

Military OneSource Podcast — Autism Acceptance From a Military-Connected Youth’s Perspective

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Autism. The spectrum. These are terms more familiar with us than they used to be, which has helped us to create a better understanding of autism, but we don't often hear about the successes and stories of those on the autism spectrum, especially with military-connected youth and teens. We have with us today, Josh, the 2024 Boys & Girls Clubs of America Southeast Region Military Youth of the Year. We're excited to be talking with him and his youth center advisor, Maria. And so, we'll be talking about Josh's experiences as a military-connected teen. So, Josh and Maria, welcome to the podcast.

Maria:

Hello.

Josh:

Hello.

Bruce Moody:

It's wonderful to be here. I should jump ahead and say I am in Kings Bay, Georgia, right now. I should have said that from the start, but here we are. I am at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in lovely, lovely Georgia. It is gorgeous here, and everybody has been really welcoming. And I'm at the teen center, which is what, hashtag KB Teens?

Maria:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

All right. There's a humongous sign outside with your hashtag, so there you go. So, let's have a conversation. First off, congratulations on being the 2024 Boys & Girls Clubs of America Southeast Region Military Youth of the Year. That's an impressive accomplishment. And please tell me a little bit about yourself.

Josh:

So, I was born in Newport News, Virginia, and my parents got divorced early on in my life and both got remarried. So, my dad moved up to Minnesota with his new wife. At first, every summer I would go and visit my dad in Minnesota, but I lived in Virginia. We moved to Smithfield and stayed there for about three years or so. I had an older brother who would be deployed overseas to Afghanistan every once in a while.

We were often worried about him, but otherwise I had a fairly calm lifestyle, you could say. However, in 2017 my father lost his job, and he had to go search for a new one. So, he eventually found a new job, but the only problem was it was down in Georgia. So, after 10 years of life in Virginia, meeting new friends and everything, we decided we would have to relocate and move down to Georgia. And that's eventually how I moved down in 2018 to Camden County, Georgia, and I eventually joined the Kings Bay Teen Center afterwards.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, good to know. So, what have you been up to since the Military Youth of the Year celebration in August?

Josh:

Since the Military Youth of the Year celebration in August, I have officially started my life as a college student. I'm a college freshman who is almost done with his first semester of college, approaching final exams rapidly, and I'm working hard to make sure that I can make it through college and keep my grades as high as possible. And I've been getting adjusted to college life, meeting new people, joining several new clubs to try and just expand my reach and outlook and I've been just trying to make sure that I can last through it.

Bruce Moody:

All right, there we go. So how and when did you and your advisor decide to get involved in the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Military Youth of the Year program?

Josh:

I got involved with the Youth of the Year program back in 2019 when Ms. Maria told me there was a Junior Youth of the Year program that I could run for. And I told Ms. Maria that I didn't think Junior Youth of the Year was for me. I'm not sure if I'm the right kid to run for it. But she just encouraged me to believe in myself and try my best. So, I ran up against two other kids for Junior Military Youth of the Year.

I had an interview with three panels of judges, answered a few questions about myself, and then I left. And a few weeks later we had our banquet, and I actually won the Junior Military Youth of the Year. And that actually shocked me, but also it brought confidence to me that I never previously had. So, after that I told myself that if I won Junior, I need to make sure I go for the big prize, which is Military Youth of the Year. And that's how I joined the Military Youth of the Year program itself.

Bruce Moody:

That's really amazing to hear. As we said at the beginning, we have another guest with us who, as you mentioned, really played a big role in helping you in the Military Youth of the Year program and throughout the years in a number of ways. Maria, please introduce yourself and how long have you worked in youth programs and tell us how you came to know Josh.

Maria:

So, I started working in Kings Bay in 2014. I am also part of a military family. My husband has been serving the United States Navy and so being a military family, it was just a privilege to be able to be a part of a community where I could support other teens. And so when I moved here, I didn't know that I would be officially working with teens, but two years after being in the youth programs, I transitioned into the teen program. And from there I used my passion for the different programs that they have here and really just used skills that I had from previous experience with Boys & Girls Club knowing that they had the Youth of the Year program and really just wanted to be a part of that to provide more opportunities for teens in our community.

Bruce Moody:

How has your experience in working with Josh helped your overall work with youth and teens?

Maria:

I met Josh in 2018 when he first started coming to the teen program, and I remember his sister first. His sister Ahsha came to the program looking for something and opportunities. Didn't meet Josh right then. I really had a lot of opportunity more with his sister, but he was kind of in the back for a little bit until his mom said that he needed to come and try it out. And when he started coming to the teen program, Josh was really quiet. He would come in and he would kind of sit by himself and be on the computer and just wasn't saying a whole lot.

But there's something in him that we all saw that he just didn't see at the time. And that was that he was just extremely smart and had so much talent in so many things. One thing that we loved about Josh was that he could look at something and memorize it or could talk to you about it like he had known the topic for a minute. So that was one really good quality that we saw. Especially with Youth of the Year, when you're talking about giving a speech and you're talking about doing essays, it was such a really good quality that he had, but we needed to figure out how to kind of get that out there.

We started with Junior Military Youth of the Year and his confidence level, like he said, just grew tremendously. Shortly after that, he had shared with us that he had Asperger's, and so that kind of started to play a role in the way that myself and my other staff looked at giving him opportunities. One of the things that we do in youth programs is we make sure that we provide an inclusive community where we're inclusive of everybody and providing opportunities for every teen that walks through the door while giving them their platform and kind of individualizing things.

And so, one of the things with Josh was really learning what were those things that were going to help enhance the different leadership skills that he had and ways that he can articulate things. What were those roles? What were those things? And so, it started with UPS Road Code, and we started watching him just take that and talk to others about safe driving. And it eventually evolved into him leading in other things. And so, I think that a lot of that had to do with us learning from each other.

Josh really taught us how to take a moment to sit down and not only do the research and finding out what are the best ways, but just asking him, I think that's one of the things that allowed for us to have a really good relationship was that he allowed for us to kind of hear more about his story and see what were those best practices, like learning that Josh needed more direct questions versus, "Maybe you should do this." He preferred us saying, "Hey Josh, come in here and do this with us." It was little things like expressing to him that he could do certain things when he might not believe in himself.

I think that these programs just provides opportunities for students and teens that are just as amazing as Josh and Ahsha and the different youth of the years, like Taylor, to really just find a platform in a way that one, they feel included, they feel like their voice is heard, but that they know that they have caring adults that are going to find a way to provide an opportunity that maybe they wouldn't get somewhere else.

I think sometimes parents and teachers, they have so many people around them. But when they come to the youth center, they know that they have a place where their voice matters, where they can be themselves. So, I think that was just really finding out who Josh was and him letting us learn more from him and provide more opportunities for other teens that come through our door. Whether it's Asperger's or Tourette's struggling with anxiety or depression, our doors are open for students to just come and be themselves and have an opportunity to have a caring adult.

Bruce Moody:

I'm totally getting that. It's wonderful. And it really is clear that the relationship the two of you have as a great example to anyone out there. What a critical resource installation youth centers can be for military-connected children. And you mentioned Ahsha and Taylor, these great, great, great people. We've had them on the podcast. It's so wonderful. From all the discussions we've had on the podcast with our fantastic Youths of the Year, it really does seem that the message is that everyone is welcome not only by the youth center but by the youth center staff as well. And Josh, can you talk about when you were diagnosed with Asperger's?

Josh:

Yes. So, when I was a kid, I had a few odd habits. I would sometimes sit in my laundry room and watch the washing machine spin around, or whenever we ate dinner, I wouldn't eat my food whenever it touched each other. I would think that it would be tainted, you could say. So, my mom noticed this was a little bit odd, and eventually she found out that I had Asperger's.

So, in the fifth grade I was being taken to an A, B and B therapy place where I would go and meet other kids, and they would give me food. And this time it would be touching, but they would still encourage me to just eat it because it's going to be okay. Or me and the other kids would play card games together or watch movies that teach about social skills.

I didn't pick up hints, but then I figured out one of my close friends that went there, he seemed pretty shy, but he seemed normal to me at first. Then I found out he had autism. So, I was shocked, and I told my mom about it, and she confessed to me everybody who went there had autism including me.

I had a form of it called Asperger's where it affected my social skills, and I wasn't able to interact with people as normally as other kids would. So, this was something that definitely shocked me because I didn't know before then that I had Asperger's. I thought I was just a normal kid with a few odd habits, but it changed the way how I looked at myself for a little bit. I became a bit more insecure and feeling like this is something I should hide from people because if I told them they wouldn't think of me as a normal kid or they would think of me as weird.

Bruce Moody:

How has Maria helped you over the years to stretch and work through the experiences that might've been uncomfortable?

Josh:

Throughout my years at the teen center, Maria has taught me to try things that I never would've tried before, if not for coming to the teen center. It started off with things simple like I went ice skating once with them and then I went zip lining over alligators, which was a terrifying experience, but it was fun. I came out alive. I came out having fun. And she began to encourage me to just join clubs, interact with other teens and get to know them better.

And eventually we went to the Keystone event in Tennessee, and we had a Mud Run, and that is something I never would've dreamed of doing in my entire life, but Ms. Maria just told me, "You're going to be okay, Josh. You're going to make it through." So, I went, and I did the Mud Run and it was an experience. But I ended up coming out of it alive and in one piece. And ever since then I haven't been as scared to try new things out as I used to be. Ms. Maria has taught me how even if something seems uncomfortable, you just have to believe in yourself and everything's going to be okay.

Bruce Moody:

For someone on the autism spectrum, social situations can be challenging. So, Josh, how did the youth centers help with that?

Josh:

The youth center taught me that there are people here that I can trust to always have my back and be comfortable around me. Because once I got to know the people at the youth center, I was told a saying, "It's better to have one real friend than five fake friends." And the people at the teen center were always someone that I could count as a real friend.

They would always make sure that they check on me whenever they saw me at school. They would ask if there was any issues I was dealing with or anyone that was messing with me and they would make it clear that they were here for me. So being at the youth center just taught me that it's okay to tell people about having autism because there are going to be some people who will accept you no matter what, no matter what flaws or differences you have. And I just learned to trust other people more during my time at the teen center.

Bruce Moody:

Do you have any suggestions that would help youth centers to support those on the autism spectrum even more?

Josh:

Yes. For kids that are on the autism spectrum, some things you could always try and do are just certain activities with them that can maybe tease them about social skills or issues that they're dealing with. For example, you could have them play a game with other kids and teach them what's the proper way to how to respond in situations that make them upset.

Or you could possibly watch movies with them like we used to do back at the A, B and B therapy place where they would show us movies about people that would interact with others in ways that weren't normal and how we should react better with them. I believe that in order to help kids with autism, you should make sure that you either put them in situations that can help them improve for the future, or you can just learn to make sure you have patience with them. Because it can be a difficult thing, of course, dealing with them, but you just have to have patience with them.

Bruce Moody:

And Maria, when you found out that Josh had Asperger's, you adapted your approach as a youth programs professional. How did that help your relationship to grow?

Maria:

It really helped my relationship to grow with Josh because it allowed me to fully understand that simple things such as eye contact when people would say, "Oh, he's being rude." No, he's not being rude. You need to really look at him and really understand. And so, one thing we pride ourselves is privacy when it comes to if he wants to share he has Asperger's with everybody, that's one thing. But as far as the staff, we make sure that we keep that stuff private just to make sure that they feel safe. This is their safe space.

But being able to know what worked with Josh and what didn't, one, allowed for our relationship to grow, it gave us an understanding into having more patience when it came to him doing things, understanding that he didn't like to be dirty. For example, the Mud Run, he mentioned it was a part, our Keystone Club gets to go to it every year, but it's called Elevate. And so, Elevate is just a leadership club where a bunch of teens get together and they meet. And so, our particular Keystone Club is a program through Boys And so, we go, and we try to interact with other teens that are doing similar things. And so that particular time we got to do a Mud Run. And in that Mud Run, I knew that Josh

did not things touching him such as mud. I knew that that kind of created a little bit of an anxiety, but I also know that Josh was getting ready to go to college and experience other things. And it was important for me to be able to be there for him in the moment that he was going to experience something so that he knew in the back of his mind that the next time something like that happened, he knew what to expect.

And I think that's one thing that when you have students that are going through things, sometimes they just need to know what that feels like or need to know what that experience might look like. But when you have somebody that cares that's right there by you, they're ready to pick you up in case something happens. And so, I really wanted to be that person for Josh during that Mud Run, watching him finish it. I mean, we laugh about it because would he do it again? I don't think he would do it again. Not my favorite thing either.

I mean, I'm not big on Mud Runs, but I also like to tell my staff we lead by example, and I think that shows them that if I'm willing to trust you and tell you to try something, I'm going to do it myself too. So that kind of built that trust. And so, watching Josh do that Mud Run one, it allowed him to see that he can do anything he sets this mind to and there's no limitation. Obviously, there might be some things that sometimes he may have to do a little bit different.

I think he mentioned in his speech, one of my favorite parts, he says, "Just differently gifted, just something different." And so, I love that because we like to say that there's so many opportunities for everybody, and so everybody does things differently. There is no one way. And I think that's what's really neat about military-connected teens is that we all have a different story. They all have a different story. Military families as well. And so just being able to provide opportunities for them to grow and give them that stability so that when they leave our teen program, we know that they are set to go and that they've built a solid foundation in the skills that we've helped them with.

And so, I love that Josh shared a little bit about some of the things that he did. Card games was something that he loved to do, so we played card games all the time with him here. That was something that was really comfortable for him. One way that I remember getting him to talk was we do our rose and thorn of the day. The thorn is something that maybe didn't go as well, and our rose is something that was the best part of our day.

And so, we do that with our teens for two reasons. The first one is we want to hear about their day. But the second one is because those students that are quiet, sometimes they might not feel like they have a voice, and in that moment it's something so simple. But that was really when Josh started speaking to us. I'll never forget, there was one time where he shared an experience about a young man at school that had pushed him that day and how he was really upset about that. And so that opened up the floor for conversations about bullying and conversations about ways that we could have reacted or not reacted and those types of conversations that we were able to have because he was able to open up through a simple activity like Rose and Thorns.

Bruce Moody:

So, what was the process like working with Josh through this condition?

Maria:

So, we have our youth implementation guidance where it does share some things as far as making sure that we're providing positive relationships and doing certain things. But the biggest thing is really learning also from the family. So, I wanted to make sure that one, Josh was comfortable with us, but also that his family was in the know, right? So, I started having conversations with mom and dad and saying, "What are those things that Josh does need support in?" His family was phenomenal in sharing, Josh was great in sharing what are the things that work, what things didn't work.

From then it was just working with our staff and saying, "Okay, how can we make sure that when we're implementing certain activities, that we are providing opportunities and modifying our activities so that it fits Josh, that it fits such and such kid?" And that goes for every student that walks through our door. So that process has taken time. It's not been something that we gained all the information and then we were ready to go.

I think that it's definitely been learn in progress. There's been times where Josh is like, "Ms. Maria, I don't like that." And I'm like, "Okay, let's regroup. Let's figure it out." Right? I think it's almost like parenting. I've said it before, you don't have a guidebook how to do it. And I don't think with teen programming you have just a guidebook that has all the answers to everything, which is why it's so important to have a team. And so, we have a great trainer. We have a great youth director. We have a great support team on our installation as I'm sure a lot of youth programs do all the way from the top, from CNIC down. It's only a phone call, an email or something away if it is something that we're struggling with or is something that we need to support our youth. I think everybody's just so inclusive in trying to include every opportunity for our teens that we have coming through our doors.

Bruce Moody:

What are some examples of how you both connected but also built a relationship?

Maria:

Definitely, I think our field trips. Our field trips were probably, like he mentioned, ice skating, zip lining over alligators. That was definitely a trust thing. Just those field trips. I think sometimes we think of field trips as just fun opportunities, but I think Josh can attest to the fact that the field trips are an opportunity for teens to not only build relationships with their peers because it provides for them to have that social

engagement when they're sitting on the bus and they're talking to one another, but also they have to trust each other when they're doing certain activities.

So, we do all kinds of field trips. And we do Field Trip Fridays, and so it ranges because the calendar is done by the teen. So, for example, this Friday we're going to the Pinball Palace, and I don't know anything about pinballs or machines, but it's something that, for example, Josh could say, "I want to do this field trip." And we try it out and we learn from each other. But it provides an opportunity for us to really just trust each other, try something new.

For our staff, we're always trying something new, but it's fun. It gives you an opportunity to laugh. It gives you an opportunity for teens to watch you fail and get back up. Right? If you're ice skating and you fall on your butt, you get right back up and you laugh about it for a little bit and you might be sore the next day. But it's those relationships that really allow for me and Josh to build a relationship. Also learning about anime, is that what we talk about on the plane? I'm learning. So, there's so many new things.

Josh:

Yeah.

Maria:

But I do love that. I love that I get to learn about anime with Josh. I think that was another thing we were able to relate to a little bit in the sense of he was teaching me something new that I can relate to my other teens who are into anime. And now I can have conversations a little bit, not too much. But again, it's those little things that I think really help build my relationship with Josh. It was just talking to him and getting to experience field trips with him that allowed for us to really build those relationships.

Bruce Moody:

That's so nice. What would be some tips that you would share with fellow youth center staff about connecting with youth who may have a similar situation to Josh?

Maria:

I would say not to be afraid to ask questions. I think a lot of the times we are scared to ask because we don't want to hurt feelings or we don't want to scare anybody away. But I think that it's important that we ask the questions like, "What can I do to help you? What can I do to make sure that you're successful?" And I think that if you follow those guidelines, it definitely writes it down for you where it says that if you are making sure that you're greeting every teen when they're walking through their door by their name,

if you're sitting down and you're playing games with them, building relationships, if you're doing all those things, it's going to create an environment of inclusion.

It's going to bring kids like Josh into the program because they're going to want to be a part of something like that because they know that they have adults that care that are willing to learn. Right? And so, I think asking those questions. If you have a teen that you see is struggling with something, I say find ways that you can have conversations where they may open up. Because I think that's how it started with me and Josh.

It wasn't until a year after he started in our program that I realized that he had Asperger's and that's when he opened up to me and really had that conversation. And so, it took time. So, it's going to take time. And then there's some that it may not take time. They may tell you right up front. And I think that if they do tell you right up front, take the opportunity to learn, speak with your trainers, speak with your program people, find out what ways you can support that teen to make sure that they are given a place where they're included, feel cared for and know that they can gain opportunities and experiences through.

Bruce Moody:

What I want to do is sort of drill down a bit in your experience. And Josh, question for you. I heard that you helped organize a couple of really inspiring events in your community to support autism awareness. Can you tell us a little bit about those events?

Josh:

Yes. So, when Regional Youth of the Year was upcoming, I decided that I needed to do some events at my teen center in my program to make sure that I could talk about when regional came up. I decided to make these little bracelets that talked about how it's okay to be different and it's not something to be ashamed of. These were little autism bracelets that had the puzzle pieces on it, and it was, Be Different. And it was basically just encouraging kids, it doesn't matter if you have autism, you shouldn't be afraid to show it.

I used to be scared to tell people that I had autism and nervous about it, but now it's not something I hide anymore or something that I'm ashamed of. It's something that I feel makes me extraordinary. As she mentioned before, and it's not something any kid should ever feel like it's their fault or they should be afraid of it. It's a gift. So, I basically made autism awareness bracelets. I handed out the bracelets to other teens at my teen center so that they could wear them, whether it's at school, at home or to the teen center itself and show they're not ashamed to have autism or Asperger's, and it's not something you should ever feel insecure about.

Bruce Moody:

Do you have any ideas of how you'll use your platform as the Southeast Region Military Youth of the Year?

Josh:

I intend to use my platform to help upcoming Youth of the Year prepare for their competitions. I've had a few kids since I've won regional text me on Instagram and ask me for advice for their speeches. They'll send their speeches to me and ask, "What do you believe I should change about my speech? What's something that I can do better on? Do you think this is good?"

And I try my best to make sure I give them advice that I believe will help them win their competition. So I intend to use my platform as Southeast Youth of the Year to support upcoming youth of the years in their competitions, and also just do my best to spread awareness for autism and make sure people know how it's an issue that we need to focus on and make sure that kids with autism feel accepted rather than rejected by other people.

Bruce Moody:

It's been such a wonderful experience talking with the both of you. Josh, I just offer you the opportunity. What would be any final advice that you would give to any military-connected youth in regard to participating in youth centers?

Josh:

To military-connected youth who are considering participating in the youth centers, I would encourage them to absolutely give it a shot. When I first came to the youth center, I didn't know what the club was my mom was introducing me to, but I was nervous. I tried to say to myself I didn't want to be a part of it, and now it has changed my life for the better so much and made just everything so much more positive. Ever since I've joined, I've found so many new friends, met so many incredible people I never thought I'd have the chance to meet. It's just changed my life so much for the better. So, I would encourage any military-connected youth out there, go to the teen centers and give them a try because it's going to make everything so much happier for you.

Bruce Moody:

Josh, Maria, thank you so much for joining us today. It has been a wonderful conversation. We're really grateful for having us here, and we wish you both all the best.

Maria:

Thank you so much for having us.

Josh:

Thank you very much.

Bruce Moody:

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