

KARST

UNSUPERVISED SINCE 1996

brandsxkarst.com • North Charleston, SC

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Karst Marks 30 Years: 60+ Programs, 98% Retention, and a Bet on Shops, Programs, and AI-Supported Workflows

Charleston-based, women-owned distributor evolves from family-founded side hustle into agency-style merch partner; second-generation CEO Michelle Harris invests in next chapter.

CHARLESTON, SC — July 2026 — Karst is marking 30 years in business this month, three decades of family-led ownership and a deliberate evolution from a Charleston-based promo distributor into an agency-style merch partner serving modern brand programs.

The company runs more than 60 active corporate and experience shop programs annually, maintains 98% client retention, and counts an average client tenure of 12-plus years — a track record that reflects what second-generation CEO Michelle Harris calls “the quiet work of doing this differently than the catalog model.”

Karst was founded in 1996 by Gerald Karst Sr., a retired Charleston firefighter and Charleston Naval Shipyard nuclear foreman who started the company after realizing his Shriner lodge had no local source for customized embroidered and screen-printed uniforms. His stepdaughter, Michelle Harris, joined in 2003 after returning from a career in the Nashville music industry. When Gerald was sidelined by an injury, she ran the business alone, restructured operations and software from the ground up, and officially took over leadership in 2004.

“I didn’t grow up in this industry — I called marinas out of the phone book and sold water bottles to a guy whose kid played hockey,” said Michelle Harris, CEO of Karst. *“What I figured out, kind of by accident, was that the way I was approaching it — leading with strategy and design instead of catalogs — wasn’t how the industry was operating. Once I found the people who were doing it that way, I realized we had a model worth scaling.”*

Today, Karst is women-owned, WBENC-certified, and runs the full agency stack: brand strategy, design, sourcing, production, fulfillment, shop platforms, on-site activations, and ongoing program management. The company operates on EOS and runs every client engagement through its eight-step Proven Process — Onboarding, Presentation, Product Selection, Design, Quoting, Approvals, Production, Delivery — plus a structured post-project loop of follow-up, quarterly check-ins, and surprise-and-delight mailers.

“We’re investing in a more scalable operating layer for shops and recurring programs,” Harris said. *“That includes selective use of AI in creative-led workflows — trend synthesis, shop merchandising, product description development — with experienced human oversight on every project. It’s not about replacing taste. It’s about giving taste more room to operate.”*

Karst is marking the milestone with a year-long campaign titled “Unsupervised Since 1996,” a 30-year series highlighting the projects, partners, and people who shaped the company — and the direction the team is taking next.

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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