

## Military OneSource Podcast — How Youth Centers Empower Teens: A Conversation With 2024 National Military Youth of the Year

### Child & Youth Programs

#### Podcast transcript

**Introduction:**

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](https://MilitaryOneSource.mil).

**Bruce Moody:**

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. With us today is the 2024 National Military Youth of the Year. Taylor, welcome to the podcast.

**Taylor:**

Yeah, thanks for having me.

**Bruce Moody:**

We're glad to have you with us. We're going to have a conversation with you and your perspectives as a youth, and I think this is going to be very encouraging for people who wonder what the youth of the future will be like. So, no pressure, but we're going to get to know you, and maybe we can start by saying congratulations. Again, you're the 2024 National Military Youth of the Year. Talk to us a little bit about, well, who are you and what have you been doing since attending the celebration in August?

**Taylor:**

Yeah, so I'm 2024 National Military Youth of the Year. I am from Naval Support Activity Bahrain. We're out in the Middle East — tiny, tiny little island next to Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf. It's a super unique place. I absolutely love it here. I've been here for six years now. And I've been born and raised overseas. Born at the Yokosuka Navy Base in Japan, moved to Misawa, Japan; Okinawa, Japan; Rota, Spain; and now I'm in Bahrain. So, I've never lived in the states. I'm a third culture kid, which for those of you that don't know, is someone that has grown up in a culture different from where their parents are from. So, my parents are both American born and raised. I am the exact opposite. That's just a little bit about me.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to learn more about that, 'cause that's the first I've heard this term. It's a really interesting concept. So, I'm retired Navy. I have been to Bahrain many, many times.

**Taylor:**

OK.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. We'll say passing through. Never was a permanent part of there. But what does it mean? What is it like? How do you see the world as someone who is perpetually overseas? Or how do you describe yourself?

**Taylor:**

First of all, I've just grown up saying, "Oh yeah, I'm a third culture kid." My parents had this book that was "Third Culture Kids" or whatever. So, I just thought it was normal, and I didn't realize how unique of a thing it actually is until I started doing Youth of the Year. And I would say my speech and I would say, "I'm a third culture kid," and everyone would be like, "What's that?" So, to me, it didn't seem that unique, that crazy, and then this kind of journey has helped me, and I see how unique it is. And I don't remember the second half of your question.

**Bruce Moody:**

That's OK. Neither do I. So, let's just move on, because you do sound like this is very normal for you. This is your life as you know it. So, how did youth centers play a part in all of that?

**Taylor:**

Yeah, so that's a good question. Being overseas forever, we've always lived off base. We've always been immersed in the culture. So, being connected to the base has put us in this kind of interesting "expats but not expats." We're world citizens, but we retain our connections to the United States through the base. So, personally, that's what the youth center does for me. No matter where I'm living, there's always the youth center, there's always similar people. They're all similar, they're into the same stuff, they have similar backgrounds in their lives. They understand what it's like to live overseas with the military.

And I talk about this in my speech, it's been the one constant throughout my life. As we've been moving around the world and there's all these unique special cultures, different people, the youth center is always the same. They're always there to help the youth, they're always there to turn them into global citizens and leaders. So that's the role that it's played in my life. It's been there since Day 1. My dad used to be a youth professional.

**Bruce Moody:**

This has been a real stabilizing force in your life, the youth centers and the people who are there, but at the same time, the youth centers and being the Military Youth of the Year is new. It's been a lot of changes, a lot of new experiences. So, what have you been up to since August?

**Taylor:**

Oh, I've been doing a lot. So, I got to go to the National Youth of the Year celebration. That was an absolutely incredible experience, met some amazing people.

**Bruce Moody:**

Where was that?

**Taylor:**

That was in Atlanta. So, we were in Atlanta, I got to see some family, I mean I got to meet Denzel Washington and A-Rod and Cam Newton, so that's like major dad lore right there. I'm going to tell my kids that in 15 years, going to be like, "Oh no, you didn't." So, it was one of the coolest weeks of my life.

And then since that even, I'm a senior in high school, I'm trucking through my last year, got my college applications in, I got accepted to BYU Idaho, and I applied for a scholarship, the Morehead-Cain Scholarship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. So, waiting to hear back from that. I've just been studying, doing class, but we just had basketball tryouts this week, and the list just came out actually a few hours ago, and I just made the varsity basketball team for the third year in a row at my school. So yeah, that's what I've been up to.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. You said earlier, before we started recording, you said you had practice this morning.

**Taylor:**

Oh yeah, last day of tryouts at 6 a.m.

**Bruce Moody:**

There you go. Why make it easy? We're going to talk more about the Military Youth of the Year competition. I want to talk some more about youth centers and what it's like for you. This is a mix of people, right? You've got your obviously other military youth who are there, but also the advisors, the adults. How does all of that mesh together?

**Taylor:**

I think it meshes together in this really unique relationship, because if you're working with child and youth programs, as we call it in the Navy, you're a kid in a grownup's body. So obviously, there's the adults and then there's the kids, there's the staff, there's the attendees, but everyone is kind of like a family. And there's the respect that transcends that, but everyone's always just having fun and hanging out and just kind of enjoying life. So, I think the youth centers are a really unique place when it comes to that.

**Bruce Moody:**

If somebody was new and wanted to join, become part of the youth center, how easy is it to join, and what is it like when you're new to a local youth center?

**Taylor:**

Well, it's super easy to join. In fact, you just walk in, fill out that packet, turn it in, and bada bing bada boom, welcome. All right. And then I think in terms of new people, the youth center is, it's like Tinder, but for meeting other people, not trying to date people. It's just like, "I'm trying to meet some friends, let's go to the youth center. That's where I'm going to meet the people. That's the connections."

I met my best friend, who's now at University of Idaho, but I met him at the teen center two years ago, just playing pool. I was like, "Oh, what's your name?" And then we got talking and we became really good friends after that. So, new kids kind of automatically gravitate towards the youth center. And then they meet other new kids, they meet people that have been there forever, and everyone just kind of mixes and has fun together and figures out who they like to hang out with.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, you're hanging out, you're making friends, but let's talk about people who may be struggling talking about their well-being. What does the youth center have for them?

**Taylor:**

And this ties back to everyone's, like, family at the youth center. If you're not OK, just come to the youth center. Everyone that's there cares about you and wants to help you. The staff are specifically trained to help you. So, it's like a hospital. If you're sick, you're not going to not go to the hospital. If you're struggling, don't avoid the youth center, come to the youth center, people are going to help you. They care about you.

**Bruce Moody:**

But it's also fun.

**Taylor:**

Oh yeah, it's super fun. You can get help in an awesome way.

**Bruce Moody:**

Taylor, can you give us an example, maybe a story of how your involvement at youth centers has influenced you?

**Taylor:**

So, I think my involvement in youth centers has turned me into the person I am, and I know that sounds a little cliché, but let me continue on this. So, my dad was a youth professional. He was the director at the youth center in Spain when I was going to the school-age care, and he made sure that all the staff knew that if I ever tried to pull the name-dropping, if 8-year-old, 7-year-old me ever tried to be like, “Yeah, my dad’s your boss.” Oh, I was not going to SAC [school-age care]. He made sure of that.

So, it really helped develop my character between just, like, the staff themselves and my dad also working there. It helped teach me leadership because they have all these opportunities for you to lead. Here’s one specific story. I remember we would do all sorts of STEM things [science, technology, engineering and math], in Spain specifically, and I don’t remember how it happened, it’s kind of the most random thing, but one day all the kids decided they were really into bugs. And next thing you know, the next couple of months at the school-age care in Spain turned into all of us just, like, creating terrariums and doing all sorts of stuff.

I remember we were finding praying mantises and breeding them, which is crazy ‘cause we were 7 and we had somehow figured out how to do this. And we had a whole silkworm factory going where we were breeding them and making these hybrids. And it was awesome because the staff were like, “Oh, you guys are into that? Let’s do it.” So, they absolutely put all their effort behind anything that we wanted to do and made sure that we got to do it, while also stepping back enough to let us figure out how to do it, and let us drive it forward with just their help.

**Bruce Moody:**

That’s totally next level, ‘cause I can remember being 7, or somewhere around there, and seeing a praying mantis, and they just blew my mind and creeped me out.

**Taylor:**

Absolutely.

**Bruce Moody:**

But that almost sounds like how you would get somebody to come to the youth center. So, maybe let’s just wrap up this part of the conversation with your best pitch to get somebody off the apps, off the couch, and into their local youth center.

**Taylor:**

My best pitch. If I’m going from a realistic standpoint, my best pitch to get someone off the apps and to the youth center today, people my age, “Hey man, there’s free food. Come on down.”

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, there you go.

**Taylor:**

I'm not even lying, that is the most effective way to get someone there. And once you rope them in with free food, it's done. They're part of the family now. So, we do all sorts of events. We do new teen indoc [indoc is like an introduction], and we do this orientation for people that have just moved here on what Bahrain is like, what can you expect? What are things we wish we knew when we moved here? And we always make sure every flyer says free food, because our base's catering is so good. It is next level. So, when any kid from around here that has eaten on base sees that the teen center is offering free food catered by the base, they are there.

**Bruce Moody:**

I'm hearing something that's really interesting to me, 'cause you're using the word "we" a lot. You also talked about you guys kind of decided that bugs was it, and then —

**Taylor:**

Yeah, I don't know how that happened.

**Bruce Moody:**

Well, the way it happened is that you guys decided that this was interesting to you, and the people who run the youth center said, "Great, we're going to help you do that." So, to what degree do you think are the youth driving or influencing or involved in what happens at the youth center?

**Taylor:**

Oh, the nth degree. Youth is in the name for a reason. That's the whole point of the youth center, right? Kids don't go to the youth center to get babysat, really. They go to the youth center because it's a catalyst for them to be able to explore different things that they're into that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to explore.

For example, also when I was in Spain, our youth center had a skate park in the back, and they would do skate lessons and skate camps and skate workshops. And so many kids would show up that had never skated before and were like, "You guys have a skate park? Can you teach me how to skate?" And it was just the coolest thing because these kids that were absolutely terrified of even just standing on a skateboard, a month later, they're dropping into the 8-foot vert ramp and they're doing all sorts of stuff.

It's super cool to be able to see kids come into the youth center and decide they want to explore something, the staff help them explore that thing, and then either they're like, "Oh yeah, I'm not into it like I thought I would be," and they go and they find something else. Or they're like, "Oh my gosh, this is it." And it's all because the staff, they're there, they're willing to help them find that something for them. 'Cause everyone has

something that makes it click, something that is just unlike anything else. And I think that the youth center is kind of the ground where a lot of kids find it.

**Bruce Moody:**

Really interesting. Let's talk about the Military Youth of the Year competition. What did it teach you about yourself?

**Taylor:**

Oh, OK. So, one of the essays for the application packet was personal growth, and it's all about, "Name an experience that you had that sparked a period of growth." And man, I wish I could have time-traveled and written it about the Youth of the Year process. Obviously, the judges would've been like, "What is going on? He's talking about the Youth of the Year process. He is just now doing it." But man, that'd be a killer essay.

So that personal growth essay, I had that thought, I don't know, a couple of weeks ago, and it really just showed up in the back of my mind, "Dang, I did learn a lot. I changed a lot." One of the biggest things I learned is better time management, because I've always been fairly good about time management. I mean, I do so many things that I kind of have to be good at time management, otherwise I don't get to do all of them.

Leading up to Youth of the Year, I'd been noticing that I'd been spending more time on my phone, less time doing certain things. And then Youth of the Year came around and I had suddenly a bunch of essays to write, and I was traveling for music and sports, and next thing I know I'm on a time crunch to get these done. And it was like, really, kind of a big slap in the face like, "Hey, get off your phone, dude. You can do so many more things."

And since then, I've been making sure my screen time is going down and down and down. My friend and I even downloaded an app that makes us do pushups in order to use apps like Instagram. Every pushup you do is one minute you can cash in. I did 3,000 pushups in, I don't know, two weeks, something like that, a week. It was ridiculous. It was more pushups than I'd ever done in my whole life.

**Bruce Moody:**

Just to kind of back up a little bit, so we're talking about the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and they offer a Military Youth of the Year program or a competition. How would you describe it and how would you encourage other youths to get involved in this?

**Taylor:**

Yeah, so I think that a really big misconception about Youth of the Year and Military Youth of the Year is that it is a competition. And sure, there's one winner, but at the end of the day, different judges on a different day could have picked someone else. No one is better than anyone. It's more of a celebration than anything else, because if you're even your local youth of the year, or you've been told by your youth directors that you

should apply to be local youth of the year, or you're regional or you're national, whatever it is, you are a leader in your club. You're one of the best. So, it's a celebration and it's recognition of what you've done, and what you've been doing and what you will continue to do. And at the end of the day, it's like a team where you have the one team captain picked out.

**Bruce Moody:**

Interesting. You described yourself, as we got started here, as a third culture kid. As you're transitioning to become a third culture adult, what does that mean? What are some of the experiences that you've had, and how is that shaping what you're looking to do in your future?

**Taylor:**

Yeah, so I think the biggest thing that being a third culture kid has done for me is given me gratitude, or the ability to recognize my gratitude. Because you always hear, "Oh, you have it so good as a kid," but most kids don't get that. They're like, "Oh, yeah, whatever. My parents are just saying that 'cause they want me to do something." But being able to have the experiences that I've had, have really kind of put that right in front of my face and be like, "No, that's not your parents just saying something, that's a real thing."

But we had the opportunity to go to Kenya. It's a four-hour flight from where we live right now, and we were able to go to Kenya for winter break. And we went to, the Maasai are the name of the tribes, and we went to one of their local villages where the houses are made out of mud bricks and the fence is a bunch of really sharp sticks. And their school building, the entire school was smaller than, I don't know, one of my classrooms at my school. And just going, there was a huge eye-opening moment for me, and it was like, "Wow, I really do have it a lot better."

And I went back to my school, and after seeing what they had, it was like, "Wow, I go to Harvard, I go to Yale. This is incredible." So just experiences like that, being able to meet so many different people with so many different backgrounds, it's all the same. Material possessions don't make people happy. It's how you live your life, the things that you accomplish.

No one's going to lay on their deathbed and be like, "Oh, I wish I had my Ferrari next to me right now." No, they're going to be there and be like, "Oh, I want my family with me." Or they're going to be thinking about the experiences they had, the people they met. So, being able to realize that that is true globally, it's a big thing for me. It's part of my philosophy of living life to the fullest. So, I think the term third culture kid is not just like a term applied to me. It's literally who I am.

**Bruce Moody:**

What a pleasure to talk to you. It almost seems like being a third culture kid is something along the lines of lifelong learning. How would you compare your phrase to, say, lifelong learning?

**Taylor:**

I think absolutely, it's lifelong learning. I think we're here, we're on earth, there's stuff to learn. If we already knew everything, then what would be the point of being here? So, having that open mind and being like, "Yeah, I don't know everything. That's cool. I'm going to go learn some more." It's not just a phrase, it's a mentality, it's a philosophy. Being willing to be a lifelong learner is going to put you way further than thinking about just yourself or things that you already know, compared to what people already know.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. We'll leave it at that. Taylor, congratulations. You are the 2024 National Military Youth of the Year. What a pleasure to have you on the podcast.

**Taylor:**

Yeah, thank you for having me.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thank you. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions or comments, maybe an idea for a future podcast, just go in the program notes, we have a link, you can send us a note. Always like to hear from people.

And 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.