

Military OneSource Podcast — 2023 National Military Youth of the Year

Children, Youth and Families Program

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're going to speak with Xavier Branch. He is the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's 2023 National Military Youth of the Year. We'll talk about his experiences with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, as well as his experiences at child and youth centers on installations where he's lived. Xavier Branch, welcome to the podcast.

Xavier Branch:

Hi, Bruce. Thanks for letting me just talk here, and thanks for inviting me.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we're glad to have you with us today. And first of all, congratulations on being named 2023 National Military Youth of the Year. Let's begin by getting to know you. Start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and what you've been doing since being named the National Military Youth of the Year.

Xavier Branch:

Well, I'm going into college right now. I'm a freshman, and I'm going to Austin Peay State University. And it's been crazy, because I'm transitioning from that high school mindset but also to that adult world.

And a little bit about me. I've been in JRTC for about four years in high school, but I've also been a part of the AVID program. And I've been going to my teen center for about roughly seven years now, I'd say, and it's had a huge impact on me.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, good choice. Let's talk about your military background. So, what is your connection to the military?

Xavier Branch:

So, it starts with my mom because she's really been in the military for eight years, and she's been in it since I was four. I've always grown up used to that military aspect in my life. And I guess it all turned back around in some weird way when JRTC popped up in high school. So, I would say that's really where I started getting more engaged in the military lifestyle.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting. So, let's get into the youth centers and the youth programs. What was that like for you, and what did that do for you and your highly mobile life?

Xavier Branch:

So, the youth center is something that really wasn't too advertised to me when I was in middle school because in sixth grade is when I joined it, but my mom had to go out of her way and find it on base thanks to her military connection, and I was able to start going to it after school. It really became like an after-school program to me after a couple of weeks of going to it. I almost depended on it just for time to do my homework and just actually relax and socialize after being lectured for eight hours a day. It was really a second home to me, and it still is now. But I think it really started in Japan because they had something called SAP and that was during fourth grade. And ever since then I've been infatuated with teen centers and, really, what they offer.

Bruce Moody:

So, you're getting involved in the youth centers. It's kind of a home away from home for you. What sort of activities are you doing when you're with them?

Xavier Branch:

So, it can really vary because they do a lot of different things depending on the day of the week. One day, they'll have a movie going on. Another day, they'll have certain food or celebrations. They have a lot of celebrations for Hispanic Heritage month, but we had a lot of different food coming in. They do a lot of different things to keep with, not only the specific setting of the year, but also to keep the kids engaged and realize this isn't just a place where you can lounge and do nothing. They always have something going on.

Bruce Moody:

I'm interested in hearing about this. So, you're not just on the sofa. You're doing stuff. Can you give us an example of maybe a story of what you did that really sticks well in your memory?

Xavier Branch:

I would have to say during my middle school year, they had a video game area, and they always have a different certain segment of the building where you could just go to and find people who have the similar interest to you. For me, it was the video game place, and that's where I could just spend time after I was done with doing homework. And that's the place where I met my first friend. And she really opened up to me and made me feel welcomed even though I felt like I was the new kid, and I didn't think I could talk to anybody. But from then on it became second nature. I could just go to that specific place, and I know I'm just welcome there.

Bruce Moody:

What would you say to parents that they should know about the local youth center and what it has to offer their kids?

Xavier Branch:

I would definitely say that it can take a giant load off for you as a parent, because it did for my mom. Because if you don't always have the time of the day to just go out, pick up your kid, drop them off at home and then do the same schedule routine every week, then you can rely on the teen center because they have transportation systems, which really saved me during middle school. And my mom was able to rely on them, in a sense. And it didn't just give me a place where I can just lounge around or just sit on a couch, as you said. It gave me a whole social setting, like a place where I can meet new friends, and even a place where I can just go off on my own and just go into a little quiet area and be by myself if I needed a little breather or just a little place to relax. So, I'd say that it's kind of like a second home for kids, but it's also a perfect teen gathering for kids if you ever want to bring them there.

Bruce Moody:

Let me just go and narrow the focus of what we're talking about now. Specifically, when a family is brand new, they're at a new duty station. What is the youth center offering at that point in a family's arrival?

Xavier Branch:

Oh, that's a good question. But it gives them a different environment because you don't really have a lot of options to have your kid socialize when it comes to the military lifestyle. So, if you're just moving to Clarksville here on base, you're wondering where your kid can be busy besides just staying at home all day. And if you don't just want them to stay at home all day, there's a perfect place called Bastogne Teen Center, and they take in kids from around middle school up to high school. And it benefits not only the kid, but it benefits the parents because you have a lot of stuff going on in your life, and you don't always have time to be there for your kid whenever you have to pick them up. But the teen center really offers a helping hand to you. It is almost like a third parent. It really makes sure to help not only the child, but also the parent in that aspect.

Bruce Moody:

Let's change the discussion a little bit and talk about the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. So how did you initially get involved in their military youth program? What inspired you to do that?

Xavier Branch:

Really it was my mom because she drove me to the teen center, and she was like, "You remember that one place in Japan? Yeah, it's similar to this," but I was like, "Okay, so I could just come here after school." But I didn't really know what to expect. The only similarities it probably shared was probably accepting kids after school. They had so much here going on compared to what was at Japan. And when it came to my teen center over here, I was able to choose what I wanted to do. I was able to feel liberated almost after school instead of just being told what to do or where to go everywhere. So, I'd say thankfully to my mom, she was definitely the main reason that I got into the military teen center. But what really kept me going and what really made me want to stay is what was there, what was offered to me at the teen center.

Bruce Moody:

Specifically, let's talk about the Military Youth of the Year program. Probably a lot of people don't know that you get paired with an advisor when you're in this program. So, really, what is this advisor? Who is this person? And what did they do for you?

Xavier Branch:

I feel like, in my terms, in my situation, it was a little different. My advisor is someone who I've known for many years now. And her name is Ms. V, and she's been a staff who always works here. She's always doing a lot of different things. She mainly runs a place called the homework center. But she's more than just another staff to me. She really is a mentor. I think that's what an advisor is supposed to be when it comes to the National Military Youth program. It's supposed to have someone who can inspire the youth but also encourage them because I couldn't really do this by myself. I really do rely on her and depend on her when it comes to a lot of the big things and getting ready for this sort of thing.

But whenever I would see different advisors and different youth at some of the events that I went to, it didn't really come off like that to me. It seemed like it was just someone who they thought was staff first and then mentor second to them. So, I really think that, in my case, it should always be someone who can encourage you. Someone who teaches you but also is willing to talk to you as an equal.

Bruce Moody:

What I'd like to ask at this point is, give us a sense of all that led up to the event in Washington, D.C. Because there were a lot of requirements, things that you had to deliver, in the lead up to that event. Talk about some of the specific things that you had to do. And as you're doing this, give us a sense of how you managed to balance all of that because you're still a student, and you're traveling. How did you manage to, well, frankly, manage all of that?

Xavier Branch:

So, when it came to just the time management of it, I really did depend and have to communicate a lot with my advisor, Ms. V. So, when I was first getting into it, I didn't know anything about Military Youth of the Year or BGCA when it came to just how you got started in it. So, I relied on Ms. V for most of the information of what I needed to do, what was required of me.

And at first, there was a bunch of formalities, giving some documents, do some essays. It's fine. I'm a student. I'm used to essays, man. But I had to get used to sacrificing some of the time of my day and not going to the fun things like at TYC that I was more used to, not go straight into doing homework or straight into going to the game room. I had to realize I gotta set this part of the day, and I gotta make sure that I tell Ms. V when I'm busy and when I'm not.

So, it was really a different thing for me to get used to when I was doing it, and I think that was around my freshman year. But it helped me jumpstart that scheduling, that time management, that would really come into play later on when I would be in college, like I am now.

Bruce Moody:

So now you finish up in Washington, D.C. But you're not done. You finished up the Military Youth of the Year program. Again, this is the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, but the military Youth of the Year is one of several categories. You are representing this category, but now you are off to New York City where you're meeting with the other youth and their other programs. Talk to us about that and the level of people that you are engaging with and the level of competition and just the level of personal challenge that went into that.

Xavier Branch:

When it came to the challenges and the experiences of the different competitions, it really depended on who I would be meeting at those competitions. So, I remember, for an example, one in Louisville, Kentucky. We went to it, and that was the first time I had somebody else besides Ms. V come with me and support me. Normally, you're allowed to bring your family with you, but you don't really get a lot of time to spend with them because you're doing so much within the day.

But I realized that my mom could probably use the extra rest rather than having to pack and go and fly with me and all that stress. So, I didn't have a lot of family there like most people, but I did have my advisors and the staff that I've grown up with. It was really beneficial for me because they were that emotional support that I can get when I was so far away from home. And it really did help me, I'll be honest. I feel like I'm not the only person who could say that I've benefited from having my advisors and other people come with me to these competitions. I definitely feel like some of my friends would agree with me on that.

Bruce Moody:

How has being named National Military Youth of the Year affected your life? And what are your future plans as a result of this?

Xavier Branch:

Honestly, I'd say it's really impacted my characteristics of what I see in a leader, but also in my capabilities of what I think a leader should be able to do. Also, it's impacted my courage because before this competition, I would admit it, I was a little timid, more reserved, more shy and not really open to just engaging in so many different topics or just talking with so many different people I don't know, not to sound anti-social or anything. I just liked staying to myself a bit more before the competition. But afterwards it really put me in a different perspective of what I can do, and maybe I don't have to hold myself back all the time. I could just be myself.

And after seeing what I could do, because as I went through the competition, I feel like some people could relate, as you go through these different events and realize, oh, I can turn into almost a completely different person when I take this seriously, it changes you. It makes you look at this in a different light, look at yourself in a different way, and really, you understand yourself a little better after the competition, I'd say.

So really, I've always had this plan, and it's been my platform ever since I've been competing for National Military Youth of the Year. Right now, it's called Peer Academic Support System, or PASS. And why it's called Peer Academic Support System is because I wanted it to be geared towards people's education. And I mentioned AVID before, which is really what inspired me to create this PASS system. It's supposed to be for the students at the teen centers who don't really have a lot of help. There's always a homework club, and you could ask people for help, but maybe you need a little bit more attention, maybe you need a tutor.

And that's really what PASS is supposed to be incorporated about. It's supposed to have tutors. It's supposed to have this little tutoring system where you can have a mentor just around in the homework area, and you can ask them to just stick with you and help you go through a topic that you're confused about at school.

And I've realized that I took a lot of these examples and ideas in PASS from my experience, because I relied on the teen center for help with my homework, for time with my homework, because after school I couldn't really get into that same mindset. Whenever I'm at home, I realized that I couldn't really get as motivated to finish my work as I would be in school. But when I was at the teen center, I was like, "Okay, I can knock this out instantly." So, I realized that if I had something like PASS, it might've helped me get even more geared towards education. And that's really why I wanted it to be so geared towards education is because I feel like it can really impact a lot of those kids that are at my teen center.

And to really expand on your question, as well, of what I'll be doing in the next year, I wanted to see if I can expand PASS to other teen centers. And that's really what I'm in the early parts about. So right now, I'm trying to see if I can talk with some of the past winners and the past candidates, some of my friends, and see if they would be interested in incorporating PASS into their teen centers. And then after that, I would really be interested into incorporating it into the school system.

Bruce Moody:

So interesting to hear. Xavier, one of the benefits of being able to talk to you and other people who are involved in the National Military Youth of the Year program is that we end up with faith that the next generation is going to be okay. It is an absolute pleasure talking with you today.

Xavier Branch:

I would really heavily encourage parents to allow their kids to become a part of the military youth program or just the Youth of the Year program. I feel like it can change a lot of people's lives, and not just for when it comes to academically. Because there's so many benefits that I didn't even mention before. Even if you don't make it all the way to regionals or something, if you go to state, they give you scholarships if you go. If you go to even regionals, or even nationals, they'll be able to give you a car, which was crazy. And it definitely put a smile on some of my friends' faces, and especially my friend Alejandra who won Youth of the Year. She got that Toyota, man. We're still waiting on her to drive us through it, but I just wanted to make a point that it can provide so many benefits to the kids if you allow them to go through it and if you allow them to go to the teen centers.

Bruce Moody:

We've got a link to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and also a link which gets into the Military Youth of the Year program. So, parents, you can click into those and read all about it.

Xavier Branch, what a pleasure to talk with you today. Thank you so much for joining us.

Xavier Branch:

Thanks for having me, man. I'm just glad to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Pleasure.

Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always look forward to hearing from you. So, click on the link in the program notes. Send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.