

# KARST

UNSUPERVISED SINCE 1996

brandsxkarst.com • North Charleston, SC

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## Karst Marks 30 Years: From a Retired Shriner's Side Hustle to a National Merch Agency Running 60+ Brand Programs

*Women-owned, Charleston-based agency reflects a category shift — from promo suppliers to creative partners running shops, drops, and ongoing brand programs end-to-end.*

**CHARLESTON, SC — July 2026** — Karst, the women-owned merch agency behind branded programs for growth-stage and lifestyle brands across the country, is marking 30 years in business this July. The company runs more than 60 active corporate and experience shop programs annually, with 12-plus year average client tenure and 98% client retention — numbers that reflect a deliberate evolution from the traditional promo industry into agency-style program partnership.

Karst was founded in 1996 by Gerald Karst Sr., a Charleston native, City of Charleston firefighter, and Charleston Naval Shipyard nuclear foreman who started the company in semi-retirement after realizing his Shriner lodge had nowhere local to source customized uniforms. His stepdaughter, Michelle Harris, joined in 2003 after returning from a music industry career in Nashville. When Gerald was sidelined by an injury soon after, she ran the business solo, restructured it from the inside, and was running it for good by 2004.

Twenty-two years later, Karst looks nothing like the side hustle that started it. The company has rebuilt itself around how modern brand teams actually work: shop-first ordering, recurring programs, retail-quality drops, and unboxing experiences designed with the same care as a product launch.

*“The industry I came into in 2003 was a commodity business — catalog, logo, ship,”* said Michelle Harris, CEO of Karst. *“Most brand teams now want a creative partner who can hold the same bar as their agency, design firm, or in-house studio — and execute against real timelines with real logistics across multiple stakeholders. We’ve spent twenty years building exactly that.”*

Karst’s clients span growth-stage consumer and lifestyle brands, national consulting and professional services firms, and retail and experience clients.

*“Merch is emotional. It’s what people wear, keep, gift, and post,”* Harris said. *“Our job is to translate brand into a curated assortment people actually want — then build the engine behind it so it runs cleanly, quarter after quarter. That’s the difference between merch as a line item and merch as a program.”*

The next chapter, Harris said, is investing further in shop infrastructure and the responsible use of AI in creative-led workflows — trend synthesis, shop merchandising, product description development — with experienced human oversight on every project.

Karst is marking the milestone with a campaign titled “Unsupervised Since 1996,” a reference to the company’s origin as a retiree’s side project that quietly grew into an agency. The series will include a founder letter, stories from defining projects, and collaborations with Charleston-area designers and makers throughout 2026.

### **About Karst**

Karst is a women-owned, WBENC-certified branded merchandise agency based in North Charleston, South Carolina. Founded in 1996, Karst designs and executes retail-quality merch programs — drops, shops, employee and customer initiatives, event activations — for growth-stage brands across the country. Karst runs on EOS and runs every client engagement through its 8-step Proven Process. Visit [brandsxkarst.com](https://brandsxkarst.com).

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