

## JOBS &amp; EDUCATION

# Making It Work

Military spouses turn to entrepreneurship to create flexible careers

By Robin Roenker

**A**SK MOST MILITARY SPOUSES about their lives, and they'll tell you the role brings both joys and challenges. In addition to the difficulty of parenting alone during deployments, military spouses can face significant barriers to long-term employment and career development when their family is reassigned from one duty station to the next.

Largely due to the challenges of moving every few years, military spouses face an unemployment rate of 24 percent according to the Department of Defense — much higher than that for civilians, which, before COVID-19, averaged below 5 percent nationally.

In order to create a profession of their own that can accommodate their mobile lifestyles, many military spouses are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship.

Here are some of those success stories:

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A "remote riveter" creator & handmade items.

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R. RIVETER, GETTY IMAGES

**R.RIVETER**

Created by **Lisa Bradley**, a former military spouse, and **Cameron Cruse**, a current military spouse, R.Riveter is a multimillion dollar company selling handbags, totes, wallets and more.

The two, who met while their husbands were stationed for Army Ranger training in Dahlgren, Ga., were launched into the national spotlight in part thanks to a successful 2016 appearance on *Shark Tank*. Through their company, named as a nod to Rosie the Riveter of WWII fame, they are on a mission to provide employment to other military spouses across the country.

Each R.Riveter product is handmade by the company's "remote riveters" — more than 40 to date — who work from their homes, many at military bases across the country. Neither Bradley nor Cruse had previous entrepreneurial, retail or manufacturing experience, but that didn't stop them from chasing their dream.

"We just realized that if we wanted something professionally, we were going to have to build it," says Cruse, the company's chief creative officer. "But we also recognized that we weren't the only ones (struggling to find employment)."

► [riveter.com](http://riveter.com)

**CHARLIEMADISON ORIGINALS**

Former military spouse **Wendy Hively**, whose husband retired in 2007 after a 20-year career with the U.S. Navy, founded Charliemadison Originals to celebrate military spouse milestones through collectible jewelry.

Hively's company offers bracelets to commemorate a military spouse's upcoming deployment — including the "In My Heart" bracelet — and military spouse and military mom pride, along with necklaces dedicated to each service branch, just to name a few.

"It's funny, because in some ways I've felt more connected to the military community in the years since my husband retired than when we were in it," says Hively, who creates each piece by hand from her home in Frederick, Md., while holding down a full-time job as a regulatory compliance officer with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

In addition to hosting a Facebook community to support military moms and spouses, Hively has started a blog to celebrate other military spouse entrepreneurs on the Charliemadison Originals website. She also donates 5 percent of the company's profits each year to agencies and charities that support veterans and active-duty military families, including Semper K9 Assistance Dogs and the Milspo Project. ► [charliemadisonoriginals.com](http://charliemadisonoriginals.com)

**"I hear from military spouses who may be having a tough day or a tough season, and they feel connected (through the jewelry) to other people who are going through the same thing, even though they may not know them."**

— **WENDY HIVELY**,  
Charliemadison Originals



**"We couldn't be prouder that the work that we do is able to provide military spouses with a sense of (entrepreneurial) identity and mobile flexible income."**

— **CAMERON CRUSE**,  
R.Riveter



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## JOBS &amp; EDUCATION



UNIQUE PLBZ, GETTY IMAGES

## UNIQUE PLBZ

Former Air Force spouse **Nicole O'Brien**, whose husband retired from the military in 2017, helms Unique PlBz, a company that creates custom art out of license plates. Launched in 2012 at a military base gift shop in Japan, where the couple was stationed, the idea has been popular since day one.

But the company really took off five years ago when O'Brien got a contract to sell at HomeGoods nationally. She now has a professional manufacturing facility in Rhode Island and sells her art — including license plate signs, birdhouses and canisters — on Amazon, through her own website and at specialty boutiques across the country.

And in addition to brightening walls and homes with creative license plate art — often incorporating state plates that have special meaning to her clients — O'Brien has made it a company mission to hire military spouses and veterans when possible. And to help others market and sell their handmade crafts, she recently founded Operation Made, a gift shop that stocks veteran and military-spouse-made items. The store's selection of goods such as hand-forged knives, coffee beans, jerky and candles are also available online at [operationmade.com](http://operationmade.com).

"Being a military spouse is a tremendous opportunity, but it's also really hard," O'Brien says.

► [uniqueplbz.com](http://uniqueplbz.com)

## WESTHOUSE

Westhouse founder and proud Army spouse **Serena West** — who is currently stationed in Virginia while her husband works at the Pentagon — understands the challenges of military life.

"This is duty station number eight for us," says West, a military spouse of 15 years and mom of two who has previously called Army bases from Germany to Kentucky home. "We've been all over."

While West had visions of going to law school after college, she quickly discovered that her career path "could not exist independently of the Army life that I was going to be living," she says. "I realized I needed to find something that was interesting to me, that allowed me to contribute financially to my family, but that also allowed me to maintain the flexibility that military life required."

The result was Westhouse, an online boutique launched in 2017 that offers an array of luxurious care packages, military-inspired items, corporate gifts and more.

As she has worked to build Westhouse from the ground up, West has felt empowered and a sense of camaraderie with other military spouse entrepreneurs. "There's joy in continuity for a lot of us," West says.

► [shopwesthouse.com](http://shopwesthouse.com)

**"Just to be able to say, 'I may not know where I'm going next, but this (business) is something that I love doing, and no matter what, I'll be able to make it work in the next place.'"**

— SERENA WEST,  
Westhouse

**"Having something of my own during my time as a military spouse was really important to me. It helped me develop into who I am today."**

— NICOLE O'BRIEN,  
Unique PlBz



WESTHOUSE