

Stories from the Home Front

Society of Military Spouses in STEM

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Meet John Hunzeker, the SMSS President



John Hunzeker is not your typical military spouse. He not only juggles the spouse life of unexpected PCS moves, kids, and house hunting, but also holds a B.S. double major in Biology and Psychology and Ph.D. in Molecular Virology, Immunology, and Medical Genetics.

"Katrina and I married in 2010 and were stationed in New Mexico for four years, Virginia for two, Minnesota for one, and Alabama for one year. I would like to continue doing research, but that will depend on where the Air Force takes us."

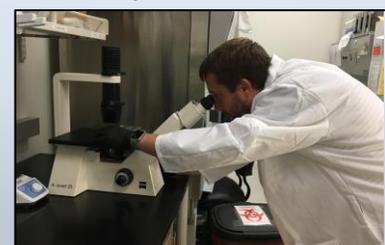
His wife, Katrina, and their two young children are in the midst of moving to their first overseas assignment in Stuttgart, Germany. The family is elated for such an exciting location, but John and Katrina are aware of the challenges that lie ahead for STEM (science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics) military spouses like himself. He has already lived in four locations since being married, one of which he and Katrina lived in different states during her one-year Air Command and Staff College stint.

John's Research



John received his B.S. in Biology and Psychology from the University of Dayton in Ohio and Ph.D. in Molecular Virology, Immunology, and Medical Genetics from Ohio State University. He then worked in academic labs and contract research at Penn State University College of Medicine and Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute, respectively. John worked as adjunct faculty for a year at Piedmont Community College in Charlottesville, Virginia. Before moving this summer, he studied methods to make a cancer patient's own immune system better at killing cancer cells at the University of Minnesota.



“The main challenge has been trying to find employment that takes advantage of my background,” he says.

“Thinking about it more, I was frustrated that I hadn’t found any spouses in a similar situation.” It is a familiar tune to the 200 or so members in SMSS’s Facebook group. Spouses here are frequently looking for meaningful employment and networking opportunities within the STEM community, all while juggling the rollercoaster of military life.

SMSS is currently the only organization tackling the complex issue of creating meaningful employment, educational, and networking opportunities for STEM military spouses. The young non-profit recently conducted a survey and received over 300 responses regarding the frustrations and potential solutions for STEM military spouse issues. Many spouses already have obtained higher STEM education and are seeking support with networking opportunities, flexible/remote work options, mentoring, and a job database geared towards STEM. These requests are a just a few of many.



“I want SMSS to serve as a hub where spouses can network, find jobs, post jobs, and essentially serve as the go-to place for STEM spouses,” Hunzeker explains. “We are still working on the details for membership benefits that will interest our target audience. I would like to see a membership program that provides tangible benefits for the spouses.”

The SMSS team of volunteers is spread out between the United States, Asia, and Europe and communicates frequently via video chat, email, text, and messaging to discuss upcoming plans for

the organization. It seems the word is getting out. The non-profit is not even a year old and has received feedback from hundreds of STEM spouses and has been approached by companies, sponsors, and foundations for funding.

John and the team envision a bright and fast-paced future for SMSS. “Military spouses have skills like flexibility and adaptability that would be an advantage for any employer. They have to deal with a degree of uncertainty that many people find daunting. In addition to these skills, STEM military spouses

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are excellent planners, are logical and are excellent problem solvers. Military spouses, STEM or otherwise, have experiences that few other candidates would be able to match when applying for a job. “

Hunzeker has reservations about how the military and companies could improve career opportunities for spouses like himself. Military spouses generally have difficulty maintaining employment with a particular company during PCS moves. Compounding that issue with STEM-specific jobs considerably narrows their meaningful employment options. Spouses have been advised to conceal their military affiliation for any chance of an interview, abandon STEM for more “portable” careers, and encouraged to “geo-bach,” live apart from their family, to obtain desired employment. “It has been difficult spending the past year apart from my family, but it made long-term sense for me to stay in Minnesota and work rather than move to Alabama and not work,” John says. “Unless the company is so big they have research labs through the United States and world, it



is impossible to stay with one company.”

Hunzeker is also in the minority of male military spouses who have not been active duty. The spouse Facebook pages have been a great resource for him, and he suggests more events that cater to working spouses. In the meantime, John will humbly tell you that he does not really have any long-running frustrations, as he

begins the family adventure in Stuttgart. “I have faced the same challenges that I am sure all other military spouses have faced. I am more irritated yet excited in the moment of waiting to hear about the next assignment,” he shares.

To learn more about the SMSS mission, visit <http://www.smsstem.org/about-smss/>.

-Emily Stallings, SMSS MPRC Chair

