

Help wanted

Military spouses find search for work challenging

By Mindy Campbell
newsroom@qctimes.com

As a military spouse, when Liz Giertz found out her family would be moving to Kansas, she knew what needed to be done.

There were the usual checklists: finding housing and a new babysitter for her two small children — not to mention a family doctor and veterinarian for the dog.

One thing Giertz didn't have to worry about was finding a new job.

Giertz, who owns her own home-based gourmet food business, will be able to keep her job as a Tastefully Simple consultant when they move.

"That is one benefit of having this job," said the East Moline

resident whose husband has been stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal for the past two years. "I don't have to interview for a job. I am the CEO and president."

Looking for a job is never easy. But many military spouses have additional obstacles that make finding one even more difficult. Military spouses often have to contend with moving every few years. And many operate as single parents during deployments or when military duties stretch into long hours.

These are obstacles, statistics show, that keep many employers from hiring military spouses. According to Census Bureau data from 2000, military spouses have a higher unemployment

— SPOUSES | **AI**



Mindy Campbell/QUAD-CITYTIMES

When Liz Giertz, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, resigned from the Army to raise her family, she found a new career as a home-based business consultant.

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rate and earn less money than their civilian counterparts.

"Military wives on average earn \$3 less per hour than their civilian look-alikes and their unemployment rate is three times as high as civilian spouses," the report stated.

Yet despite the obstacles, many spouses are finding jobs wherever they end up. Whether it is the home-based business route, a government position or finding a portable profession, more than 69 percent of military spouses are working or seeking work. About 68 percent of those who are working help to pay for basic family expenses, according to a Department of Defense report.

Limited choices

Like Giertz, many spouses venture down the home-based business route. With flexible hours and portability, a home-based business is one answer to the career question. Within any military community, it is possible to find spouses with home-based businesses ranging from food products to jewelry to health supplements.

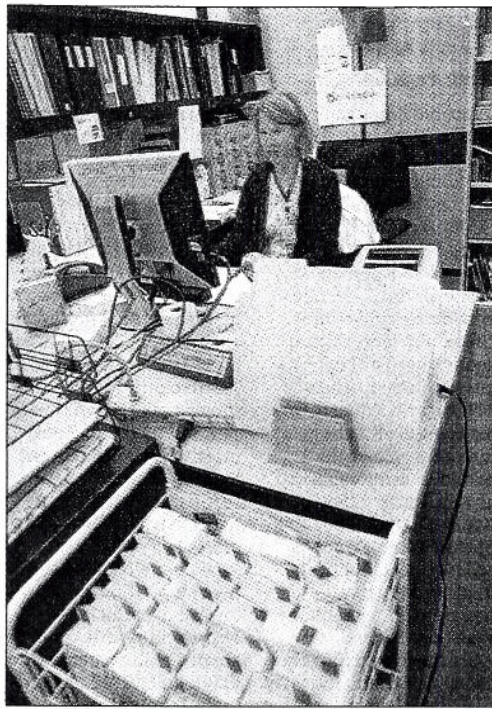
Giertz, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, spent 13 years as an active-duty Army officer. She decided to leave the Army once she started her family.

"It was a very hard decision," she said. "I knew I would never be able to work like I felt compelled to in the Army and be the mother I wanted to be."

When Giertz attended a Tastefully Simple party about 18 months ago, she decided to become a consultant.

"It is not so much about making money, but about getting out of the house and talking to other women," she said. "I also feel like I am making a monetary contribution to the family, even if it is a small amount."

Finding a portable career such as a home-based business is something the military encourages spouses to look into. Through Web sites and programs such as the Military Spouse Career



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Part of Rebecca Kammerer's success as a military spouse has been her choice of profession and attitude. Kammerer is a technical services supervisor at Davenport Public Library. "Every town has libraries," she said. "I also love what I do. I can't help but think that comes through in some way."

Department of Defense is helping to train and educate spouses in what they consider to be high-growth, high-demand careers. Such jobs include health care, financial services, information technology, education and construction.

However, many career fields, while in high demand, have license or requirement restrictions that may not make it easy for a spouse to transfer from place to place.

Andi Fabiano-Vazquez has found work at the college level. For the past year, she taught classes at both Black Hawk and Scott Community colleges.

Fabiano-Vazquez would love to teach at the high school or middle school level, but is finding that isn't easy because of her husband's frequent reassignments.

"Each state has its own certification," she said. "I would have to spend an obscene amount of money to be able to teach in each state I live in."

Fabiano-Vazquez, whose husband is a Coast Guard officer stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal,

is moving this summer to Virginia.

Moving around a lot is hard on a career, she said, but is typical of military life. The Department of Defense reported that only about 10 percent of all military spouses stay in the same home for more than five years.

"You wait a long time for a great opportunity to come up and when it does, you have to say thank you but we are moving," said Fabiano-Vazquez, who had to turn down an offer to teach more classes at Black Hawk because they are moving.

Working for the boss

Another route some military spouses go is to secure a job with the government. The Department of Defense encourages spouses to find work within the government system and offers incentives to help military

spouses get hired.

With her husband deployed, Kari Gallagher eventually found herself in Germany — alone and jobless.

"I saw friends raise a family or get a job," said Gallagher, who before moving to Europe had completed a master's degree in public administration when she couldn't find a job in Kansas. "I didn't have either. That was really frustrating."

Gallagher finally found a government job as a program management specialist. After cracking into the government system, she hoped moving within the system would be easier.

When her family arrived on Arsenal Island a few years ago, there were limited jobs available. Eventually, she found a position as a continuous improvement specialist, a job she has held for nearly two years.

"One of the biggest problems is that you don't get your own career," she said. "There are huge obstacles to real job progression. You have these gaps in your resume every few years."

The military, she said, still hasn't been able to figure out how to bridge the gap between the soldier and the working military spouse. Dual military couples are able to find jobs at the same military post. However, the same is not done for the spouse who has a government job.

"You are not really able to build a career," she said. "The more advanced you get in your career, the harder it is to obtain the higher level jobs."

Surviving, thriving

Having a positive outlook is what helps Gallagher get through the challenges of job hunting.

"I am working for personal fulfillment, not for the money or career progression," she said. "You always put your spouse's job first. You also need to

be really flexible in what you are willing to do."

Rebecca Kammerer, Davenport Public Library technical services supervisor, considers herself lucky to have maintained a professional career as a military spouse. Her husband is a chaplain in the Army, stationed at the Arsenal.

Part of her success has been the choice of profession and attitude.

"Every town has libraries," she said. "I also love what I do. I can't help but think that comes through in some way."

Having the right attitude is important, Fabiano-Vazquez said.

"I am moving so often that if there are no jobs I know we will be going somewhere else soon," she said. "That is a great thing."

Gallagher also advises spouses to take advantage of the military's support system.

"They have awesome support and career counseling," she said. "If you get frustrated, don't give up. It takes a lot of perseverance."

Fabiano-Vazquez said that while the military does offer a lot of support, she would like to see it expanded.

"There's more to finding a job than writing a good resume," she said. "We need to know more, like 'how do I deal with leaving a job? How do I find a job that transitions with me? How do I explain to my employer why I have had so many jobs?'"

On the other side of the fence, Gallagher said, employers also need to realize the value of employing a military spouse.

"Military spouses have a wealth of experience," she said. "They move all over the place. They bring a new perspective to the job."

Mindy Campbell is a military spouse whose husband is stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal. His assignments have taken them to Virginia, Tennessee and Germany.



LARRY FISHER/QUAD-CITY TIMES

Rebecca Kammerer is a technical services supervisor at the Davenport Public Library. Her husband is an Army chaplain stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal.