

KARST

UNSUPERVISED SINCE 1996

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Charleston-Based Karst Marks 30 Years: From a Retired Firefighter's Garage to a National Merch Agency

Women-owned, family-founded company — started by a Charleston Shriner and now led by his stepdaughter — designs branded merch for growth-stage brands nationwide, all from North Charleston.

CHARLESTON, SC — July 2026 — Karst, the North Charleston-based branded merchandise agency, is marking 30 years in business this July. Founded in 1996 by the late Gerald Karst Sr. — a Charleston native, City of Charleston firefighter, and Charleston Naval Shipyard nuclear foreman — the company has grown from a retirement side project into a national agency running more than 60 active brand programs from its North Charleston home.

The story of Karst is a Charleston story. Gerald started the company in 1996 after retiring from the Naval Shipyard, when he realized his Shriner lodge had nowhere local to source customized uniforms. He worked out of his home, focused on apparel for industrial clients, and built it slowly. In 2003, his stepdaughter Michelle Harris came home to Charleston after seven years in the Nashville music industry, asked if she could try selling some promo, and opened the phone book. Her first sale: water bottles for a gas company owner's kid's hockey team.

Soon after, Gerald fell from a ladder and was incapacitated. Michelle ran the business solo — figuring out QuickBooks, paying vendors, and rebuilding the operation from the inside. When Gerald came back, he saw what she'd built and stepped aside. She officially took over in 2004.

"Charleston shaped this business," said Michelle Harris, CEO of Karst. "My stepdad started it because his community needed something. I came home from Nashville and accidentally found a career here. We've grown up as a business in this city, and now what we make from here ends up in the hands of people all over the country."

Today, Karst is women-owned, WBENC-certified, and serves national clients including consumer brands, professional services firms, and major event and festival programs. The team works out of an office in North Charleston with a small, tight crew of designers, account managers, and production staff. Recent local and national work includes festival retail, custom-designed merch programs for high-growth brands, and ongoing online shops for clients with distributed teams across the country.

Karst is marking the milestone with a year-long campaign titled "Unsupervised Since 1996" — a nod to the company's origin as Gerald's retirement side project. The 30-year series will include a founder letter, stories from defining projects, and select collaborations with Charleston-area designers and makers.

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.

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