultural exchange is limited to cultural assimilation, it ultimately results in a loss of identity, which decreases the overall happiness and well-being of an individual and/or cultural group.

This preservation of origin is what military women hope to do by nourishing their family and community roots; that they in turn will acquire the ability to sustain themselves through the example of their culturally cultivated parent. The more that an individual learns about a single population, the more one understands that they are connected to other populations. This unification allows for a better overall understanding

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<sup>12</sup> Bacallao and Smokowski, *The Costs of Getting Ahead*, pp. 52-66.

<sup>13</sup> Bacallao and Smokowski, *The Costs of Getting Ahead*, pp. 52-66.

<sup>14</sup> Facebook, 2014, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).

<sup>15</sup> Skype, 2014, [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com).

<sup>16</sup> Kakao Talk, 2014, <http://www.kakao.com/en>.

of the human race. This is why the concept of separateness is one of the most destructive things in the world today.<sup>17</sup>

Most memories are time-and-place specific, but these times and places are also bound by a memory that is universal and unifying. “People play with place in an effort to express the meaning of place—ultimately of their place—in the world.”<sup>18</sup> In order to understand a migrant population you must also evaluate what brought these individuals to their current location, how they have been helped upon their arrival, and the side effects due to times of great change. A prominent sociologist named Robert Orsi summarizes, what I believe is the essence of the American identity, “American character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences.”<sup>19</sup> The following sections will provide evidence of the tools Military Wives use to fill these gaps, sustain family, and recreate home.

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<sup>17</sup> Ted Brader, Nicholas A. Valentino, and Elizabeth Suhay. "What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (4) (Oct. 2008. ): 959-978.

<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 92.

<sup>19</sup> Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 1999. 55.

# **CHAPTER TWO:**

## **METHODOLOGY**

Tweet

0


Like

1.8k

Share

John E. Gately , Jr.

AWARDS AND CITATIONS



Silver Star Citation

[See more recipients of this award](#)

Awarded for actions during the [World War I](#)

By direction of the President, under the provisions of the act of Congress approved July 9, 1918 (Bul. No. 43, W.D., 1918), Private John E. Gately, Jr. (MCSN: 84460/117948), United States Marine Corps, is cited by the Commanding General, American Expeditionary Forces, for gallantry in action and a silver star may be placed upon the ribbon of the Victory Medals awarded him. Private Gately distinguished himself by gallantry in action while serving with Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment (Marines), 2d Division, American Expeditionary Forces, in action at Chateau-Thierry, France, on 25 June 1918, while acting as a runner.

**General Orders:** GHQ, American Expeditionary Forces, Citation Orders No. 2 (June 3, 1919)

**Action Date:** June 25, 1918

**Service:** [Marine Corps](#)

**Rank:** Private

**Company:** Company I

**Battalion:** 3d Battalion

**Regiment:** 5th Regiment (Marines)

**Division:** 2d Division, American Expeditionary Forces

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Being raised in a multigenerational military family, my perspective of the United States military is one of great pride and respect. The military family tradition began with my great grandfather, who received a silver star, continued through my grandfather's and father's service, and is currently carried on by my brother. My family has been through several relocations, during which we were required to adapt to new surroundings and communities. Growing up in this lifestyle, I became accustomed to the process, and viewed it as a positive experience. Perhaps because I was a child, I may not have realized that it required special efforts by my mother to maintain our family culture and identity, or that she may have sometimes struggled. Consequently, I approached this

<sup>20</sup> Military Times, 2014, <http://projects.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=75363>.

project initially expecting that my interviewees would relate happy stories. Seeing this as a bias, one of the challenges I believed that I faced was not to let my own experience and point of view interfere with the processes of interviewing and analyzing, and to try to set aside that bias so that I would not shape my methods.

As a consequence, the first few interviews were quite formal and scripted. Rather than approaching my interviewees in a personal way, I attempted to "keep a distance." This resulted in a level of discomfort, for both my interviewees and me, which I began to see as a negative influence on the possibility of their relating their personal experiences in a fuller way. At this point, I reflected on the assertion made by the folklorist Elaine Lawless, author of the article "'Reciprocal' Ethnography: No One Said It was Easy," that we each bring our own experiences to an encounter. "The exchange of ideas and meaning is reciprocal -- we learn from each other and no voice is privileged."<sup>21</sup> This thought, along with the ideas of Ruth Behar (see below), thereafter guided my interview process.

As interviews continued, I became more comfortable with the exchange of ideas and experiences with my interviewees. They were more comfortable, and the interview process turned into a more informal conversation rather than an uncomfortable question set. It became equally apparent that because of them knowing more about my experiences, the women were more open about their thoughts and feelings. I recognize now that my personal life experience will always be reflected in the way a topic is discussed and portrayed. Therefore it is important to acknowledge this throughout the reading of this paper.

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<sup>21</sup> Elaine Lawless, "'Reciprocal' Ethnography: No One Said It was Easy," *Journal of Folklore Research* Volume 37, No 2/3 May-Dec 2000, 99

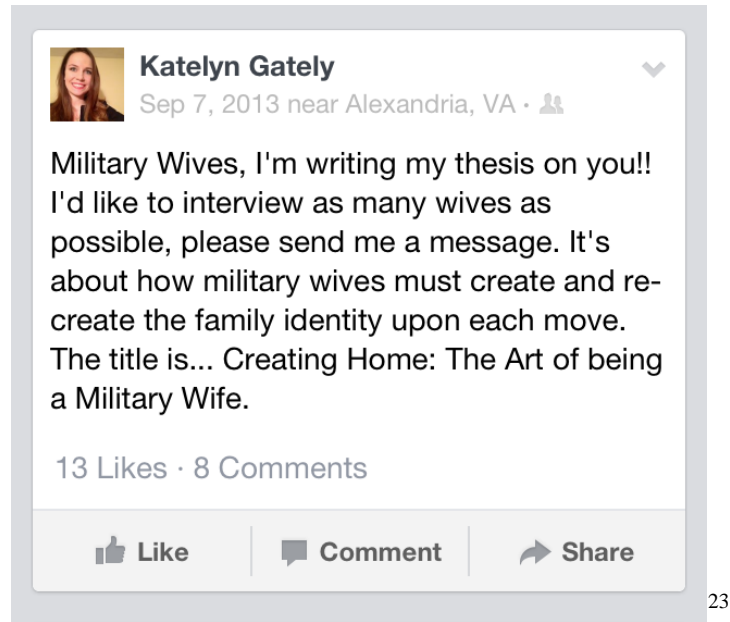
When I first began my research, searching for military spouse interviewees, I was inspired by all of the positive emails I received from Military Wives, husbands, and their children. After seeing this positive response, I found motivation and incentive to educate people about the culture and identity of military families, people whose dedication to national service made them willing to live in places far from their homes. As the member of a military family, I felt that once I found women willing to be interviewed I'd understand their stories in greater detail.

I initially acquired interviewees through personal and family connections. These connections produced two interviews, at which time it became apparent that there would be too few sources without further interviews. This prompted a Facebook post, and to my advantage, two friends shared the following post. Once trust with my interviewees was developed, some of the women then provided additional sources by sharing my request through Facebook. <sup>22</sup>



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<sup>22</sup> "Facebook"



I did not place restrictions on which military spouses could participate. Therefore, interviews were chosen based upon the individual's availability to be interviewed. Each interview was recorded using a recording application named SoundCloud, used with an iPhone 4s. Two of the interviews were conducted in person because they were local. The remainder were done over the phone or through Skype because the interviewees were located overseas and around the country.

The question set was developed based on the readings and my personal background of military life, which led me to believe that Military Wives have specific tools that they use. The question set consisted of the following:

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<sup>23</sup> "Facebook"

Question Set
How do you celebrate seasons? (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July, etc)
How does your family form intimate bonds? traditions? rituals?
Does faith influence your family?
When your husband is away or deployed how do you keep your sense of autonomy? What about when you are reunited?
Where do you get your support in the hard times?
Family Folklife: special events, behaviors, material item, family roles, relationships with others, children, pets, school, housing, commissary/exchange

As the interviews were being conducted, and many of the women opened up about their lives, it became evident that some of these interviews were deeply personal and would require privacy. This is the reasoning behind the use of pseudonyms; their names were changed to protect privacy.

The individuals interviewed were of all ages, lifestyles, backgrounds, various spousal military rank and/or branches, locations, and family roles. Throughout the writing of this paper several women will be quoted and discussed. All women referenced have been assigned pseudonyms. Background information about main interviewees follows:

- **Sarah**, a wife of 30 years to an Army officer. They have two adult children and have lived in New York, Kansas, Germany, D.C., and Newport News. They met while she was working at West Point.
  
- **Margaret**, a wife of just over 2 years to an enlisted Army member, in her late 20s. At present they have no children and have been stationed in Virginia, Washington, and are currently residing in North Carolina.



- **Suzy**, a wife and mother of two, whom she homeschools. Her husband is an active duty Army Officer. Suzy has dealt with numerous deployments and moves, both domestic and international. At the time of the interview, her family was in the process of moving back to the United States after being stationed internationally.
  
- **Stephanie**, a wife and mother of two boys. Her husband is an active duty officer in the Marine Corps. They have lived in California, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and are currently stationed in New Orleans.
  
- **Wendy**, is a wife and new mother. Her husband is an active duty military officer. They have lived at multiple duty locations, most notably in Germany.
  
- **Bonnie**, a wife of an active duty Coast Guard Officer. She and her husband have two children, one of whom followed in his father's footsteps and is an officer in the Coast Guard. They have lived in Cape Cod, Florida, D.C., and are currently located in Virginia.
  
- **Steve**, a male married to an enlisted Navy service member. They have been married for two years and have a daughter. They are currently residing in Virginia but may be moving in the near future.

- **Ashley**, the wife of a retired Coast Guard officer. They have two grown children and have lived in a number of different states before settling in Oregon. Their son followed in his father's footsteps by attending the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.
- **Lily** is a young wife and mother. Her husband went into the Marine Corps as an officer after completing college at Virginia Military Institute.
- I also had short conversations with a number of other enlisted men, officers, and Military Wives.

The process of collecting interviews began through a single Facebook posting which two friends then re-posted to their Facebook sites, which helped enlarge my circle. I received approximately 20 replies. The replies were not strictly from Military Wives, but also included active duty or retired military service men, children of military members, and friends that support the military. Although many showed an initial interest, this paper is based on 11 complete interviews and brief interviews with 5 other Military Wives. Each woman interviewed was involved with her husband while he was active in the military, had experienced multiple moves, and had remained home while her husband was training or deployed. It is important to note that spouses ranged from enlisted servicemen to officers. When my interviews were concluded, there had been communication with 16 Military Wives and a male married to a military service woman.

Although I did not find much literature on Military Wives initially, my conversations with my interviewees led me to a variety of other kinds of sources of information. Over the course of 6 months, I collected information from libraries, online journals, blogs, surveys, and personal experience. With this information and what was gathered through the interviews, I will attempt to share the lifestyle of a Military Wife.

# **CHAPTER THREE:**

## **LITERATURE/RESOURCE REVIEW**

Through the course of my study in Anthropology and Cultural Studies, I have been especially interested in the displacement of individuals. This had an influence in the formation of this paper. My previous studies included Bolivian immigration, the history of U.S. immigration, diaspora populations, and Afghanistan-American traditions, among others. Although these topics are not directly related to the subject of military families, they all contain common traits shared by displaced groups and transplanted communities. This helped me to recognize those traits in my interviewees and anticipate their coping mechanisms.

Several blogs created by Military Wives contributed to my research process. The three prominent blogs that most helped support my research process were *The Ever-Changing Life a Military Wife*<sup>24</sup>, *The Not Quite Military Wife*<sup>25</sup>, and *A Military Wife's Mayhem*<sup>26</sup>. These blogs provided insight into the mind and perspective of Military Wives and helped steer the research.

Four scholarly sources played a key role in how my interviews were examined. They were: *The Vulnerable Observer*<sup>27</sup>, *Reciprocal Ethnography*<sup>28</sup>, *Ethnography*<sup>29</sup>, and *Critical Ethnography*<sup>30</sup>. Behar discusses the dilemma faced by those who document others' lives and experiences -- whether to try to remain "objective" and not interfere with what they are witnessing or whether to be a true participant, bringing their own feelings

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<sup>24</sup> *The Every-Changing Life a Military Wife*. <http://www.everchanginglife.com>

<sup>25</sup> *The Not Quite Military Wife*. <http://www.thenotquitemilitarywife.com>

<sup>26</sup> *A Military Wife's Mayhem*. <http://www.militarywifemayhem.com>

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)

<sup>28</sup> Elaine Lawless, "'Reciprocal' " Ethnography: No One Said It was Easy, *Journal of Folklore Research* Volume 37, No 2/3 May-Dec 2000, 197-205

<sup>29</sup> David Fetterman, *Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005).

and thoughts to the situation. She points out that in doing the latter, the interviewer/documenter must accept that she is "vulnerable." Throughout the interview process, I participated as a "vulnerable" observer, recognizing that my own experiences gave me a natural sympathy for these women and allowing me to be more open both to revealing my own views and understanding theirs.

As mentioned in the Methodology section, Elaine Lawless' article also helped to guide me through interviewing and analyzing, and sums up the approach and perspective I adopted to carry out this study. In her work with women preachers, Lawless came to realize that her own experience in a religious home had an indelible effect on her perceptions, and that she could not approach her group of women ministers in an aloof, "separate" manner. She recognized that she must truly participate, and that her interviewees wanted a true exchange with her. Her encounters with the women must be open and honest; she must participate as a conversant and companion in the learning process.

A book by authors Steve Zeitlin and Ilana Harlow entitled *Giving a Voice to Sorrow: Personal Responses to Death and Mourning* discusses the healing and coping process that occurs during a loss. Military Wives continually experience a mourning, or "letting go," process. Therefore, this book was imperative to completing the conclusion section of this capstone. Throughout the course of interviews it became clear that these Military Wives used a number of healing exercises to assist their family in moving forward, letting go, and acquiring a sense of control. The major topics and tools explored in Zeitlin and Harlow's work were Storytelling, Ritual and Ceremony, and

Commemorative Art.<sup>31</sup> Many of the tools and processes suggested in that text were used by the woman interviewed, which is explored in detail in the analysis section. Some of the recommended tools the book provided were singing, dancing, drawing, and building. The concept of life review was also used, which helps individuals with the understanding of how the end of one thing is the beginning of something else. These tools help to demonstrate that change is a part of life, and although change cannot be fully controlled, it is important in making a cultural transition.

Another source that impacted the process of this paper was a book by Florence Falk entitled *ON MY OWN: The art of being a woman alone*. This book asserts that being alone is an essential component of being connected to the larger community. This paradox, although seemingly common sense, influenced the entire paper because of the intimate quality of the topic. In the book Falk states, “Begin... where you are, NOT where you want to be. Begin stuck in the doldrums of your false story--if that is where you are. Begin there because, in truth, there is no other place to start from. Tell yourself that you are going to listen for the sound of your own voice--and remind yourself when you forget. And you will forget, over and over again.”<sup>32</sup> She continues this thought pattern throughout the book, going into great detail about the strength, courage, and freedom a woman could possess if she weren’t so afraid of being alone.

The last book that had a significant influence on the writing of this paper was *Healing from Family Rifts: Ten Steps to Finding Peace After Being Cut Off from a Family Member*. This book discussed how communication, compassion, and unity create

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<sup>31</sup> Steve Zietlin and Ilana Harlow, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow: Personal Responses to Death and Mourning* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2001)

<sup>32</sup> Florence Falk, *ON MY OWN: The Art of Being a Woman Alone* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007)

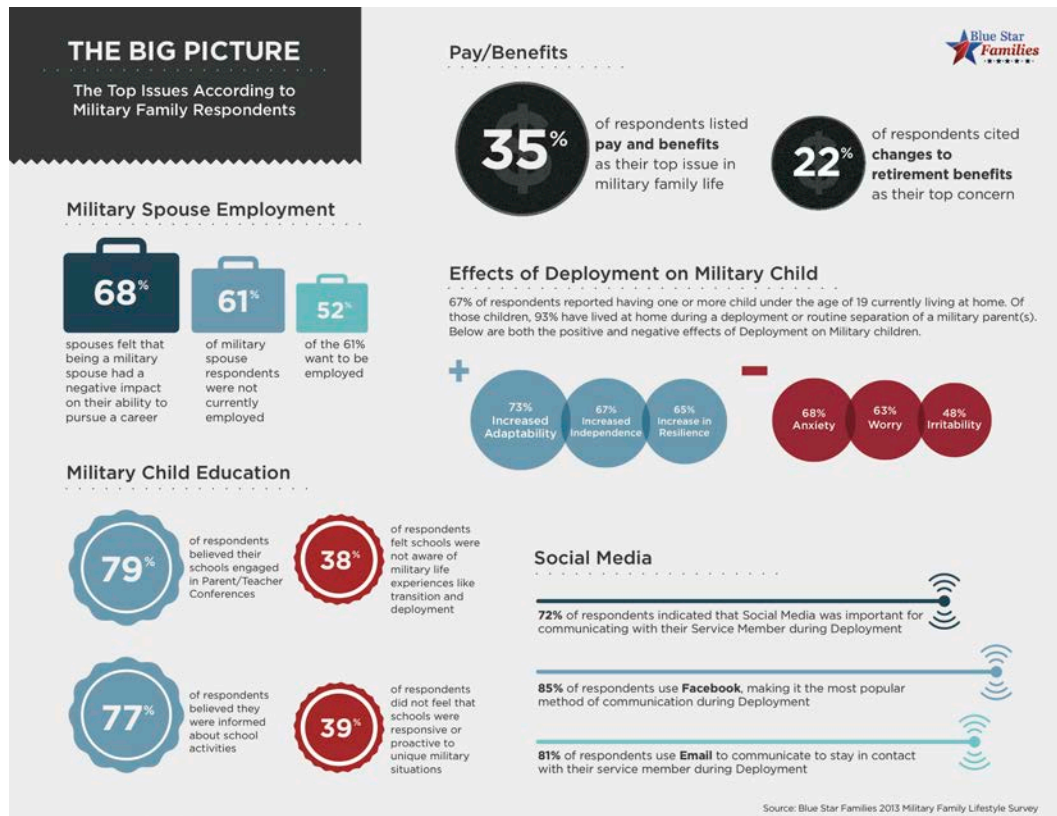
healthy families. Although few quotes were used, the main concepts were applied and reflected in all topics in the analysis section. This book went into detail about how the family structure is crucial to maintaining a sense of “togetherness,” i.e., one may speak as an individual and regard other feelings, and the feelings of others must sometimes come before one’s own. These concepts are the only way that peace is maintained.

The above sources contributed heavily to the formation of this paper and the understanding of Military Wives. There were, however, two studies that also helped confirm these theories. Blue Star Families is a support site created by military spouses. Their mission is as follows: “We are committed to connecting one another through the unique challenges of military service and asking the larger civilian population to help as well, strengthening military families regardless of rank, branch of service or physical location, and leading military family members to create the best personal and family life possible for themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Blue Star Families also provided transition support, suicide prevention, financial assistance, and deployment tips. The following image helps support the need for organizations like Blue Star Families. The chart presents their data, showing the top issues according to military family respondents: pay and benefits, military spouse employment, effects of deployment on military children, and the education of military members.

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<sup>33</sup> “Blue Star Families”, 2014, <http://bsf.radcampaign.com/lead>.





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Keith Keshia and Trent Nguyen did a study entitled "The Lived Experience of Military Wives with Children During Multiple Deployments," in which they interviewed 10 Military Wives from the ages of 18-45. The subject of their study was: "How do military wives with children perceive and describe their experience during their husbands' multiple deployments?" The results showed five common themes: (a) deployment differences, (b) communication, (c) stability, (d) support networks and (e) spousal relationship.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, a study published by *Behavioral Medicine* concluded that "Stress was found to have an adverse effect on well-being only among those who did not perceive themselves as having social support."<sup>36</sup> This supports the

<sup>34</sup> Image Provided by. <http://bsf.radcampaign.com/lead>

<sup>35</sup> Keshia and Nguyen. *The Lived Experience of Military Wives*, 105-118.

<sup>36</sup> Keshia and Nguyen. *The Lived Experience of Military Wives*, 105-118.

idea that creating a community of support is needed for the re-formation of home, which is addressed in greater detail below.

# **CHAPTER FOUR:**

## **ANALYSIS**

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## DEPLOYMENT

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The military sends out troops for a specific period of time, in a certain locale, to ensure their position of military readiness/presence within said locale. This is commonly referred to as *deployment*. During this time the military members may have little to no communication with loved ones and must leave their families for extended periods of time for training and fieldwork. It is not uncommon for members to receive only a 24-hour notice prior to departures. A standard deployment is approximately six months, which leaves the spouse with all burdens and responsibilities for the family. A study done by the *Scientific Journal of Pure and Applied Science* interviewed 10 Military Wives with children who had experienced at least two deployments. This study was to find how a military wife with children perceived deployment. Results showed five main themes, which were consistent with my findings: 1.) Deployment differences, 2.) Communication, 3.) Stability, 4.) Support Networks, and 5.) Spousal relationship. They concluded “Despite missing their husbands, these participants continued to find the resources and the solutions needed to continue to balance their lives during multiple deployments.”<sup>37</sup>

The wives interviewed for this paper had an easier time adjusting to the extra workload but had a harder time dealing with the potential loss of their loved one. Their spouse had always been there to assist in daily life, but when their partner leaves for

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<sup>37</sup> Keshia and Nguyen. *The Lived Experience of Military Wives*, 105-118.

training or deployment it is as if they are without their anchor.<sup>38</sup> Everyone behaves differently when experiencing the possible loss of a loved one, but for a military wife it is a constant fear.

During my interviews, it became apparent that the fear of interviewees was rooted in the unknown status of their military spouse. Additional emotions used to describe deployment were: isolation, change, depression, and anxiety. Wendy best summed up deployment:

**Wendy:** The first half of the deployment went really slow, because it's the first deployment and you're trying to get your bearings and figure out how to do everything. There's a saying in the military that when the guys are gone everything goes wrong. And it's very true. There's another saying that as a spouse your super powers come out. And that's really true. All of a sudden you're fixing light bulbs and you're fixing electrical things you never knew you could fix because you have to. I definitely found both of those sayings true. And once we got to the halfway mark it just flew. I think by that point you kind of get adjusted -- you have that independence; you have the new routine in place. That helped me get through. I also had a couple friends from the unit that would go to the same things I would and you get really close to them. Once my girlfriends and I had a weekly subway date and there was a show we watched. Even if it wasn't together we'd text each other. Over all I would say it was a pretty good experience and nothing happened to him while he was over there, but very challenging, which changes the whole scope of deployment.<sup>39</sup>

The feeling of support from other Military Wives during deployment was a common theme, as detailed in the following quote by Suzy.

**Suzy:** Military Wives know how to rally together and help each other. We had shifts and people would come in and visit me so I wouldn't be so lonely. When I first got pregnant we moved on post and we had a lot of support. If I'm close to family I get family support, if not I have to rely on friends and other military wives. I have to rely on those sources since my husband's at work.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lily, Phone Interview, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy, Phone Interview, 2013

<sup>40</sup> Suzy, Phone Interview, 2013.

Each woman detailed deployment a little differently. Another woman, Sarah, spoke of the stress she felt when her husband was deployed shortly after she found out she was pregnant with their first child. Directly prior to the birth, she received a call informing her that her husband was in the hospital after a severe heart attack. This was when she realized her husband might never return, and that she had to remain strong for her unborn daughter.<sup>41</sup> She has kept the lesson of possibly being a widow at any moment throughout her life. Sarah shared many other seemingly unhappy stories: Once, her husband was gone for so long that her son began telling people he had died. Another story details her move to Germany with her children, without a car or the ability to speak the language. She never seemed upset about the cards that she had been dealt, but rather acknowledged that she had made the choice when entering into a military marriage.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the interview Sarah continued to sound strong and upbeat, using common phrases like: “bloom where you’re planted,” “make or break,” “do it for the children,” “be flexible,” and “keep it together so your family can keep it together”.<sup>43</sup>

Ashley detailed her husband’s absences as the norm. Throughout the course of the 45-minute interview she kept repeating the phrase “You do what you have to do.”<sup>44</sup>

**Ashley:** My husband and I just got married, we moved to Kodiak Alaska, we were put on a ship, and then he was deployed. A couple weeks after he was deployed our household goods arrived, not that we had that much but you learn to deal with stuff. He wasn’t there when the household goods came; he wasn’t there when his truck finally made it off

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah, Phone Interview, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> “Sarah”

<sup>43</sup> “Sarah”

<sup>44</sup> Ashley, Phone Interview, 2013.

the boat. You do what you have to do. Then I didn't want to move to New York City, but the thing was we were stationed there.<sup>45</sup>

Although others may have sought professional help, only one admitted to seeking a counselor and taking anxiety medications. She stated, "I don't want my husband to see how worried and upset it makes me. I get anxiety because I can't control what happens to him when he's away."<sup>46</sup> Throughout the conversation with Margaret, it became apparent that during his deployments she is mentally right there with him. She shared details about her suffering, from anxieties during deployment to worries about her husband's PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).



*Figure 1: Image of Margaret's dog.<sup>45</sup>*

At times her fears overwhelmed her, to the point of seeking professional help and taking anti-anxiety medication. She has a difficult time trying to ease the mental stress. Her self-admitted problem is rooted in her own desire to control things that she cannot control. This interviewee revealed that she wishes her husband were not in harm's way, but she also acknowledges that his desire to serve his nation was part of the reason she loves him. Another thing that makes her situation unique is that they have put off having

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<sup>45</sup> "Ashley"

<sup>46</sup> Margaret, Phone Interview, 2013.

children until her husband leaves the service. Until then they have a dog that serves as a substitute.<sup>47</sup>

Wives are not the only ones who suffer when a military member is deployed. The children miss their fathers and must start a new routine. Statements such as “Keeping Dad’s memory alive while he’s gone is like a full time job”<sup>48</sup> were not uncommon.

Ashley discussed her husband’s return as being difficult, due to his desire to return to things that were identical to how he left them.

**Ashley:** You really do, you play mom and dad and you are running the household. Then this stranger walks in and you have to say "Wow! Take a step back and let’s discuss this away from the children." While the person who is coming back into the fold needs to take their place but they can’t step on your toes.<sup>49</sup>

While another woman, who has dealt with deployment on more than one occasion, stated:

**Suzy:** You really have to be purposeful about it, and I think that’s why some people have issues. They just kind of go on their own way, so when dad or mom comes home, whoever the service member, they have issues. For me it becomes a full time job. First of all, there are pictures of him everywhere and we each do a daddy box. Usually it’s once a month, but when he first leaves we send a lot more boxes, and that’s like the whole month everybody has an empty box that they take time. Whenever we go out we take a picture and send a box from each of us. The kids are really creative in doing their boxes. For me it’s scrapbook pages, any major event and daily pictures. I try to send him things small enough to put up on his desk or open and flip through quickly. The daddy box is a big deal. We talk about him all the time. My son gave him action figures and said ‘Daddy, take care of this and bring it home.’ While my daughter sent a baby doll one time it gave them the freedom to send what they wanted. It sounds crazy, but a lot of times I take his cloths out of the dresser and throw them in the dirty laundry.<sup>50</sup>

She continued:

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<sup>47</sup> “Sarah”

<sup>48</sup> “Sarah”

<sup>49</sup> “Ashley”

<sup>50</sup> “Suzy”



We're blessed because we can talk to him on the computer, we can talk to him on the phone. When my dad was in Vietnam my mom didn't hear from him, they'd have to do snail mail letters. If we are having a difficult problem or major issue then we will talk to him on Skype. If the kids are having problems they can talk to him. The kids get Face Time with him, too, alone not with someone hanging over their shoulder. Everyone has his or her personal time with him. It's also difficult because you don't want to overwhelm them because they have a job to do too. It's a fine line.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, she discussed how she would set up clocks to compare "our time" and "Daddy time".<sup>52</sup> She'd then ask the children what they thought their father was doing and then pray for him.<sup>53</sup> Another woman's story about one of her children:

Our oldest son was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and he started having a lot of issues. He wouldn't do his work or anything the teacher asked. It was like he gave up on school. They kept saying 'You need to take him to a psychologist,' so I took him to see a psychologist a couple times but I kept saying 'There's nothing wrong with him. His father's not here.' They had support groups for kids like drawing pictures for the missing family member and that was good. It helped a lot. His report cards -- every one he got were F's. But as soon as his father came home his grades went back up to A's and he was fine. I kept telling them 'It's because his dad's gone. When he comes home everything will be fine.' They were surprised. He was an angry kid and wouldn't do what you asked, wouldn't do his homework or pay attention in class, but the day he came home he completely changed back.

The schools and school system were both topics that continuously came up in interview. Examples include:

**Suzy:** Every time we leave I think, 'This is never going to work.' There is always a time where I get a little down and 'I'm never going to unpack, this house is never going to be organized.' I home school, too. The kids are never going to get out of school.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>52</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>53</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>54</sup> "Suzy"

She then went on to discuss homeschooling in more detail.

**Suzy:** I've kind of always wondered about it. One thing that made us say we need to do it. With his MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] we move every year or two. We literally have never been anywhere for two years. People can be difficult, like dealing with the school calendar and the kids going in and out of different schools. With the military, we don't make his schedule; they do. So with home school I can schedule around him. So when he comes home for a two-week break, I don't have to worry about asking for my kids to be out of school. We just are off. And honestly the routine of home school helps us with everyday life. We have a job we have to do everyday, but the home school for me... I think the lifestyle is so much easier especially if you're military. The kids like it, too. Most of the time when they meet their friends, and most of their friends aren't home school, most of the kids want to come to our house and be home school. But it's clearly a different life style.<sup>55</sup>

**Bonnie:** That was always the question as to where we would live. Because schools played a big part of our children's lives. So whether we lived on base or not. Cape Cod was wonderful because the children weren't in school. But then when we moved that affected our living on base because sometimes living on base meant there wasn't the best schools there. Then we found the Catholic school and that became so much a part of our life, the school and church, because we value that education. Then we came here and thought 'Do we live in North Carolina or live up here?' We thought the public schools here were good. So they no longer went to Catholic school and went to private. We then were stationed in DC and my husband and I then did research and decided to take our kids up there.<sup>56</sup>

The consequences of deployment linger even after the military members return home. Routines must change again and bonds must be reaffirmed. When asked if it was hard to mend the bond upon return one woman, who had recently experienced her husband's return, stated:

**Wendy:** Yes and no. The love of your life is coming back, your best friend is coming back, you've been apart for so long.... The first few days are wonderful. It's kind of like a honeymoon all over again, but after that it gets very hard. Part of it too depends on the personality, because I

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<sup>55</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>56</sup> Bonnie, In Person Interview, Virginia, 2013.

surround myself with women for 9 months and men surrounded him for 9 months, very much estrogen, testosterone going. The imbalance... definitely communication has to change. I took a course when he entered the Marine Corps, and I told him they recommend that when you come back, you're coming back into my world and you coming back into this new routine, where our daughter was 2 months and now she's 9 months, we need to have like a two week period of you viewing our schedule and routine and then if we want to make changes we can do that. But he can't just come in here and start changing everything just because he's home. That actually worked very well for us. Then on the flip side, because he still works during the day and I make all my plans during the day, it didn't end up affecting us that much. Maybe things here and there.<sup>57</sup>

Another detailed:

Whether he was home or not, we would follow through to keep the routine the same. I will say that when a dad/husband is gone for a long time and then they show up they tend to want to take control. You have to remind them, 'I've been here this whole time, and this is the way things are done. You can't change them.' Even if it's the same way done before he was deployed. They tend to want to compensate. That's not what we need. What we need is his support.<sup>58</sup>

Although each person and interview was different it seemed as though the same situation presented itself, regardless of circumstance. Through the course of the interviews it became apparent that Military Wives know what it feels like to be forcefully uprooted, to be isolated, and to feel lonely. They also possess a unique awareness that at any time during deployment they could become truly husbandless. In order to endure such a life a woman must have a genuine understanding of the lifestyle and be committed to continuing life with or without her husband present, which is one of the qualities that distinguishes Military Wives from other women. This reveals how these women survive such difficult times and how they find support within a community.

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<sup>57</sup> "Wendy"

<sup>58</sup> "Ashley"

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## AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY

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Since Military Wives live a lifestyle of constant change and ambiguity, they must learn to live both alone and within a community. Each woman interviewed referenced the need for and benefits of a strong support system. This concept was supported by another study, published by *Behavioral Medicine*, which showed that stress was only found to have an adverse effect on the well-being of Military Wives who did not perceive themselves as within a strong support system.<sup>59</sup> The wives each acknowledged that at times it seemed that they were alone in their struggles, but realized everyone experiences hardships and all must seek out support. Through the course of interviews, the paradox of independence and belonging to a community began to emerge. A person receives support in two ways: through one's own sense of self and through a community of peers. The women interviewed all believed that they were not alone in their struggles or during their happiest moments. A quote from a book by Florence Falk states it best:

The art of being a woman alone is founded on a contradiction: to exist alone successfully, we need the solid bracing of friends, mentors, and community. A woman who has been raped needs to know the hotline number to call as well as the location of the nearest rape crisis center in her area. A woman who learns she has breast cancer needs the support of other survivors. A woman who chooses to be artificially inseminated, or alternatively, to adopt a child on her own, needs to know the shortcuts from women who have already cut trails. A woman thinking about having an abortion needs the guidance and support of knowledgeable and above all, nonjudgmental woman. A single mother or a divorced woman who hasn't learned to take care of her finances needs solid advice from those who have. A woman faced with caring for an elderly parent needs

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<sup>59</sup> Leora N. Rosen, Linda Z. Moghadam, "Social Support, Family Separation, and Well-being among Military Wives" ( *Behavioral Medicine* Vol. 14, Iss. 2, 1988)

concrete information about the kind and range of health-care services that exist....<sup>60</sup>

During interviews it became particularly apparent that Military Wives found the greatest relief when they were sharing experiences with one another. They found solace after receiving encouragement from women in similar situations, which one woman detailed eloquently: “They can provide empathy rather than sympathy. They fully understand what I am going through.”<sup>61</sup> Another explained that her outside family and friends provided support, but she also felt that they couldn’t fully grasp the weight of knowing that one could be husbandless at any moment.<sup>62</sup> Yet another mentioned the use of military lingo and being unable to explain to civilian families what Military Wives experience, because “they wouldn’t understand, it was like a foreign language.”<sup>63</sup> Ashley formed a compelling argument about taking responsibility for individual happiness, and that happiness is an individual choice and decision.

**Ashley:** When you have to be moved to a place you're not sure about, make sure, no matter what, you make the best of the place. When we were transferred to Astoria first thing, our daughter was barely two and our son was barely two months old. When they got old enough we bought them rain gear. It rains a lot in the Pacific North West and you don't want to stay in. You got to take your kids outside and you got to get yourself outside. Make the best of every situation at every place you're in. You're the only person who has any gauge in how you're going to enjoy or not enjoy your experience. You can love a place or you can hate a place, but it's your responsibility to make that decision.<sup>64</sup>

This same woman later said:

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<sup>60</sup> Falk, *ON MY OWN*, 245.

<sup>61</sup> Stephanie, Phone Interview, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> “Lily”

<sup>63</sup> “Stephanie”

<sup>64</sup> “Ashley”

**Ashley:** I think you see that in a lot of the families that are like the Wounded Warriors. The communities -- they all jump up and help the spouses. This is the hand I was dealt, and this is what I need to do to make the best of it. We've found we've enjoyed every place we've been deployed because we went in with the right attitude to make it right for the family. This is not going to be easy. If you're having a hard time, don't feel guilty about it, because it's natural. It's normal. It's the way it's meant to be. But the big thing is communicate. Talk to each other and if you can't talk to each other at that time, talk to a friend. Have a backup, I've always had good female friends thorough all our moves. Don't have yourself in a hidey-hole. Make friendships whether it's through church, spouses associations, wherever in your community. Make connections. Because you'll find they are supporting you and you are supporting them. You won't feel like you're in depression. You make those decisions. You decide not to get out of bed. If you see someone walking down the street, smile! It doesn't take much to make another person happy. Sometimes it's just a smile. So get outside yourself. Because whatever you give to someone else you put out and it multiplies.<sup>65</sup>

Based on my personal experience, I had hypothesized that individuals would reference an attachment to a faith-based community. They all confirmed this assumption and each spoke about their involvement within a church community at some point in their husband's career. Only one woman stated that she didn't know how much religious support helped.<sup>66</sup> From this, it was inferred that people of similar values are sought out to provide individuals with comfort and support.

**Suzy:** In 2005 I had cancer and a hysterectomy. I actually had cancer when I was pregnant. I thought I had it when I was pregnant with my son. That was right when we just got married. I got pregnant on my honeymoon. I found out after my first OB appointment, I was a nurse and friends with the doctor and he called me late one night and informed me I had cervical cancer and it was already to the uterus. I refused treatment until I delivered. It was really stressful. I was bedridden and in the hospital. Everything that could go wrong went wrong with my pregnancy. They told me I couldn't get pregnant again, but that's what they told me before I got pregnant the first time. I got pregnant again, and they suggested I have an abortion. I said 'No, I'll have a miscarriage

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<sup>65</sup> "Ashley"

<sup>66</sup> "Sarah"

or I'll deliver.' My aunt moved in and became my personal nurse. I delivered a healthy baby girl but there was so much damage they took out everything.<sup>67</sup>

It can be overwhelming to move to a new location, seemingly all alone. Anyone who suffers can feel morose and lonesome, thinking that they are alone in this suffering and that no one suffers as much as them. That, however, is not the truth that they discover. When these individuals speak to others who have suffered through deployment difficulties, they realize that they are not alone. Once they realize this, many want to take the opportunity to inform others in the same situation.<sup>68</sup> These women open up to each other and support each other. They realize that they share similar situations, but their coping techniques are unique in that everyone copes in their own way.

When a person enters a social group they begin performing rituals and partnerships. By participating in these rituals and social engagements they enter a “psychosocial state induced by the sounds, the sights, the smells, and the presence of so many others, we come to feel a sense of solidarity with one another. Lines of social division that otherwise structure our lives and divide us—by age, gender, social class, or ethnicity—melt away.”<sup>69</sup> This solidarity is a type of creed by which Military Wives live. They often band together when their husbands are on deployment. They become close to one another through their shared rituals and grieving processes. Often, Military Wives will meet together or with other caring women and discuss their current life situations. A facilitator by the name of Frankie Barker noted in a community building section, “By

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<sup>67</sup> “Suzy”

<sup>68</sup> “Margaret”

<sup>69</sup> Tom Burrup, *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook: How to Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Art, and Culture* (Saint Paul: Fieldstone Alliance, 2011), 79.

witnessing the stories of eleven courageous neighbors, I was returned to a place of hope, faith, and trust in the goodness and humanness of us all.”<sup>70</sup>

When these women meet and discuss their private issues they are forming unique bonds with each other. By supporting others you also support yourself, you have a hand to hold and a friend to lean on in times of struggle. “We speak, for example, of the ‘fabric of our lives’ and of the ways in which lives get ‘woven’ together.”<sup>71</sup>

Most interviewees referenced picking up a hobby in order to fill their mind and distract themselves while their husbands were away. They noted that hobbies served several purposes. Examples of these purposes include: provided support, distraction, entertainment, and allowed them to meet like-minded individuals. Having a hobby also allows an individual to have a sense of control in their lives. “When you create something you choose how it’s going to be. People that don’t have much control over any element of their lives, and their family members often don’t either. But they can control the things they make themselves. They gain not only a certain kind of autonomy in that, but also pride.”<sup>72</sup> Research supports that scrapbooking, journaling, singing, and drawing help the individual define their place in the world.<sup>73</sup> By doing this the individual gets a sense of control and the ability to let go of the past.

The church community also allows the children of Military Wives to make friends and have a smoother transition to a new area. The majority of the women interviewed discussed their church involvement, which for the purpose of this section is noted as a hobby. The women who were involved in a church community talked about finding

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<sup>70</sup> Burrup, *The Creative Community Builder’s Handbook*, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Zietlin, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, 189.

<sup>72</sup> Zietlin, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> Zietlin, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, 71.



comfort and support from other caring individuals. About half of the women who were active in a church were in leadership roles. Margret told the following story: Directly after being married, her husband was reassigned to the state of Washington. A few days after completing the move he was sent away for several months of training. She referred to how hard this time period was and how one of the things that kept her sane was her involvement with the church choir. In this case the church community provided support, comfort, and friendship, and served as a tool to release the anxieties she was facing.<sup>74</sup> While the church community was referenced by every woman interviewed, there were a number of other pursuits referenced.

**Bonnie:** Church community changes a lot. Each place has been supportive. One in Cape Code we were very active in that community. In Florida I taught fifth grade at a Catholic School, very active in that community. In Chesapeake, since kids got older haven't been as involved.<sup>75</sup>

Jenny stated that ice-skating was her childhood hobby and when her former fiancé was deployed, ice-skating became her outlet. Ice-skating, like any hobby, was a tool to meet people and to get involved in a community, as well as an outlet for physical, mental, and emotional stress.<sup>76</sup>

Suzy referenced her strong passion for scrapbooking. She discussed how she does it for her husband when he's deployed, how she does it for each child, how she does it as a New Year's tradition, for instance. Upon listening to the recording of the interview, it became apparent to me that scrapbooking was more than a hobby. It was

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<sup>74</sup> "Margaret"

<sup>75</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>76</sup> Jenny, Phone Interview, 2013.

also a way of healing, moving on, creating, and letting go. For Suzy, scrapbooking was a personal healing ritual.<sup>77</sup>

It is additionally worth noting that the male married to a military member also used hobbies as a healing tool. The male interviewed referenced feeling overwhelmed when his wife was away, leaving him as the sole provider for their daughter. He got involved in a motorcycle club and, as a way to clear his head, went out on long rides by himself or with his club. The club also volunteers in the community and has a faith-based belief system.<sup>78</sup>

Another interesting perspective can be seen in how the children's hobbies become the hobbies of the parents. One family had a daughter involved in gymnastics and traveled regularly for competitions. Supporting their daughter became a family hobby.<sup>79</sup>

Community can be defined as a shared space where individuals meet for common goal or purpose, while Autonomy involves reflecting on one's deeper values.<sup>80</sup> The two seemingly different models of participation actually must co-exist. In the case of a military wife, she must have a solid internal and external sense of support and security.

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<sup>77</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>78</sup> Steve, Phone Interview, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>80</sup> Mark Sichel, *Healing the Family Rifts: Ten Steps to Finding Peace after being cut off from a Family Member* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publications, 2004) 115-130.

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## HOLIDAYS

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The changing of the seasons and annual events are represented in every culture with the celebration of holidays and days of remembrance. These annual occurrences help to create unity, instill traditions, and bring people together. Throughout the course of the interviews, there was a pattern consisting of four main times of celebration: Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, and military holidays.



Some of the women noted that their husbands would volunteer to work on some holidays in the hopes of ensuring they could have Christmas and Christmas Eve with their families.<sup>81</sup>

**Bonnie:** My husband always chose to work at Thanksgiving because our home was -- when the children were small, we'd have Christmas so we would always volunteer for Thanksgiving and New Years so we could have Christmas Eve and Christmas day. We'd keep the same traditions and we'd work around it. Certain foods. Depending where we lived we would, even if our husbands weren't there, we'd all get together and do it together.<sup>82</sup>

**Stephanie:** We actually have a lot of holiday traditions that I think my husband and I have carried over from our childhood, which makes us feel better but also we do it with our boys. Even at this young age, they feel comforted by it. Every year, my husband gets out his light up trains and they play with them around the tree. We prep them with what holiday is

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<sup>81</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>82</sup> "Bonnie"

Image: Katelyn Gately, Virginia, 2013.

coming up, what it means, and share our old traditions with them and we go off of their cue about what they like about it or what they don't like and play and press forward. We make it sound -- it's what they like so it's always a home to them no matter where we're living. We decorate, we do the train, we make special foods, and we'll make cookies together. All those things a person grows up doing with their parents or their grandparents. We just continue on those same traditions; it's just every three years it's in a new house. Sometimes family comes to visit, which makes it more special, and sometimes they don't but either way we try not to lose the real meaning of the holiday.<sup>83</sup>

Due to multiple moves, there are situations where the family has not taken up roots or items can't be found in their new community. This is why some of the women interviewed referenced buying fake Christmas trees, especially those who had experienced overseas travel. Suzy told a story about her current move during the Christmas season.

**Suzy:** Since we were in the middle of a move, and our Christmas tree was destroyed. My daughter really likes arts and crafts. And for my daughter she's really into the Christmas tree and decorations. I'm not really into the decoration because I've never had a lot of time to focus on that, but she loves the Christmas tree and things like that. So, for this year we're painting a Christmas tree to hang on the wall and we are going to get the tiny ornaments and pop them through the canvas. That way it'll be more fun for her since she gets to create the tree. You have to stop and say 'What's going to make it like Christmas to everyone?' And my son, he couldn't care less, he just wants the presents and everyone home, but my daughter needed a little bit more so this helped her to feel more settled and happy about Christmas. Plus we'll have this canvas of our homemade Christmas tree. Our biggest thing is being happy together when he's not deployed and we can all be at the same place. We learn to appreciate the little things<sup>84</sup>

Wendy also pointed out that a live Christmas tree is not practical within the military lifestyle, and at times is simply not possible. Her family Christmas tree was ruined while in the middle of a move from Germany to the U.S.:

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<sup>83</sup> "Stephanie"

<sup>84</sup> "Suzy"

**Wendy:** We have a Christmas tree. We just started having a small fake tree. It's not really feasible to have a real tree when you travel and go home for the holidays. So we do that and then we always save our presents for when we come home for the holidays.<sup>85</sup>

While Bonnie discussed the creation of holiday recipes:

**Bonnie:** I'd start off with my mother's recipes, and as I got older I'd mix other recipes and develop my own. So I think, as I've gotten older, I've created my own cranberry molds or cranberry recipes. Sweet potatoes. I've change from how my mother used to do it.<sup>86</sup>

Like many families who open their doors to outside family members and friends during the holiday season, Military Wives reach out to other military families and personnel who are away from home and family. One woman noted that this re-creation of comfort helped sustain a feeling of home for all involved. Another special characteristic of military families is the sharing of traditions with residents when in a foreign country. All women who lived internationally noted introducing their new friends to American Thanksgiving customs.

Thanksgiving represents a time of thankfulness, togetherness, and unity. In many American homes it is the one time of year when a whole family gathers around the table and shows sincere gratitude for their respective years together. It has always been a time for unity and joining people together.

Although the history and food items may seem of little importance, the Military Wife generally knows that this holiday became official because of the Civil War. It can be argued that it was custom/agreement of the military. Thanksgiving has also served as an example of peace. Because of the strong symbolism of mending two sides and

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<sup>85</sup> "Wendy"

<sup>86</sup> "Bonnie"

accepting and/or hoping for a positive future, the meaning of Thanksgiving resonates strongly with military family values.

**Bonnie:** “We always have a big meal. Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, bread. We’ve always done Thanksgiving dinner. One year we got a turkey that would not fit [into the oven in the housing unit that they had.]”<sup>87</sup>

Celebrating a person’s birth is done in most family units, but for the military family it seems to have a deeper symbolism. The day is not just for the individual but also for all the members of the family. The annual occasion provides an additional comfort to the family by reinforcing their belief that, although things may change, there are still constants. Birthdays are milestones to celebrate an individual family member, but also serve as a particularly important date because the family is continually viewed as a team or unit. Noting a person’s birthday allows the individual to have a special day and provides them with a feeling of genuine appreciation.

**Suzy:** We always bake a cake. My daughter usually makes it. She makes amazing cakes. We usually have our own family birthday thing, where it’s just us. We still will have something for the kids with their friends, something fun. One year, we had a zoo birthday party. We rented out some space at the zoo and all their friends came. Sometimes bowling, but our real birthday celebration is our family life. Whoever’s birthday it is, it’s their favorite meal cooked. Or if they want to go out we go out to a certain place. My daughter bakes the cakes, even on her own birthday because her cakes are the best. We open presents and have cake, just us. Even if we have a party with friends over, that’s a different cake. We always have our family one first and usually there’s no one else in our immediate family one.”<sup>88</sup>

The common form of celebration includes close friends and family members, a birthday cake, a rendition of "Happy Birthday", the opening of presents, and preparation

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<sup>87</sup> “Bonnie”

<sup>88</sup> “Suzy”

of the favorite meal of the person being honored. It's another symbol of togetherness.

One woman interviewed had a unique situation, since her two children were born one day and one year apart. Despite this, she made sure each child felt special and cared for on their special day.<sup>89</sup>

National holidays that support patriotism and honor veterans are widely celebrated by military families. They include Veteran's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day. Military families take great pride in honoring the country's history and fallen veterans through parades, in-house gatherings, cemetery visits, public gatherings, and visits to military landmarks. One interviewee requires her children to volunteer on these holidays in order to instill the qualities the holidays represent.<sup>90</sup> Most women noted that they prepare red, white, and blue food items, put out their American flag, and view fireworks.

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<sup>89</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>90</sup> "Stephanie"

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## FOODWAYS

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Clearly food and foodways are a major mechanism in constructing a family bond. Food has a way of connecting distant family and friends to one another. Examples can be seen in eating foods that remind us of home and family, sending care packages to soldiers, and parents sending packages to children away at college. Additionally, for military families it's often not the specific food that matters; what matters most is the process of the food making and celebration of the event. For example, many dinner events do not focus on the food but rather the people in attendance. When a family eats a special meal, they are focused on each other. "Food creates bonds with family, friends, and neighbors, while still having an open quality that allows the bond that is being created to change, depending upon the food type. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance."<sup>91</sup>

Food was most discussed in relation to the holidays; it was used as a supporting and bonding tool. Stephanie told a story of how her family always makes sugar cookies together during the Christmas season.<sup>92</sup> Jenny discussed how her daughter makes the best birthday cakes and prepares them for every family member's birthday.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Susan Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America," in Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell editors, *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: the Performance of Group Identity* (Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984) 48.

<sup>92</sup> "Stephanie"

<sup>93</sup> "Jenny"



One year, Lindsay forgot to put the raisins into her cinnamon raisin bread, a dish which she makes during the winter holiday. She laughed while telling me the story, explaining that it never really was about the cinnamon raisin bread, but the tradition of baking something to bond over.<sup>94</sup> The food item is simply a tool used to reinforce family intimacy and union.

The food items themselves, although they should originate from traditional cuisine, is less important than the process. Creating the food is a process that allows expression, emotion, and service. This process also incorporates a sense of belonging and community, and promotes well- being.<sup>95</sup> This is what I represent as a “supporting food system”:



*Figure 2: Chart showing the process of a supporting food system: 1.) Preparing 2.) Consuming 3.) Serving 4.) Supporting.*

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<sup>94</sup> “Bonnie”

<sup>95</sup> Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," 48.

The idea is to show devotional labor, allowing the family to take their minds off of themselves and to focus on the greater good of humanity/family. The process helps to sustain culture because the food is a tool used to show gratitude and support to friends and family.

The heart of the “food support system” is emotional support. The preparation, consumption, and serving are all physical demonstrations. The supportive aspect is the emotional attention family and friends provide to one another. The food being prepared and served is the return of the gift of love and support. The circle is broadened when friends and extended family are there to provide support to the military family. As Susan Kalcik says in her article "Ethnic Foodways in America," “Whatever we call it, the sense of unity with family or other group members is so important in many cultures that people will suffer some hardship and discomfort to attain it.”<sup>96</sup>

The food is an actor and key ingredient to the activity, but it is not the food itself that is generating the significance of the event. The meaning is being created throughout the fulfillment of the complete process: Preparation, Consumption, Serving, and Supporting. There is not one thing that provides the most support in times of need; rather it is the system and the method of handling a bad situation in the best possible way.

According to Deborah Lupton, “Food and eating, then, are intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings ranging the

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<sup>96</sup> Susan Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," 48.

spectrum.”<sup>97</sup> Food links the body, mind, soul, self, others, past, present, and future to each other. It is both material and symbolic. This linkage allows for peace in times of hurt and sorrow and excitement in times of celebration, and it allows for a communal process to form along its way. Food and foodways are a tool used by Military Wives to embark on a journey of togetherness, demonstrated by preparation, consumption, serving, and support.

Holidays are patterns, reference points, and memory markers. Regardless of location, they provide comfort and tradition, which helps sustain the concept of home. Some families also create a tradition for other holidays such as: St. Patrick’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Easter, New Year’s, Cinco de Mayo, and Halloween.

Everyone interviewed celebrated holidays, events which help to solidify their belief systems. They mark time, seasons, and events. They bring about comfort, remembrance, and memory. All of these are of special importance for military families. Each military family has their own traditions that help keep the consistency for a family faced with constant change.

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<sup>97</sup> Deborah Lupton, "Food and Emotion," in *The Taste of Culture: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: BERG Publications, 2005), 324.

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## FAMILY BONDS, VALUES, & COMMUNICATION

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Army General Martin E. Dempsey once said, “Our families are the bedrock of our nation's defense. Family members may not shoulder a weapon or fly combat sorties, but their commitment, support, and endurance is a source of great pride and inspiration for us all.”<sup>98</sup> Throughout interviews it was evident that the reason these military couples stay together is due in part to their shared belief system. They journey throughout life together and provide each other with unconditional commitment, support, and endurance. Each person interviewed noted the specific belief system that she shared with her spouse. All women expressed their desire to make the world a better place, which they stated was the reason that their husband joined the force. Most had some form of religious upbringing and continued to share a strong faith-based existence.

Military traditions are often passed down from generation to generation, which is referred to as a “legacy.”<sup>99</sup> There are certain people who serve as links between generations. When a military elder dies, they take with them the link to their generation.<sup>100</sup>

Honoring ancestors is a belief shared by many cultures. “Some cultures put forth the belief that a person is not really dead until the last person who remembers him or her is also gone.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, the men and women who dedicate themselves to military

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<sup>98</sup> Department of Defense, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=56811>.

<sup>99</sup> “Lily”

<sup>100</sup> Zietlin, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Zietlin, *Giving a Voice to Sorrow*, 14.

service can be viewed as living monuments to their family histories. This falls in line with the dominant family value of preserving and sustaining the family identity regardless of circumstance. The men and women who serve or marry service members continue the family custom and therefore continue to honor their departed family members. An example of intergenerational military linkage can be seen in the quotes below:

**Suzy:** I'm from a military family, my father's from a military family and my grandfather's from a military family. Same with my husband. In my opinion there is no better way of life, especially when supporting a family. Military life can be very beneficial. It's also very difficult, so if my kids went in I'd be proud of him. But I'd worry, after I've been through a life time of husbands deployed and worrying, I just wouldn't be able to do that with a child.<sup>102</sup>

**Bonnie:** The Coast Guard was always a big part of their life, especially for our son. As a small child we lived at Otis International Guard Base in Cape Cod and he would know just by the sound of the aircraft what it was. There was just always that interest and we always kept close touch with what was going on. He had all the toys and knew so much about it. He ended up going to the Coast Guard Academy and is currently serving in the Coast Guard<sup>103</sup>

It is important to note the significance religion plays in migration and relocation. "Religion can be a means by which collective identities are formed..."<sup>104</sup> In the case of military families, the main foundation of a person's life consists of family, the military, and service to others. Most of the women I interviewed expressed the belief that family and church balance with each other to support individual and family.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>103</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>104</sup> Alyshia Galvez. *Guadalupe in New York: Devotion and the Struggle for Citizenship Rights among Mexican Immigrants*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010) 38.

<sup>105</sup> "Bonnie"; "Margaret"; "Ashley"

**Ashley:** I was born and raised Catholic. My husband was kind of Protestant. You know that was a little difficult and shame on me because I was always very strong in my faith and I even taught catechism for third grade class. I always felt my faith was very important to me. When I was a teen-ager, I would question and I seemed to always get an answer at the homily. We went together and I'd go by myself when he was gone. There was a lot of stress about faith and family, and he said "whatever you want."<sup>106</sup>

**Ashley:** At times the only thing that keeps us strong is faith. Our daughter was born in New York City, when I didn't want to live in New York City. She was born hydrocephalus[sic]. So thank God we're living at Governors Island. This goes back to making the best out of every place you live. You never know how your life will be affected in that position or how you will affect someone else's life. Don't look at a place of -- 'This is me. Oh I'm stuck here.' Look at it as 'How do I make it work,' PERIOD. I don't care what part of life you're in, how old you or young you are, or what your job is or your spouse's job is. If you walk in and say 'I hate this,' nothing will be right. If you walk into this place and say 'Thank you for bringing me here and telling me what to do.' Just do it. Even if you have no faith you go to a place -- if I see one spot of blue sky today it is a good day. You make your life.<sup>107</sup>

Some had a strict adherence to a church while others felt their faith was better served at home. Most of the wives have a strong faith in everything working together for good: all mankind is equal; there is a higher purpose. These beliefs provided fundamental core values shared by the Military Wives, and were likely the greatest contributor to their family success. It was observed throughout the course of every interview:

**Stephanie:** Church and God were my 100% Rock. If I didn't have that I don't know really how I'd view a lot of things, especially the hard days.<sup>108</sup>

**Bonnie:** So definitely whether the different challenges as far as having to move or make a big decision on whether to move, I feel like prayer, pray,

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<sup>106</sup> "Ashley"

<sup>107</sup> "Ashley"

<sup>108</sup> "Stephanie"

and family. Then it's amazing how it all kind of unfolds in front of you.<sup>109</sup>

**Suzy:** I get my support from friends, family, and church<sup>110</sup>

**Ashley:** Came from a family of faith and I've kept that with me throughout life.<sup>111</sup>

**Steve:** My wife and I have a strong faith based belief system.

Without prompting or directing, each woman referenced communication being the glue to their healthy relationship with their spouse. They discussed, how, without proper communication, their relationships would fail:

**Ashley:** It always comes down to communication. You have that conversation, whether it's do you want to take this deployment or do we have a child or do we join this parish or church, whatever. If you are with someone in any form of relationship, communication is the number one key. If you can't communicate, you're not in the right relationship. I think that's very important because there are so many things we see today where people are together and then all of a sudden they're no more. It's because they never talk to each other. We don't talk intimately every day, but we know that other person is right there. If I'm having a cry ball day they will know it and feel it right there with me. If I'm having a happy day they will know it and they will experience it.<sup>112</sup>

**Wendy:** A huge part of it is communication. I know so many girls, with the bible study I co-lead, we have girls that are 18-30. Some of these 18 year olds fell in love, they got married, and the guy was deployed, and she didn't have a Dears Card [ID Card]. He hadn't done anything to prepare and she didn't know that she needed it. So, unfortunately if there's no communication it damages the relationship but also their ability to get on base. It's an absolute necessity.<sup>113</sup>

Later in the interview, Wendy spoke of herself:

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<sup>109</sup> "Bonnie"

<sup>110</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>111</sup> "Ashley"

<sup>112</sup> "Suzy"

<sup>113</sup> "Ashley"

**Wendy:** I try to stay very grounded and look at things sort of at face value. Make sure we're always communicating. I don't want to be one of those wives that doesn't know anything but I also don't want to be one of those wives who is a know-it-all. We always have them on base. They think that their husband's rank is also theirs. You never want to be one of those wives."<sup>114</sup>

It seems that each relationship involved a free, open, and non-judgmental communication. In "*Healing the Family Rift*," the author states that "the highest purpose for a family is to provide an environment of support and love, a safe space from which they can go out into the world."<sup>115</sup>

Open communication is intimate and in many ways a sacred gift. "If intimacy involves making ourselves known to others and allowing others to make themselves known to us, then communication is vital to true intimacy. Our ability to communicate has a tremendous impact on our ability to be intimate."<sup>116</sup> Intimacy can also be intimidating; some feel it creates a dangerous vulnerability.

Many have discovered that there is vulnerability in intimacy, because the other person in the relationship comes to know your weak spots. You can't open yourself up to others and then say, 'But don't hurt me with the information you have about me now.' They may hurt you, whether or not they intend to. There is only one person you have to trust in order to be intimate with another: yourself. You have to trust that you will be able to handle matters even if your partner seems to use the information against you."<sup>117</sup>

Regardless, in order to maintain a relationship, a person must communicate to make certain that misunderstandings do not occur.

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Culture describes the human ability to communicate and to navigate the natural and social environment together. It can be compared to the operating system of a computer. Computers have sophisticated software programs for word processing accounting, data management, and the like. None of them, however, will work without an operating system, the special, underlying code or common language that enables all the parts and all the functional programs to talk to one another and to flow from chip to chip, and from disk to screen.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> "Wendy"

<sup>115</sup> Sichel, *Healing the Family Rifts*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Sichel, *Healing the Family Rifts*, 70.

<sup>117</sup> Sichel, *Healing the Family Rifts*, 17.

<sup>118</sup> Burrup, *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook*, 59.



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With the Internet, it is easy to monitor the current happenings of specific areas. The effectiveness of the media has a huge effect on the connection to place. Online newspapers allow locals, visitors, and past residents to read the neighborhood reports. There are many other media outlets that help able family and friends remain connected. Myspace<sup>119</sup>, Facebook<sup>120</sup>, and Meetup<sup>121</sup> are all ways families stay connected. With the click of a mouse one is able to explore both the goings-on of local towns, keep up with previous locations, and learn about those of the country as a whole. By filling the space between one's last home and their new current surroundings, it is easier for a person to adjust and become familiar with their new circumstance.

All of the strategies, tools, values, and beliefs described in this section illustrate how military families manage to sustain their family identity and culture despite frequent relocation. In doing so, they may also exemplify Charles Darwin's assertion that it is the "most adaptable to change" who survive.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> "Myspace," 2014, [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com).

<sup>120</sup> "Facebook"

<sup>121</sup> "Meetup," 2014, [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com).

<sup>122</sup> Charles Darwin. BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2014.

[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/charles\\_darwin\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/charles_darwin_2.html), accessed August 25, 2014.

# **CHAPTER FIVE:**

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

The preservation of an individual's roots is of utmost importance to that individual's identity. When a person's cultural exchange is limited to cultural assimilation, one can experience a loss of identity, which decreases the overall happiness and well being of the social group. Therefore, sustaining the memory and traditions of home ultimately sustains the American Society.<sup>123</sup>

During my interviews, the women seemed to be most appreciative that I showed an interest in their lives and what they go through as Military Wives. They felt that their experience was not recognized by the public, and that it would be helpful for the public at large to know more about the experiences and sacrifices of the whole family, not just the soldiers. With this in mind, I recognized that it is important to increase public awareness of the military lifestyle, and that a practical application of my research would be creating a system of online outreach and sharing about the experience of military families. Having seen the usefulness of blogs and other websites, I propose that an umbrella website could be established to serve as a hub for links to the organizations and institutions that could help to spread awareness and information for both the public and Military Wives and their families.

The Blue Star Families website is already established and could possibly serve as the overarching website. For the centralized hub to be successful, many partnerships would have to be formed. Partnering with other organizations that have similar missions would allow for integration of information and public awareness. Some organizations Blue Star Families could partner with are: Wounded Warriors, USO, PTAs, churches,

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<sup>123</sup> Alejandro Portes, "Migration, Development, and Segmented Assimilation: A Conceptual Review of the Evidence," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (NAFTA and Beyond: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Global Trade and Development) (Mar. 2007): 73-97.

celebrities, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Puppy Rescue Mission, and more. Examples of their missions can be found below:

**Wounded Warrior Project:** To honor and empower Wounded Warriors.

**USO:** The USO lifts the spirits of America's troops and their families.

**PTA:** The overall purpose of PTA is to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.

**Puppy Rescue Mission:** to help military men and women bring their battle buddies home.

By acting as a central location for awareness and resources, the hub website could help advertise activities that these organizations might then create to help raise awareness and knowledge of the experiences and needs of military families. It would assist military families as well as others that they come in contact with. Importantly, it could also help schools to understand the great challenges and fears the children are going through and to provide resources for teachers and school administrators.

Additionally, this paper may be useful for community builders and social workers. The tools used in this study to help sustain any migrant population are: support, community, rituals, foods, open communications, and family values. A displaced family will increase their likelihood of a successful transition by using similar tools and resources to those of these Military Wives. The continued use of this study would assist in future research topics such as immigrant populations, the military, Military Wives, and widows.

# **CHAPTER SIX:**

## **CONCLUSION**

The general population is not well aware of precisely what military members and their families face on a daily basis. A military wife must be a strong and independent individual. Separation from family and friends, displacement from everything one has ever known, and living with the knowledge that her husband may not return home, all make it necessary for her to have the tools to remain intact despite all of the adversity.

The ultimate goal of this study is to present and convey a fundamental understanding of the tools used to sustain a military family and recreate home. The entire family must sacrifice themselves and their lives for the safety of their nation. It has been observed that individuals will scan for faces that remind them of home.<sup>124</sup> They look for individuals who are like-minded, who look like them, and who have similar goals or beliefs. They find those that they have the most in common with, which help with the feeling of homesickness. Routines, rituals, support groups, holidays, foods, and values are developed. They play an integral role in helping to sustain the culture and stability of a family. They are the tools used to sustain a lifestyle of constant change. These tools are what Military Wives use to have control in an ever-changing lifestyle. Cultural sustainability consists of acknowledging that change will occur but individuals need collaborative work as their keystone to sustaining a mutual and beneficial future. This constant transformation requires an acceptance of the past and an optimistic outlook toward the future. The use of special tools and practices to ameliorate change helps those facing change to integrate the past, present, and future to sustain the culture and stability of the individual and the community.

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<sup>124</sup> Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (California, New Village Press, 2006) 28.

All the previous discussion points can be summed up in a single sentence: Military Wives are able to recreate home because of their understanding that while, in life, all are independent, we all still live in this world together. There is a quote from Marshall McLuhan that states “there are no passengers on spaceship Earth. We are all crew.”<sup>125</sup> This common belief is their capstone, their reason for doing what they do, their fuel. Everyone interviewed made similar comments pertaining to the difficulties of living a military lifestyle and how it is not for the weak. In my observation, their strength comes from their willingness to be vulnerable. Every three to five years they are placed in seemingly impossible situations, but every move allows them to gain insight and emerge better, stronger, more flexible, and independent. They all admitted to their breakdowns and shortcomings but also their need for independence while remaining connected and supported by others. A quote, found in the book *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew – Three women search for understanding*, summarized the role a military wife and mother must assume in her family:

And I think that if you are lucky enough to give and receive love, then you can be happy in the face of suffering. I was talking to a friend about this and we decided that maybe heaven is just that...love. And that heaven exists on a day-to-day basis within people. When they give and receive love, that's a little slice of heaven.<sup>126</sup>

In conclusion it is my belief that recreating home is not one thing or another. The rituals, holidays, and traditions are all based on love of family. Throughout my entire research it was evident that these acts were tools. The most important factor that sustains

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<sup>125</sup> Marshall McLuhan. BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2014.  
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marshallmc100969.html>, accessed August 25, 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner, *The Faith club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew—Three women search for understanding*, (New York: Free Press. 2006) 154.

a military family is their commitment and devotion to one another. The foods, holidays, communities, and rituals are all tools to reinforce the family unit and purpose, and thus to support their commitment and devotion. If one removed a food item, a location, or a specific holiday, the staunch and unbreakable military family would create new ways of living. This makes each military family a uniquely sustainable culture.



# **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

## **REFLECTION**

Throughout the past 12 months I've undergone a wealth of change. The creation of this paper in many ways was a mirror of my own life. Throughout my life as a military child, without knowing it, I always felt that my home was at my grandmother's in Pennsylvania. I had never lived in PA, but it was my personal reference point. When I thought of peace, love, and comfort, it was there at her house. In a sense, her home was the means to sustaining my identity and the family culture. When she passed on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 it was earth shattering. It threatened my whole sense of self. I've dealt with change in many forms but not with the passing of a loved one. Studying how these women overcome adversity allowed me to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of what it means to be an active member of society and an independent individual.

I gained knowledge of two main themes: change and creation, and the role they play in the lives of others as well as my own. Everyone develops his or her own tools to manage change. While writing this paper I experienced two deaths, a move, and a job change. Throughout my transition period I relied on my family and faith. Additionally the military life style I grew up with created, in my life, a love for change. I have a love for exploring new things, moving, and looking for adventure. However, the downside is I take on more than I should and have developed a need to avoid the feeling of entrapment. Reflecting on this paper I began to seek more stability in my life, which resulted in a home purchase. There are many tools used to manage change and sustain oneself through change: reach out to friends more consistently, understand that church isn't just about religion -- it's about preserving tradition and building community.

Additionally I learned about the process of creation. Throughout any process one must be flexible. Even though there is a desired outcome, not everything will go as planned. Cancelled appointments, difficulty in getting responses, and unexpected dynamics during the interview process can all sidetrack one from the planned schedule.

During the interviews with the women I studied, I learned that some people will be more open than others. During any interview you need to establish rapport in order for interviewees to be comfortable enough to trust you with their stories.

There is also a dependency on other people when creating a thesis. Both interviewer and interviewee must be dependable in order to help the process move forward. Since this paper was my “child,” I now have a better understanding of the expression “It takes a village to raise a child.” No one is gifted at everything. I learned that it’s okay to reach out for help and support in times of need.

Overall I learned a great deal about the world and myself. Before coming into the MACS program, I was interested in the more tangible elements of culture, such as food, language, and the arts of different groups. But the program taught me more about how culture is structured, how those elements come together in those tangible forms and express values, experience, and environment. Culture is like a living organism that goes through changes; it evolves rather than remaining static. Cultural leaders must be strategic and purposeful about their efforts to sustain a culture. In my future professional life, I hope to pair what I have learned about cultural transition with my long held interest in helping people by working directly with those who are facing change.

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