

Military OneSource Podcast — Finding Passion and Purpose in the Stories of Military-Connected Youth With Ahsha B.

Child & Youth Programs

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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. Today we are talking with Ahsha B. Ahsha was the 2022 Boys & Girls Clubs of America National Military Youth of the Year. At the time we had Ahsha on the podcast, she was talking about finding purpose and passion in the stories of military-connected youth.

Welcome, Ahsha. It's good to have you back to the podcast.

Ahsha B.:

Yes. It's so good to be back. Just thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I'm so excited for our conversation today.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we are really glad to have you back. Briefly, what have you been up to? What have you been doing since we last spoke?

Ahsha B.:

Yes, well, I'm just living my good old glory days in college right now. Currently I am in my second year of college, but I found out recently that by my credits, I'm actually being considered a junior, so that's been an eye-opener, I would say, recently. But I've just had so many amazing opportunities to learn so many different things. I'm still working on some new episodes that are going to be coming out on my personal podcast, Chats with Ahsha B. I have another speaking opportunity coming up in May actually, at a golfing convention, which is very exciting. I have a mentorship role that I will be taking in Atlanta where I will be hosting a panel, and one of the youth on the panel is actually the kid that I passed the National Military Youth of the Year title to for 2023, so I am so

excited to see him again. I will also be taking part in an internship with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America this summer, so that is very exciting.

Bruce Moody:

When you were last with us, you talked about your goal of becoming a motivational speaker and, well, it does seem like you are well on your way. But I'll still ask, is this still a passion for you and how are you reaching youth?

Ahsha B.:

1000%. Oh, my goodness. It truly just brings-

Bruce Moody:

I kind of thought so.

Ahsha B.:

It truly brings me so much joy and fulfillment to know that I can share my experience and the wisdom that I've learned from others to affect change or even just inspire someone else. I would say there are so many ways that I've been so blessed with the opportunity to be able to help youth find their stories.

One of my favorite avenues I got to do was host a podcasting kind of competition, if you will. It was with UPS Road Code, which is a program with UPS, the delivery service, about safe driving. One of the things that they did was they actually opened up the opportunity for us to help create platforms with podcasts to help youth elevate their stories. I got to fly into Anaheim, California, and I got to look at all the different ideas that these youth had for podcasting. And I got to help them set up the name of their podcast, the title, what's your mission, where do you want to go with it? That was just so fulfilling for me to help youth start what I once was in that position of doing, starting my own podcast. Yeah, that was really special.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we're partial to podcasts over here, so it's a powerful-

Ahsha B.:

Right on.

Bruce Moody:

... medium. Yeah, right on, absolutely. Now, how are you working with these youth to help them get their stories out?

Ahsha B.:

Yeah, so as I said previously, podcasts. Another aspect that I've helped youth with is figuring out where they can promote their stories and who they can talk to about it. For example, I've talked to some youth who were trying to advocate about their experiences with dealing with drug violence at their school. The first thing that I talked about

obviously was creating a presentation with statistics, maybe with a little bit of their personal testimonies in it, and presenting it to the higher officials of their school. Maybe starting a petition, getting other youth to sign that petition. I got to talk to these girls about possibly starting a blog where different people could maybe write in about their experiences with drug violence or different things. That was just one facet of an aspect, whether it was podcasting, whether it was starting a blog.

Sometimes I think one of the best ways is getting a kid to talk about their story. So often I would come across some kids who were just very guarded about really being vulnerable in kind of a BGCA-conference environment. Being blessed with the opportunity to get them to share their story, just starting off, just getting them to talk about their story, there's so much power in that because before we can get to the podcast, before we can get to the blogs, one of the best ways to help youth begin to elevate their story is to just tell it in the first place.

Bruce Moody:

Right, and of course, BGCA is the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Ahsha B.:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

Don't you know in the military, we have too many acronyms, so we try not to use them.

Ahsha B.:

You're right, you're right. You're right.

Bruce Moody:

No, but let's get back on this because this is really, really interesting. I know that you talk a lot about teens. You're trying to reach out to them, and you have a way of seeing them as various types of teens. What does that mean? What are the types of teens that you see?

Ahsha B.:

There were three kind of main categories that, for me, I was kind of able to fit youth experience I came across into. The first type of youth that I saw were youth who just straight up believed that their story did not have any value, that they didn't have any purpose, that they didn't have a passion, or they couldn't bring something to the table in their society. Then I would say the second type of youth I came across were youth who were looking to find value in their stories from other people or other sources. Instead of looking at their experiences to find learned value there, they were like, "Okay, well, what is my friend saying? Well, what is Instagram saying? Well, what is social media saying? How are other people trying to make me see my story?" if that makes sense. Then the last type of youth I really ran into were youth who understood that their

story had value and meaning and purpose, but they weren't sure how to get it out there into the world.

Bruce Moody:

Ahsha, this is really great conversation here, and as I'm listening to you, I'm sure most parents would love it if their military-connected youth had mentoring and coaching along the way. What can parents do to help their children and teens find their purpose and their voice?

Ahsha B.:

One thing that my mom did was she really encouraged us to step outside of our comfort zone, and I would say encourage-slash-lovingly forced us to get outside of our comfort zone. One of the aspects of doing that was taking us to our local youth center-slash-teen center, and so for parents, really try to be invested in your kids. Pay attention. What are their likes? What are their dislikes? Where do you feel like they maybe become more bashful, more shy? What environments do you feel like they're more confident and outgoing in? You take that — for example, your kid might love animating and drawing, but you've noticed they're a bit more bashful in public speaking, right? Find opportunities, whether it is a local teen center or a local youth center, or whether it is an art program possibly in the community, in the area, to put your youth or put your teen in a space where they can learn, grow and be successful.

But also encouraging youth to find a mentor outside of you. I know that can be very easier said than done, but for example, my mentor at my youth center, her name was Miss Maria, and she knew me like the back of her hand. She knew what snacks I liked. she knew when I got stressed out. She knew what opportunities I was best in. I think it was really great because she was able to bring in another perspective to my mom. You never know as a parent where you might have someone who's mentoring your kid and they can say, "Hey, I don't know if you've noticed this, but they're really starting to grow with their leadership skills. They're really starting to take an interest in maybe film development." It might be something that you as a parent just happened to not catch. But having that mentor, someone who was encouraging your youth to step outside of their comfort zone to discover different facets of what the world has to offer can really be such a blessing and such a benefit to youth.

Bruce Moody:

You mentioned mentoring is available at installation youth centers, and also through the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Ahsha B.:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, talk about the importance of your relationship with your mentor, how you met and how were you connected with your mentor? How did that all come to be?

Ahsha B.:

Oh, my goodness. What a story. This story starts off with, I remember very clearly my younger brother had already been attending our local youth center. At this point, my mom was like, "I want you to meet the head director for all of the advisors at that youth center."

I was like, "Okay, I'm going to go in and have a meeting with her." I remember getting off the bus and walking to the teen center. And I remember I didn't see any girls, and I was like, "Okay." I remember I just kept walking. It was all these boys just kept coming up everywhere. I was like, "Oh, my gosh."

I remember she was this little, short lady walked up to me. She was like, "Hi, my name is Maria. So nice to meet you. We're going to be having a meeting in here."

I was like, "Okay." I was very guarded. I already saw all these guys. I don't know where the heck the rest of the girls are. I was already kind of iffy.

I remember we sat there, and she asked me, "So just how are you and you doing?"

I was like, "Oh."

She asked me how I was doing. It wasn't straight, "What do you want? What's your goal in being here?" She took value in trying to see where I was at, where I was at mentally and emotionally. I remember I told her how I was doing, and she was like, "So what are you interested in? What do you love?"

I remember the biggest smile came on my face, and I said, "I love speaking." I said, "Speaking just makes me so happy and it fills me with so much joy."

She just got instantly excited. She was like, "Oh, my goodness, Ahsha. There are so many opportunities. I just can think of so many things."

I was like, "Oh, really?" This was so exciting. She didn't discourage me. She wasn't like, "Ooh, speaking, that's a really hard career to get into." She helped me really narrow. "Okay, what is it about speaking? Is there a certain topic within speaking that you like?"

We had that meeting, and instantly I just knew she was going to play such a major role in my life. Throughout this whole process, our relationship just grew so close because I am somebody, I stress out so fast. So going into a scholarship competition with so much on the line, I'm like, "I don't know if I'm going to do it. I don't know if I'm going to make it. I'm stressed."

Miss Maria was like, "Look, first, I need you to breathe." She knew my tics. She knew when I was going to get stressed. She knew before I would go in to speak, I couldn't eat a big meal because that would make me feel sick. We would go, we would always get Starbucks. I would always get a pink drink with blueberries on the side. I would eat my

little blueberries. She just really knew me the back of her hand. And so really just having an adult that doesn't judge you, it is because they care, it is because they love you, and it's because they want to see you succeed in the best way possible. To this day, we still text. She has two daughters. I check up on her daughters all the time. We still have quite a solid relationship to this day.

Bruce Moody:

It does seem like an effective mentor is somebody who really gets the person. When we look at the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and youth centers on installations, talk about how they connect youth with adults. Talk about how they help youth see themselves as something bigger than themselves.

Ahsha B.:

Right, absolutely. I would definitely say the Boys & Girls Clubs of America are experts in that. It's really interesting because going to different clubs, every club has a different way that they get the advisors to connect with youth. But one thing that none of the clubs that I visited ever do, it's not forceful. It's supernatural. They really just allow relationships to bloom naturally.

Of course, first you'll have maybe the head advisor ask, "Hey, how are you doing? What are some of your interests?"

The kid might say, "Okay, I have an interest in basketball. Okay, I have an interest in astrophysics." I've seen clubs who will just help connect that youth with maybe an opportunity in the community. Let's say a youth is excited and wants to learn about astrophysics. They'll try to find, maybe, opportunities in the community where they can learn more.

Then you'll see what will happen is the youth will come into the club and talk about, "Oh my goodness, I went to this amazing conference that Miss So-and-So, the head director, told me about, and then I learned this, this and that."

Then you have an advisor come in and they'll be like, "Oh my gosh, that was so cool. In high school, I was really passionate about this aspect of space," let's say. And so that's an instant connection right there. One thing that I would say that they really try not to do is they try not to force it. That's the thing. Every teenager, every youth that comes in there is very different, and the last thing that you want to do is force somebody. The best thing that I would say a good majority of the clubs do is they do their best to connect the youth with opportunities in their community.

But then you have other facets and other clubs where you have youth who might be a bit troubled, and they come in there and they're like, "I just need to be heard. I don't need advice. I don't need a counselor. I just need somebody to listen to me." I've also seen youth and advisor relationships where the youth is like, "I am just so thankful that they sat down and listened to me. They didn't push me away. They didn't try to shove all this advice down my throat and leave. They sat down, and they just listened." To have an adult see you in that way, that's valuable. Whether it's connecting with a youth

through an interest or whether it's just being someone to listen, I would say those are the two biggest facets that I have seen in my experience with working with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Those are the two avenues that they really take to connect and create youth and advisor relationships.

Bruce Moody:

You're talking about the qualities, the characteristics and really the skillset that you have in these mentors and why they're so special to you. Ahsha, what I'd like to you to do is contrast that. How is that different from relationships with parents and family members?

Ahsha B.:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I would say that's an interesting question, and it's a multifaceted question because it depends, first, on the use relationship with the parent. It's hard to kind of generalize because I have my own dynamic and relationship with my parents, which is very different to some other youth that I've met.

So, I can speak from my personal experience first. I can say that for me, one of my biggest issues was always this fear of disappointing my parents as their kid and not meeting the expectations of success that I felt like was being put on me. It was one of those things where to say that, "Oh yeah, I want to be an inspirational speaker." It's not like, "Oh yeah, I graduate college, and I can just apply to be an inspirational speaker." It takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of faith to pursue something like that. That fear of disappointment, that fear of not being enough, and I can't leave or go anywhere else because they're my parents. To have, for me, that fear of I'm going to disappoint the people that brought me into this earth, the people that gave me an opportunity, the people that fought for me to put me in the school that I was in, to put me in the organization that I was in, I placed a lot of expectations on myself.

But with Miss Maria, she wasn't forcing me to have a relationship with her, and she was saying, "Whatever your interest is, I'm going to support and cheer you on with that. Do I want you to be successful? Absolutely. But if you want to go around and pick up garbage for the rest of your life, be a little garbage truck person, if that is what makes you happy, if that is what you feel like you've been called to, and if that's the job that you feel you're going to get the most fulfillment from, then I'm going to support you in that." There's less of an expectation to have this high reach of success, to set a great example for my younger brothers.

I would say that from my personal experience, but I've also met some youth who don't have great relationships with their parents. And so, the dynamic with them and their advisor is that their advisor is like a parent to them. It's a very multifaceted question because, as I stated previously, every youth has a very, very different relationship with their parent.

Bruce Moody:

Ahsha, do you see yourself as a mentor now?

Ahsha B.:

Yes, and that's awesome.

Bruce Moody:

Good. Okay. How would you describe your role as a motivational speaker-slash-mentor to your peers?

Ahsha B.:

Right, of course. For me, what makes a mentor so special is that I am constantly being shown what selflessness really looks like, what humbleness looks like and what it takes to be a mentor — just the amount of humbleness, of selfless you need to have. I would say the best part is that being a mentor to these youth have helped me to see the world on a greater scale outside of myself. Because for me, sometimes as human beings, we can be a bit naturally selfish with some things. Especially being in the limelight and being just, "Oh, Ahsha, you're so great, you're such a great speaker," all this other stuff, and now having to change my perspective and say, "Okay, now it is my job to pour into these youth. Now it is my job to see the world outside of myself and see the things that I've accomplished was opening the door for other people to come behind me."

It's not about me, but also as a mentor, explaining that to youth. For example, with the other kids and teens competing in Youth of the Year after the year I went, I told them, I said, "It is going to fly by so fast. It's going to be so much praise, and it's going to be so exciting and then the switch is going to flip. Now it's going to switch, and that's going to be happening to other teens, and you're going to have to take on the perspective of being a humble and selfless leader and praising these kids and helping these kids understand the value in their story and supporting them in this competition." Really being a mentor just has helped me grow as a person. It's helped my character grow and, through that, I've been able to share my experience with youth and how mentoring them has helped me and my walk with humbleness and my walk in selflessness and encourage them to do the same thing when they reach mentorship positions. Because, really, it's a full circle. I help and inspire youth as mentors so that they, when they get to that position, can do the same thing to others.

Bruce Moody:

Now we all know that military life can present challenges to military-connected youth, especially with regard to relocation and deployment. What do youth say about deployment, and how do you talk to youth about this topic?

Ahsha B.:

Oof. That's a good one. Well, first I just want to say something to the parents. I just want to say that as a teen, I can only imagine the emotional strength and flexibility that you have to have as a parent for your children. I always do my best to tell military parents this, "I honor and I respect you so much for the sacrifices that you make for your family, the emotional sacrifices, and know that it's not for nothing. Even if your kids don't see it

right now, one day they will and they will thank you for that." That's what I wanted to say first.

Second, I would say that one of the biggest things that I have seen with military-connected youth is two things. The first thing is they are so open to different cultures and different people's experiences. I was literally texting one of my friends the other day who lives in Naples, Italy. About two months ago, I was checking on another friend of mine who lives in Guam. Then I just found out a couple of weeks ago that a friend of mine who lived in Naples, Italy, just moved to Kansas. I was like, "What? That's such a culture shock. I can only imagine."

But I would say that they are so accepting of other kids' experiences, of other kids' cultures. That was such a big thing. You had kids from all of these different racial ethnicities coming together. You didn't see these kind of stereotypes. You just saw understanding or the desire to learn. They were like, "Really? Well, this was my experience. How was that experience for you?" Like, "Oh." And the common ground they were able to find was obviously that they were all military-connected youth.

But the second thing that I saw was that the adaptability that they need to have in life, in general, they had more success in that. I would tell a lot of the youth this, I would say, "I know it is so hard, but even outside of the military, change happens. Now, it might not happen as often, but change most certainly happens. Now that you have had this experience as a young person, as a teen, you are emotionally mature in your ability to be able to, 'Okay, so I've moved to a new place. How am I processing this? How am I doing emotionally right now? How can I serve and be there for my family, but also make sure that I'm in a good space? Where do I get involved?'" They're already, at such a young age, gaining the skill of being able to change and adjust successfully.

I try to get these youth to see, and I know it's hard to see change in a positive light, but to see the positive aspects of change and what blessings that could mean for them in the future, because it is easy to look at the negative in the situation, and I tell the kids that. It's so easy to look at deployment as a negative thing. I'm not saying there won't be hurt. I'm not saying there won't be pain. But what I am saying is you will be more equipped in the future to be able to handle aspects like this when it just happens in life.

Bruce Moody:

Ahsha, I'm just listening to you talking and wondering why you're not working for Military OneSource. Yeah, I'm really curious. What other topics are specific to military-connected youth? What topics are youth sharing with you in youth centers, at college, wherever? What are they talking about?

Ahsha B.:

The first thing that I would say is the word "military-connected youth," the military kids that I came across didn't even understand what military-connected youth was. I've come across some military-connected teens who were like, "Yeah, I've never been

through deployment. We stayed here on this base the whole time, and this is where I grew up. I kind of don't feel like I fit into the military community."

I was like, "Wow." Still there is this battle that we're facing to get military-connected youth from other areas of the military to feel like they're still a part of the military, even if their parents didn't go through deployment or their family never had to be deployed. I was like, "Well, oh my goodness, but your story doesn't have less value connected to the military than a kid whose parents have deployed. You're bringing in a valuable but completely different experience that people need to hear." I would say that's the first thing, is really talking to kids my age whose parents were in the military and never deployed, or their parents were deployed but retired before they were born. I'm like, "Does that kid not have as much value as the kid whose parents deployed?" Absolutely not.

Bruce Moody:

You bring up a really great point, which could really be the subject of a whole podcast, which is military life is different for different individuals and different families, and some people deploy more than others. I wonder when we look at an installation youth center, that installation youth center team is going to have, I would think, a better read on its community and the pressure points that they're experiencing. When you look at your installation youth centers, how are they supporting you and influencing your development?

Ahsha B.:

Mmm. That is a really good question. I'm going to pull again on what I said previously regarding humbleness. Not that one person's struggle has more value than another person's struggle, but when I just see what teens on different military installations go through, just hearing their stories, it helps me to just be so humble and just be so grateful for my story, for my experience, for the opportunity [00:28:00] that I get to hear their stories and experiences and just the humbleness to know that my job is to help and serve other people. I would really say that military installations have helped me grow in those two areas of my character. I really had a lot of character development in being a part of and being able to support military installations.

Bruce Moody:

We're talking about installation youth centers. We also were talking about the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. How do these two differ? How does the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, in what way is that group maybe separate from an installation youth center? How is that group helping with your development?

Ahsha B.:

The first thing that I would say in an aspect of the differences, I would say that the military, when I won National Military Youth of the Year, was still, quite frankly, new to a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. You had people trying to seek understanding with very different experiences. The Boys & Girls Clubs of America also

has a lot of youth who are not affiliated to the military, who have no clue about the experiences, about the aspects of military life. I would say the beauty in that is there's a whole new door that opens for understanding. However, when you look at military installations, there is a lot of that common understanding of some simple and basic aspects of military life, of some things that military families, maybe, whether you're a girl in the military, just some things that you can relate to with other girls on the military installation, that if you were to try to maybe relate to somebody in an aspect of who was not connected to the military, there will be maybe a lack of understanding we'll say.

For example, being on a military installation, sometimes that battle against isolation and feeling like you don't have anyone really there for you, you don't have anyone familiar, if that makes sense. But you're also learning how to be a family to the people that you're there with, if that makes sense. Whereas somebody who is a normal citizen who is not affiliated with the military may sometimes struggle to understand that battle against isolation while also having to learn how to see the people that you're with as a family. I would say that is a difference between the Boys & Girls Clubs and military installations.

But again, I say that both have had equal influence and impact on me in terms of my character development. As much as the Boys & Girls Clubs has given me amazing opportunities, speaking opportunities and being able to travel and see all these amazing things, I would say the best takeaway I've had is my character development, has been my ability to develop and my selflessness, in my communication, in my understanding of trying to see and hear other people's stories without coming in with judgment or possible stereotypes that social media may try to put on people. The Boys & Girls Clubs and the military installation has helped to really break that down. I would say that's probably a difference between the two of them and then an area where they both helped me grow as a person.

Bruce Moody:

Well, Ahsha, we've covered a lot of ground.

Ahsha B.:

Yes, we have.

Bruce Moody:

We got to wrap things up. Yeah, we have. And I hope we have you back, but I just want to welcome any final thoughts maybe about how parents can take advantage of youth centers and their local community to help their military-connected youth in finding a purpose.

Ahsha B.:

Yes. The biggest thing that I would say is get involved. Whether it is in your church, whether it is maybe in programs in your community, whether it is community service, one of the best things that we can do as human beings is to help other people. Just

imagine, parents, the influence and the impact that has on your children when your children see you going out and serving and being involved, even though you just deployed to a new area, and you could stay cooped up in house and not going out and not doing a lot of other things. I understand the desire and the feeling sometimes of wanting to do that, but it sets such an amazing example on your children. Like I said, just go out and just look for things.

That's one thing that I will say. It's not always going to be a walk in the park. I'm not saying that you're going to walk out of the door, a new program is just going to plop down at your feet. It might, and that is amazing. But sometimes some of the best things, they take work, and you have to fight for them. And for your family to find comfort, whether deployed or you are retired from the military or whether you've never deployed or any other experience you might've had getting out and getting involved in your community. I'm not even saying it has to be the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. There are so many amazing programs like Jack and Jill programs, there are communities on Facebook. If you are a mom, you love baking cookies for your kids, going on Facebook and finding a baking community. You never know. You might meet women who are from across the country, but you can come together and share recipes and all these things, so you're finding an outlet for yourself where you have something that you're interested in and you're excited about. I don't think that as a parent that should stop you from finding and discovering new things that you're interested and excited about because that inspires your children to have that facet of it.

But then to also have that sense of community and have people who are going to try to seek understanding in you and your story. That is beautiful. Whether it's the Boys & Girls Clubs of America or some other group in your community, the best thing, I'm telling you that you can do for yourself and for your kiddos, is to get involved in something bigger than yourself. That will help serve others and, in return, others will serve and bless you.

Bruce Moody:

I hope that people who are listening to this podcast will share it with people who think that the next generation is just lost because this will turn them around. Ahsha, it is always a pleasure to have you on the podcast. Please come back and join us again.

Ahsha B.:

Yes, thank you so much.

Bruce Moody:

Ahsha B. is the 2022 Boys & Girls Clubs of America National Military Youth of the Year, and also a passionate person. That passion will sustain for some time to come. Always, always great to have you on the podcast. All the best to you.

Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. And if you have a question, a comment, or an idea for a future episode, click on the feedback button that we have in the program notes. Be sure to subscribe to

this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.