

SIXTEEN YEARS IN COMMAND: LIFE AS A MILITARY SPOUSE

January 29, 2018 | By Chris Bucher



Photo Credit: Capt. Scott Hetzel (USAREUR)

It's been over six months since Jenny Cornelius received a phone call telling her she was about to be on the move once again. With an extensive military background, it's something she's become accustomed to. Only this time, the context was a bit different.

The voice on the other end of the phone told Cornelius, a military spouse stationed at Fort Campbell in Kentucky at the time, she'd been hired by the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs to assume a role she had extensive experience in. She made the move to the Madison area with her family and started as a veterans' benefit and resource specialist. She's been flourishing in the role ever since.

"It's a perfect transition and middle ground," Cornelius, who now resides in McFarland, said. "I didn't have to go cold turkey on my military folks through retirement. It can be not only hard on a retiree, but it can also be hard on the families, too. You're out of your comfort zone; you're out of your support group. But everything has been going well."

Cornelius has been thriving at the WDVA as a source of information for veterans and their families. Not only because of her military service, but also because she's been in their shoes before.

While at Fort Campbell, she worked as a family readiness support assistant for Task Force Attack. She knows what it takes for military families to persevere through difficult times because she did it herself for well over a decade, and is still doing it.

Cornelius has been married to retired Army Chief Warrant Officer 5 Kristopher Cornelius for nearly 16 years. The couple first met and became acquaintances before things started to evolve. Despite multiple deployments and being separated for dozens of months, they kept their relationship flourishing and tied the knot in 2002. She's

one of the more than 550,000 female spouses of military personnel nationwide, according to 2015 data from the U.S. Department of Defense.

"What we knew was that we had amazing support here in the states and from our families," Jenny said. "As a military spouse, they always say the soldier is the head of the family, but the spouse is the neck. The spouses keep their communities running. Soldiers are deployed and deploying ... but to keep things handy in the back, it takes volunteers, it takes us spouses."

The Cornelius' have three children – one son who carried on the military experience as a drone pilot and another who works in a military-heavy community. Their youngest daughter is on the wrestling and football teams at her high school.

After 32 years of service, Kris retired from the military in September 2017. Even with the retirement, he's had trouble staying out of the sky. He's currently in Texas learning to become a commercial airline pilot.

With it constantly being difficult for the family to be together all at once, Jenny said she realizes more than ever the crucial role military spouses play.

"When they are away, you've got to keep things running and keep it on the forefront," she said. "You have to educate, communicate, and work through monetary issues ... all of that has to be held up. It's sticking through all of that and realizing that your purpose is supporting the lifestyle that gives the military member the best opportunity to do their best overseas or here on the home front."

For her experiences and work with military families, Jenny was one of 12 awardees to receive the Outstanding Military Spouse Award in 2011. She received the honor for going above and beyond to support military families through community involvement.

"I cannot speak enough about the strength, support, resiliency, pride and creative spirit of our military spouses," Jenny said.

"Truly, they are the most inspiring people I know."

It's that same involvement and dedication that makes her so successful working with the WDVA in the Division of Veterans Benefits. Wisconsin leads the nation in benefits, programs and services offered to military veterans, and their spouses are no different.

With the Wisconsin G.I. Bill, military spouses and their children are eligible to have their tuition partly paid for at any University of Wisconsin System school. In addition to education, there are also financial benefits offered to military spouses. The Wisconsin Veterans & Surviving Spouses Property Tax Credit provides eligible veterans and un-remarried, surviving spouses a refundable property tax credit for their primary, in-state residence.

Informing those in a similar situation about the many benefits available for military spouses is something Jenny has taken a substantial amount of pride in.

"It's been amazing," she said. "Everything has been going well."

For more information on the many benefits offered to veterans and their families through the WDVA, visit <http://bit.ly/VetBenefitsWI>.