

A Conversation with Lisa Bradley and Cameron Cruse, Founders of R.Riveter

Q. About eight years ago, you all launched one of the most talked-about new brands: R.Riveter. For those who don't know, what is R.Riveter?

A. Cameron: R.Riveter is a handbag company on a mission. We started the company in 2011 with the goal of providing mobile, flexible income for military spouses, so that they can take their job wherever the military takes them. They can move from Ft. Carson in Colorado to Ft. Bragg in North Carolina to Ft. Benning in Georgia and take their work along with.

Lisa and I started the company when our husbands were both instructors in the mountain phase of Ranger school. We were living in Dahlonega, GA both with freshly printed master's degrees - excited about finding work in our new fields. The problem? There wasn't much opportunity in our industries in the north Georgia mountains.

We knew there had to be other military spouses in our shoes – and decided if we could create a company that not only provided work for ourselves, but for others like us – that was a win.

Q. Where did the idea for handbags come from?

A. Lisa: We started R.Riveter with a “why” – a solution to a problem we were facing. Our goal was to create opportunities for military spouses to have mobile and flexible income, by bringing manufacturing into their homes. It's funny to think that we had the business model idea before we decided we even wanted to make.

When deciding on a product to make, we wanted the item to be something personal that could stand up to the story and impact of the unique way it is manufactured. A woman chooses a specific brand of handbag because she wants to represent what she portrays herself as - whether that is through the brand, the style or (in our case) the mission behind the product. We loved that unlike clothing you switch out frequently, women carry a handbag every day, and our customers know when they pick up an R.Riveter handbag, they are picking up a whole community of women.

As far as the materials that our bags are made from, we landed on canvas, cotton liner because we needed to work with a medium that could be crafted in homes of military spouses – without asking them to invest in costly industrial sewing machines. The canvas and leather materials come together to create a really unique, but utilitarian bag that go with limitless personal styles.

C: I think another thing that's really important to note - we are a bootstrap company. As modest military families, Lisa and I were only able to invest very little money up front--a little over \$2,000 each, not all at one time.

When we first started, it was just the two of us, and we had a little bit more than nothing [laughs]. We thought, how do we make something out of nothing? Handbags! We sold one handbag to make two more, sold those two to make four, and so on.

L: Another important story that we try to tell is the importance of how we created something from nothing in America. If two military spouses that come from pretty modest families were able to create a multimillion-dollar company that empowers women, what else can be accomplished?

Q. It's one thing for you to be frustrated with the lack of opportunity for yourselves. It's another for you to come up with an idea that could help other military spouses as well--and that's what it was from the jump. Now, one-third of every dollar spent at R.Riveter goes to a military family. Why were you compelled to build that kind of business?

A. L: As military spouses, we just had the same conversation over and over again, about how it was so difficult to find employment, and how everyone was going through the same struggle. You'd land a really great interview, but then the employer would just put our resumes at the bottom of the pile because they saw how fragmented our work history was.

It became clear very early on that we could choose between part-time work, or a job that wasn't particularly fulfilling, and one that definitely wasn't in our respective fields.

We wanted to create a mobile, flexible at-home work opportunity. We saw the need for meaningful employment, but more importantly, we saw the need for community - one you didn't have to abandon each time the military moves your family.

A big part of this struggle is self-identity - I moved four times by the time I was 24. That's a key time in your life, when you're identifying who you are and what you do with your career and with your life. My husband was flourishing - growing in his career, being promoted. He had one of the most robust, tight-knit work groups that exists--there is nothing like the bond with people who fight alongside you. Meanwhile, I was floundering. I felt like I was re-identifying--redefining--myself with every new post, every new neighborhood, every new community, that I was a part of.

That's such an unfortunate part of the lifestyle--being in the military is not just a job. It's a lifestyle. I thought it was so tough that military spouses felt like that every time they moved. They should be growing instead of re-identifying.

Many people said to me - "Well, that's what you signed up for when you married the military." But we challenged that - why should military spouses have to choose between family and personal fulfillment?

C: I think that's one thing Lisa and I both share is the notion that we want to leave our community better than when we found it. I attribute that to--as much as Lisa hates it--being part of the millennial generation [both laugh]. Lisa will deny it, but she's a millennial too. We're not quite satisfied with being told, "well, that's just how things are." Millennials act - we challenge the status quo, and try to change things for the better.

L: No, no. Inside, I am part of the Greatest Generation. I'm just living in the millennial years [laughs]. I'm an old soul.

C: There is a really exciting energy with graduates in this generation. They're moving into the world, wanting to make a significant impact, and to the world a better place. As dreamy as that sounds, we had an opportunity right in front of us--a gaping hole we could fill it. It wasn't, "Can we do this? Should we do this?" It was, "How are we going to do it?"

Q. Let's talk about your individual backgrounds a bit--they're a big part of why R.Riveter works so well. Cameron, you have a master's in architecture, correct? Where did you grow up?

A. C: I grew up in Georgia, just outside of Atlanta. In high school, I always knew I wanted to do something design-oriented, but I wanted it to be significant and functional. So when I found the practice of architecture, I just knew it was perfect for me. I went and got a master's at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Halfway through all of that, I met and fell in love with George, my (now) husband, who is active duty military. A few days after I graduated from my graduate program, we moved out to the middle of nowhere in the north Georgia mountains. It was my quarter-life crisis [laughs].

I'm a mom of two kids--they're eight and five. I live in Moore County, North Carolina in a great little community. I love living in the South - winter is my worst nightmare!

L: Cameron is great at creating. She's always had this keen ability to curate, I admire that skill.

C: Thank you!

Q. And Lisa, you have an MBA, correct? Where did you grow up?

A. L: I grew up in a small town in Montana. Having grown up in this remote setting, my parents both are very resourceful and creative. As entrepreneurs, they were also great at problem solving. Fortunately, they passed those skills on to me early in life. I saw firsthand the ups and downs of starting your own business - and knew it was something I wanted to do. That's what really drove me to get my MBA - I had grand plans with my entrepreneurial dreams.

I met a boy during college that put my dreams on hold. We moved a lot initially – and ended up in the North Georgia mountains in the fall of 2010. That’s where I met Cameron, and the rest is history.

My husband transitioned from the military in 2012 – less than 12 months after we started R.Riveter. On top of a complicated business model, my business partner and I only lived in the same zip code for 10 months before beginning a long-distance business relationship. When Jason got out of the military, he decided to get his MBA, and our family moved out to New York. It was incredible to see him transition from the military world to what felt like my world – in business. Since then, it’s been amazing to have his knowledge and expertise in our leadership circle. The only challenging piece is that oftentimes, he sides with Cameron more than he sides with me...[laughs].

Cameron and I always joke that our families are business-married. It’s a whole other level of knowing each other.

Now, Jason works for Amazon, and we move more frequently than we ever did in the Army, which is both hard to believe--and kind of ironic. We just recently moved to Ohio, which is where our family lives today.

C: It’s interesting – with R.Riveter, we’ve been able to have an impact on the lives of so many military spouses. But there is so much about R.Riveter’s mission that applies to Lisa’s life even *more* now that her husband is in the corporate civilian world. They’re still experiencing a transient life, following her husband’s work and she’s still being a support system for him. It’s a situation that so many women find themselves in today. R.Riveter isn’t just for military spouses – it’s for the modern woman.

Q. We need to talk about the name! Where did R.Riveter come from?

A. C: We named the company ‘R.Riveter’ after WWII icon Rosie the Riveter. I remember that Lisa and I had come up with somewhere near 30 options – but when we looked at ‘R.Riveter’, we knew that was it. There was something about the name that was rooted in our history – our scrappy start in an attic in the North Georgia mountains, but could still apply no matter how large we grew.

Rosie was an embodiment of everything we felt was important to us, and what stand for as a company: women’s right to work, female empowerment, and just standing up for what you believe in and what you need to do – no matter how difficult or complicated the path may be.

L: You know how much I like the Greatest Generation [laughs].

When men were drafted and sent off to war, literally millions of women stepped out of their comfort zones to do their part for our country. These Rosies kept the nation moving forward in an incredibly difficult time – and were the epitome of female empowerment.

Our business model is inspired by the strength, but is bringing manufacturing back into the home, so modern-day women really can do it all. She can belong to a connected community, create income, *and* be there for her family when she's needed - all on her own schedule.

Back when Rosies were working in manufacturing roles, they had quality control stamps – where women would stamp a number on components they created. When we gave each remote riveter an “RR” number – we didn’t realize that we were leaning into this same thought process. Each component of an R.Riveter bag is actually stamped with the RR numbers of the maker.

Q. Let’s talk about your manufacturing process. How does it work?

A. C: Across the country, we have about 35 remote riveters who are military spouses. They all specialize in crafting certain types of components: liners, canvas parts, small leather pieces. Each riveter specializes in one or two areas, so they can become experts. When parts are completed, Riveters ship them to our shop in North Carolina, where we assemble products and prep bags for retail and distribution. Up to 12 makers touch each R.Riveter handbag – from Riveters creating initial canvas, liner and leather components, to our local team in the shop assembling and quality controlling each product.

Many people ask us why we seemingly made things more complicated by moving parts of our manufacturing into different homes across the country. We came up with this process because we wanted to have something that military spouses could plug into that can move with them in a transient military life –but it had to be as straightforward and transparent as possible. You can do the remote riveter job with a home sewing machine and basic tools – you don’t need to invest in costly commercial equipment.

L: The individual pieces are a throwback to Rosie the Riveter too because during WWII, Rosies were making planes, and each plane was assembled with rivets. Each individual rivet was incredibly important to the plane. However, it wasn’t a functional until all those rivets came together.

That’s how our manufacturing process works as well – many components coming together to create one final product. It’s a large value stream of individuals, working together towards one common goal.

Q. Where can people buy these completed R.Riveter handbags?

A. C: We do most of our sales online at www.RRiveter.com. We also have a flagship store in Southern Pines, North Carolina. When we opened the brick and mortar location, we experienced a customer and community connection that we could never have anticipated. It’s been incredible.

Our flagship store has moved three times within a few block radius in the charming southern town we call home. It’s grown from a tiny hole-in-the-wall, off the beaten path to today, where we’re on the main street downtown, where everybody comes to work and play. We have 1,200 square feet of retail space where we sell R.Riveter products and a

curated collection of other military spouse, American made or mission-driven pieces as well.

Q. The story behind R.Riveter is so compelling, but then, the handbags themselves stand alone as works of functional style and impeccable design. How do you maintain such a high level of quality, and where do the ideas for your designs come from?

A. C: We keep it clean and simple. When Lisa and I started in the attic in Dahlonega, GA, we had no experience in manufacturing. We knew we wanted military spouses (and eventually our larger network) to be able to pick up the craft fairly quickly so we could grow. We base our designs on the life of the modern-day woman: they're utilitarian, clean, and refined. You can go from the board room to the park with your R.Riveter bag on your shoulder, and feel empowered along the way.

L: In order to make our business model work, we had to create product that has a lot of components that could come together. Our handbags are actually built in a completely different order than a manufacturer would typically construct them - if the manufacturing was in one location.

Each bag represents the many hands who are coming together to make it. Our customers understand that when they pick up an R.Riveter bag, they're picking up an entire community of women.

Q. You all were on *Shark Tank*--and you did so well. You walked away with Mark Cuban as an investor. What was that experience like?

A. C: Terrifying [laughs].

L: Shark Tank was a rollercoaster, really. Thank goodness we had each other to get through it. At any one time, we balanced each other out--one of us would be nervous and the other would bolster "We're totally fine!" Then the next day, those roles would flip.

Really, *Shark Tank* took our company to a completely different level, not just because we got a deal. In order to prepare for something like that, we had to slow down and get out of the day-to-day details and examine what we wanted this company to be and where we wanted it to go. All of our ideas, projections, and numbers were going to be scrutinized by some of the best business leaders in the country, on national television.

We prepped so much. My husband had just gone through his MBA program, and he was probably the worst "shark" we encountered the entire time. He really prepped us for it, and it's amazing that we're still married today [laughs].

The actual Tank experience was phenomenal. We prepared for a potentially difficult time in the Tank, and when we were in there, it was so incredible to see the response to what we created and decisions we made along the way.

Q. You are one of the fastest growing companies in America, ranked in the top 300 for growth nationwide. You experienced a 1,475% growth increase over the last three years--that's incredible. How has this growth changed your vision for what R.Riveter can be--or has it?

A. C: The ultimate vision for empowerment and opportunity has never changed. What has changed and matured over the last seven or eight years since we started the company is the way we're going to do that.

When we started in the garage, we had 6,000 different ideas about how we were going to grow our company. Like any small start-up, the ideas and possibilities can be overwhelming. Year after year, we started to refine our processes and realize what really worked for us—what was possible to plug into the real world and scale.

L: Up until Shark Tank, we both invested \$2,100 on credit cards. Our husbands thought we were crazy for buying an industrial sewing machine within the first week of starting.

C: It got *real* serious [laughs]. I think everybody thought, 'Okay, they'll do something. They'll start this business. They'll work it out. Then, they'll probably eventually find real jobs. But when we took on debt together, everybody's attention perked up.

L: We really grew the company handbag by handbag. It took us endless pots of coffee and late night glasses of wine to get through those first seven bags. We sold those seven to make 20 more, and so on. And thankfully - we got a lot better at it along the way.

You really can start from nothing and grow it. It might not be as fast, but a lot of the time, you make smarter decisions by going a little bit slower.

Q. Tell us about the R.Riveter collection for spring and summer this year. What's new?

A. C: R.Riveter's Spring / Summer Collection is the first time we've created a product outside of a solid color. We launched a beautiful, custom floral canvas that we designed with a friend of Lisa's, Sara Renner. The design is an artistic rendering of our mission to empower women - it's a tribute to what can happen when women support other women.

L: The floral design really started with an inspiration - we wanted the collection to celebrate empowered women. Throughout history, women have risen by lifting each other up, building on collective strengths. The floral canvas really captures the idea "A flower does not think to compete with the flower next to it - it just blooms." We rise by lifting others, not by competing or comparing. Empowered women empower other women - and that's what we wanted to celebrate here.

Q. What has been the most rewarding part of launching R.Riveter so far?

A. L: The most rewarding part for me is seeing individuals who'd hit a point where they didn't think there was opportunity for them and then, finally, they find R.Riveter. One of my favorite stories is about Cheryl, a gal who's been with us almost since the beginning. She's

worn almost every hat within company. Now, she's our bookkeeper, and her original degree was in accounting.

I remember her telling me that her husband overheard a remote conference call she was on. Afterwards, he looked at her and said, "Cheryl, I'm so proud of you. The boys and I look at you in a completely different way. People look at you to make decisions." It was a really neat thing for him to be able to see his wife of 15 years in a completely different light.

C: I second that. To see our community flourishing is amazing--and community is something you can't force. For some, it's an opportunity to go into a field they never thought they would--to reinvent themselves the way Lisa and I did a little bit. Early on, we had nurses, teachers, and all kinds other military spouses saying, "Okay, how do I lean into *this opportunity* and re-imagine who I originally planned to be and make myself an even better version of myself?"

L: A lot of our riveters are doing something they did not study in school--or at least, it's not what they thought they'd be doing. But, something like a special memory of a grandmother teaching her how to sew is what triggers their involvement. It's amazing how all of these little moments in life can become a much larger opportunity for you in the future.

About R.Riveter

R.Riveter was founded on the American ideal that opportunity and innovation, when combined with determination, will create positive impact. From two women in an attic to a nationwide network of Riveters, our company embodies the time-tested mantra of success through hard work while providing travel hardened military spouses the opportunity to achieve and elevate. With each spouse doing their part to assemble the product, the mission is accomplished through the hands of many, coming together as one. The team spirit and community within R.Riveter drives individual and collective success, in the shop or at home. <https://www.riveter.com>