

Military OneSource Podcast — How MFLCs Support Children in School

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Having someone at school who is just there to listen may not sound like a big deal, but for military connected children and teens, it can make all the difference.

Hi, I am Bruce Moody. In this episode, I'm joined by two military and family life counselors. They go by MFLC, and they are with us to talk about why they chose this work, how their experiences fuel their connection with students and what a day-in-the-life of a school-based MFLC really looks like.

Before we get started, I do want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military and for the military. We are your first line of support, giving war fighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. We have our number and our website in the program notes along with a link that you can use to send us your questions, your comments or an idea for a future episode.

We'd love to hear from you. And a reminder — you can subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen, so please do. Okay, let's jump into today's conversation.

Well, good day, Mayela Lopez and Elicia Juarez. Welcome to the podcast.

Elicia Juarez:

Hello.

Mayela Lopez:

Yay. Hello.

Moody:

Yay. Alright. I'm going to just start off by asking for each of you to tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became a military and family life counselor, which is what we're talking about today. Mayela, let's start with you.

Lopez:

Hi, good morning, Bruce. My name is Mayela Lopez, and I'm at Fort Bliss in Texas, and I've been a military and family life counselor for about six years; and I'm embedded at two

schools. I've been loving my job. I'm very passionate about what I do, and the way that I got started is that a friend told me about the job as a military and family life counselor; and once I found out about it, read the mission and what they did, I fell in love with it, and I was so excited to jump on board.

And I have about eight years of clinical experience working with children, so I knew that I was going to be a great fit working at schools because I'm very passionate about working with children and families and the way that I've provided them support in my clinical background working at shelters and school-based programs, I feel that it would be a great opportunity to provide, you know, resources to them.

My background in working in a setting where I'm able to provide that touch of myself in regards to having fun with them and providing them a little bit more about social emotional learning skills, learning about themselves and how to cope with different ways in daily life stressors. So, I've been working with a lot of families in different settings; so I am just very passionate about giving back to my community and our service members.

Moody:

Nice. Elicia, how about you?

Juarez:

Yes, so I am a licensed professional counselor and a licensed marriage and family therapist. I've been working in the field for a little over a decade, and so along my journey as a mental health professional, I had a colleague who's been an MFLC for about 15 years or so, and I was like, "whoa, this program sounds amazing," and I applied and I absolutely love it. I've been working as an MFLC with the New Orleans Joint Air Station base for, this is my third year, and I currently work with high schoolers. I'll do summer camps or on demand crisis events or deployment events. And I'm passionate on the personal side about this because my cousin who was in the Air Force, who has passed — I wonder if his son would have maybe had an MFLC there for him. Maybe that would've really benefited him. And so, there's a little bit of a personal reason of why I love doing this work as well.

Moody:

You know, I've met a lot of MFLC, and we're going to call these military and family life counselors, MFLC. Sorry, we try to steer away from the acronyms, but you know, it's just a lot of words and we're going to crunch it down to MFLC.

But here's the thing — I'm hearing your stories, and I'm hearing the passion behind it, but I hear that passion from MFLC wherever I go. You guys are an amazing bunch of people, so I'm looking forward to our conversation, but I'm telling you, regardless of the service with which you're affiliated and where you are currently located, the MFLC are just as passionate.

So, let's have a conversation. And Mayela, let's talk to you for a bit. You've worked with children and families in both school age programs and shelters. How did that shape your approach as an MFLC.

Lopez:

Well, Bruce, one of the things that I've learned about working with children and families is that I feel that I have to have a lot of empathy and compassion for the families that I'm working with in regards to how they're coming about an MFLC. Most of the times, they just want to meet the MFLC at the school, but sometimes it's the other side around is that they're coming and asking for help.

And I know that it could be a very vulnerable position to be in because they might feel embarrassed. They might feel like, you know, "I don't know what else to do." And so, I feel having that empathy and compassion and you know, just empowering them for them coming to me is just a big honor. And just recognizing the fact that it's a big deal for them to even ask for help in the smallest degree to a big degree, and working and having that connection with the students, building that rapport, making them feel safe and comfortable is one of my biggest things, is that it, once they feel that support then they're able to disclose information about their emotions, what they're feeling their mom or their dad might be deploying soon.

And that's very big for them. And then also for the families, their spouses, in regards to them not knowing what to do because their spouse just left and they're alone. They don't have any friends or family here. So, I feel it's building that connection and understanding where they're at at that moment. And it's such an honor and privilege to be working along with them and sharing that perspective of like, "I'm here to help you. How can we work through this together?" And finding a common ground, finding a solution together, and I just feel it's really amazing to see them progress and do better things.

Moody:

Elicia, you returned to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help your community. How does that experience influence your work, your work specifically with military families today?

Juarez:

Yes. So, Katrina hit while I was out-of-state in college working on my bachelor's in psychology, and I was like, "oh." I knew I need to go back, and I need to help with the recovery.

And I think that it definitely is applicable to the work with military families in that I focused a lot on trauma transitions and how to cope with those traumas, those transitions and how to promote resiliency and specifically how it affects the family as a system.

And so, many military families might be PCS or permanent change of station, every two to three years. And that's a lot of transitions, and with transitions come stress, even positive

transitions, there's still stress. And so, I want to promote those coping skills: How to become a master at dealing with stress, and not only individually, but on a systemic scale. And for how can the family cope together with this stress and coping constructively, right? Because you know, there's destructive coping as well. And so, to focus on how can we not only cope well with this, but also, you know, make this foster resiliency and growth.

Moody:

This is really interesting. Now for the benefit of our families, for our parents, particular, what does a typical day look like for you in a school setting?

Juarez:

A typical day for me is going into the school and being there when the students arrive, greeting them and also greeting the staff. And you know, that's pretty much all I need to do because by that time I've already had maybe five students. "Ms. Juarez, I need to talk to you today." You got to find a way to talk to me or I'll have staff who come and have a concern about a student and they want me to pull that student to speak with them. And then I do have a daily lunch group for our military kiddos to come.

And each day we might have a different topic. And since I work with high schoolers, a lot of times the students pick the topics. You know, "Ms. Juarez, we really need to talk about empathy tomorrow, or we really need to talk about communication skills, conflict resolution skills." And then I support the staff and collaborate with the staff because the better the staff is supported at the school then the better they can serve our military students and make sure their needs are met.

Moody:

You know, this is really interesting, and I'm going to say this a lot because I love talking to MFLC, so apologies upfront, but you know, one of the reasons, well the core reason why we do this is that a service member, a war fighter, can be at their job focusing on the mission without the stuff back home. Being a weight and a distraction and for that reason itself is so very, very important.

So with that in mind, as we have this conversation, it does sound like the moment you walk through the door, you've got to be ready. Because you're going to have it coming from you from all different directions. Yes. How do you balance that? How do you balance your support for families, students, and staff? How do you balance all of that together?

Juarez:

Well, I think I prioritize based off of needs of the student of the family. You know which need is immediate, which need can wait till later in the day depending on the issue or the history I know about what that child is dealing with. And then also, I'm sure Mayela can agree with me here, it's a lot of practicing what you preach.

Lopez:

Yes, I agree.

Juarez:

So, on those coping skills, right? Mayela? Yes. So, a lot of self-care you can't pour from an empty cup. So, a lot of utilizing those. Coping skills, those positive mindsets, that growth mindset, utilizing that throughout your day so that you can serve and you can give.

Lopez:

Yes. I love that, Elicia. One of the things that I just want to add is one of the things that I mostly love about my day is that every day looks very differently.

We do have a scheduled individual in group sessions, but sometimes there's a special event at school where we're able to provide extra support there and we can do presentations for the staff. There's probably some cafes for the parent and volunteers that we can go do a presentation there, coffee with the principals. So, there's many different outlets that we can also get into and present ourselves and continue to have that balance with our individual sessions or group sessions and that support for the school. And then maybe we're lucky, we might have a parent come in and want to have a session as well. They might ask "hey, you know what? Would we be able to go outside and go for a walk outside of the school? There's something that I don't want to be talking about in the school." So I just feel like it offers us a great balance because I know as a therapist, as clinicians, we can get burned out from seeing too many sessions back-to-back. So, I feel like giving us that flexibility, walking around in the PE room, in the cafeteria, providing presentations, meeting with parents outside of the school, it gives us a really great balance to practice that self-care as well.

Juarez:

Absolutely.

Moody:

You know, Mayela, let's stay with you for just a little bit longer and then go to Elicia, but I guess, what do you wish the parents knew more about the support that you provide?

Lopez:

And that's a really great question because we work mostly with the children because we're embedded in the schools. We don't have a lot of contact with the parents unless there's a need or we need to have the counselors reach out to the parents. I just wish more parents would come and look for us, for them to be like, "Hey, do you have an MFLC at the school?"

Because sometimes there's not an MFLC at the school and they have to reach to ACS or reach to another MFLC that could be around their neighborhood, but making sure that they know that the MFLC is there and getting to know them, schedule a meeting with them, because the MFLC at the school, like the ways that Elicia and I do is that we are able to provide services to the parents as well, to the service member and to the spouse.

Maybe they're very nervous about an upcoming deployment, and they don't know how it's going to impact their child. So, we can schedule a meeting for them to come in, and we can

work on, you know, developing goals or developing a plan of action. Who can we contact? Or for me to know also that there's a deployment coming up because I'm giving the child the benefit of the doubt that they're like, "I think my mom's about to deploy in three weeks and then we find out that it's in two days." You know? So, I feel like there would be more communication between the parents and the MFLC, and I think that would be a really great way for us to provide better support for the students.

Moody:

You know, I just have a kind of a follow up for you because you threw in an acronym there that makes a lot of sense to the Army and probably not so much for others.

And you mentioned the ACS, which is Army Community Service. Yes. And so, I guess my question is, because you mentioned that for families who may be totally new to the concept of. These MFLC being in the schools, what are the means by which they can contact an MFLC or learn about the MFLC program is going to whatever the service has for family readiness programs. Is that installation office a good place to start or can they call the school or a little of both? How does that work?

Lopez:

In my understanding? I think it's a little bit of both, because I know that I've spoken to a couple of my colleagues. And when I've covered in the summer in certain brigades or installations, we do give out a briefing to the service members that are getting deployed or they're about to PCs somewhere, and we let them know like, "Hey, make sure that you find out that if there's an MFLC at the school" and if there's not, maybe at a CS or Military OneSource, for them to be in contact with an MFLC if needed.

I feel it's just calling the school as well, because I know some campuses are designated purple stars, and that's one of the requirements sometimes that they do have an MFLC there, so it's just depending, because I know not all schools have an MFLC there, but it's just. You know, calling their campuses and reaching out or calling the installation and seeing if there's a nearby [unintelligible] as well.

Moody:

Okay. And you mentioned Purple Star schools, which is going to be a whole topic for another podcast.

Lopez:

Yes.

Moody:

But definitely, if you are new to a community and you go online and you look up and you find a Purple Star school in your community, give them a look because they are designated as being aware of and helpful to military families and there's a lot more to it.

But I'll just, I'll just leave it at there for now, and all of that is your answer to the question. But Elicia, I wanted to give you the opportunity to say, these are the sort of things that you wish parents and caregivers really knew more about the support that you provide.

Juarez:

Yes. So, I think them knowing that we do family sessions, I'll tell families, you know and we can always do a family session at the school or off the school site if that's needed and, oh, I didn't know y'all did that.

So I think to piggyback off Mayela. The family sessions and that we're also there for the parents. And then a big one is that we will hook you up with resources. We will let you know the resources that you need. We just have to know what you need, so we can be almost like the liaison to more formal outside counseling.

If we see that maybe this student is struggling more than what us being in the school can provide, and they need to get more formal medical counseling outside of the school, you know, we can help you set up that resource along with many other resources that are available for our military.

Moody:

What are some of the things that you do to maybe build trust and connection with the students over the course of the school year?

Juarez:

I'll Go ahead, Mayela.

Lopez:

Yes, thank you.

Moody:

We're also cordial. This is great. Yes.

Juarez:

Okay. Well, so, since I work with high schoolers, confidentiality is very important to them. Right? So, they sometimes are hesitant with going to the school counselors because, oh, you know, their phrase is, "I don't want everyone knowing my business."

And it's not that the school counselors aren't professional; it's more that since I'm with the MFLC program, I'm a little bit more on the outside. I don't work for the school, so they feel a little more comfortable with me in the sense of, okay, I know that it's going to be confidential. It's a little bit on the outside, and the school liaison officer on our base, I work very closely with her and she provides things like little birthday bags, little treats that I will just go and kind of walk around and give to the students, whether it's their birthday or they did really well. Sports, a sports game the night before, and just kind of recognize them and

open that door to, "Hey, I'm here, I'm on your side. I'm here to support you with whatever you may need." And the school liaison officer also provides outlets for our teens to get together socially. So, whether that's college tours or a game night on the base, and I'm the one who kind of recruits those students. Because social, having friends is so important to teens and can really mitigate some of those feelings of loneliness, depression, isolation, by having those social events as well.

Moody:

And you mentioned the school liaisons, which again has been the topic of podcasts that we've done and some that we're planning. Actually, there are a lot of resources, and I would encourage that you just call Military OneSource or contact your local family readiness center. They're going to be able to point you to all of these resources, so don't feel you have to remember every single thing that's being discussed here today.

So, let's maybe get into some ideas, for example, meaningful ways that parents can support their children's emotional wellbeing during the school year and ways that they can partner with the MFLC in the process.

Lopez:

Bruce, I also just want to add very quickly, and I know that we have to be very creative because working with children and adolescents, we have to meet them where they're at.

So, I feel getting to know our students is the core of everything, just because we have the privilege of seeing them on a day to day. So, when we know when they're having a good day, when they're having a bad day, when they're having an off day. So, I feel like as an MFLC we are able to see those magical moments of, "Hey, you know what, this person, this Johnny boy, he's not doing good let me go help him out." And I feel we're an extra set of eyes for our parents, for our service members, and I feel the collaboration with the school, networking with the PE coaches where we're able to provide support in one of their PE events in the cafeteria, walking around with them but also encouraging the parents to volunteer as well.

I know that in my campus, since it's a little bit more elementary, with more younger children, they offer different types of programs where parents can come and connect with their students throughout the day, and that could be a really great opportunity as an "M" flag for me to get to know the parents a little bit more.

Maybe the parents will be open to asking me questions on, "Hey, how's my son or my daughter doing throughout the day?" This is what's coming up, and we can build that relationship there. But then also just being able to spend time with their child on the school setting. So, I think that's also very special because once we get home on a day-to-day where we are super busy. We have to, you know, get into homework. We have to get ready for the next day. So, parents are usually very busy and then, especially because they're tired from work, so it's very fast paced after school.

But coming in during the school and collaborating during those special activities, I feel, you know, they're able to put all of the stressors aside and be able to collaborate with their child and be able to see them as a student versus their son or daughter at home. But other than that, it's just having the school support coming together and doing these awesome activities for the students. And I feel that a parent would be able to recognize their strengths in their child and being how they're blossoming academically wise and socially with their friends and just getting to see how their child is building that resiliency on a day-to-day basis.

Especially if they are just PCSing to that new school, and how they're making friends and stuff. So, I just feel like it's a really great opportunity for parents to collaborate in the school and get to meet their teachers, their counselors, and the MFLC, just because I feel like we are also able to provide great feedback to the parents.

Juarez:

I love what Mayela is saying. I think that's absolutely true, and I think parents reaching out to the MFLC is one of the best ways to get onboard and it takes a village, right? And I think that a lot of times, high schoolers, specifically, I mean, I think all children will do this, but maybe they don't want to go to their parent about issues because they don't want to burden them, and they're worried about their reaction.

And so, I think just creating that safe space with your child in a non-judgmental way to talk about their feelings, even if you don't know what they're talking about to be really interested in what they're interested in, you know? Whether it's the new video game or the new anime character or whatever to be really interested in what they like and not just talking to them about, "Did you do this? Did you not do this?" But really finding that way to connect with them and yeah, collaborating with the MFLC, reaching out or you know, I'll tell parents, I'm like, "Hey, if you know you had a bad night or a conflict or a bad morning, call me and say, Hey, can you please check on Johnny today?" And I will do that.

So that's what I got for that.

Moody:

That's what you got. Alright. Alright, cool. And Mayela, so before we were recording, you were talking about solution focused techniques. So how are these techniques helping children to feel more confident. How are your techniques helping children to just be better in their space?

Lopez:

Well, I talked a lot about it, empathy and compassion, and one of my specialty is the power of play. I feel with the elementary children, you kind of have to sneak in different types of techniques through playing, and I feel like once they're playing and they're having fun, they feel less stress, and they're able to listen and to understand.

Their emotional aspect. So, one of the things that I empower them is to really get to know and understand emotional recognition in regards to how they're feeling on a day-to-day basis. So, when they come into my individual or group sessions, I always ask them, "How are you feeling today?" And sometimes they're like, "Ah, I'm okay. Eh, I don't know."

And I make them look at their emotional chart and I'm like, "Choose a feeling emotion. How are you feeling? Pinpoint it." And they're like, "You know what? I am feeling sad. I am feeling angry." And I always provide that safe space to them. And I ask them, "You're more than welcome to share if you feel comfortable."

And sometimes they will, and they will elaborate. "Like, I had a problem with my friend. We were arguing and we're friends anymore." So, once we are able to establish the problem or the issue of what they're experiencing, we are able to help them identify a solution or we start role playing and we find, you know, some common ground between the disagreement.

So, I get them to look at their perspective and the other person's perspective, and I get them, you know, to understand the picture in different ways. And so, they feel a little bit more comfortable and they start saying like, "Hey, I didn't think about it in this way, or I didn't view it this way," so I can understand.

And I think with that role playing situation. They are able to provide problem-solving skills, like maybe I should have approached it a different way. And they feel empowered to approach their issues and challenges in different ways. And one of the biggest things with working with military children is that they feel like they don't have any control to situations.

Like they're not able to control when their dad or their mom's about to. They don't get to choose where they're going to go, and sometimes they lose their teachers; they lose their friends, so they have to start all over again. But I always tell them, "You have the power to choose how you're going to feel; how you're going to react to things."

Nobody can, um, force you to feel a certain way or react a certain way, so you have that power. So, by them feeling like I have the power to choose to feel happy, to feel mad, to feel disappointed, that kind of empowers them to feel like, "Hey, I am in control of the situation, and they feel stronger and feel more confident to face new challenges."

And I love it when a certain situation comes about and they come up to me and they're like, "Ms. May, look at what happened and I did it on my own," and they're able to tell me exactly how they fixed their own issue and they just have this big smile on their face, and they feel so proud of themselves. So that's the whole winning situation for me that I'm like, "Wow, this is so awesome. They actually learned from individual or group sessions or learned from each other." And I just love it. I love seeing that.

Moody:

Yeah, I can tell. And Elicia, how does your background in marriage and family therapy help you strengthen family connections?

Juarez:

Well, my background in marriage and family therapy aids me in understanding the systems and dynamics in place that may be affecting the student or the student's family, right?

Because we exist in relationships, we're born into them. We're usually wounded in them, but we heal in them. And I remember learning in grad school — I didn't make this up — that the family is like a baby mobile, you know, like the things that hang above the crib and when one of them is touched and moved, every single one has to move and adjust.

And I think that that is a lot like the family. And you know, we affect each other. And when students come in, a lot of their grief has to do with whether it's peer relationships or family relationships and their feelings are surrounding those. So, I like to give them those skills, those communication skills; those conflict resolution skills that sometimes you know, most of us aren't really privy to learning about, and so they can feel heard at home. Their parents can feel heard. They can communicate with their parents in a respectful way so that they can promote that connection with the parent even if the parent is deployed, they can still be working on these things and practicing.

Thankfully, we have the technology where they can communicate sometimes a little bit more, or even I'll tell the parent who's home, put pics all around of the deployed parent. Lots of pictures everywhere so that they're still around. Because a lot of teens will say things like, "Oh, well, when my parent comes back, it's weird and it's awkward, right?" Because the family system has been operating in one way while the parent's deployed and then they come back and we've got to find this new homeostasis and that can be a little rocky. So, I want to help them have it not be so weird or awkward as they say.

Moody:

I would like for each of you to share a story that illustrates the impact of your work, the impact of an MFLC having helped out a student's wellbeing in a school setting. Who wants to go first?

Lopez:

I can go first. Is that okay, Elicia?

Juarez:

Absolutely.

Lopez:

Awesome.

Moody:

Man, we're all so cordial. This is just wonderful.

Lopez:

I have so many wonderful stories, but one of my favorite ones is I had a young girl's start off with me. She was brand new to my campus, and when I love to share this story because I was able to witness the progress that she made throughout the whole year.

She came to me. She was very timid. Her mom had no idea how to shake off the shyness. She was like, we moved a couple of times. I don't know how to help my daughter. The more that I encourage her, the further that she gets away from me. She doesn't communicate with me. I just don't know what to do anymore.

So, it was really amazing to see also the family come in because they were very concerned about their daughter because she wasn't wanting to socialize, she wasn't wanting to connect with her peers. She was becoming more isolated, and the parents signed to the consent form, and I was able to place her in individual sessions for a while because I wanted to get to know her a little bit more and we continue to play. We were playing Uno and Jenga and stuff like that. And little-by-little I was, you know, putting in a couple of different ways of making connection with her. And she started opening up, and she was just saying that she didn't feel comfortable meeting new people because she didn't know how to start a conversation, so within time we would role playing and we were just simple things like, "Hey, what's your name? What do you like to eat?" Just basic questions that I feel like she didn't feel comfortable asking somebody and even sharing things about herself, so when I started role playing with her and I asked her if it was okay for her to be coming into group, she was a little bit nervous, but we had already been working on that.

And once I put her in a group setting, she blossomed so much because she knew that she wasn't the only one experiencing the same situation. She met other military students that felt the same way in the beginning of the school year because she had to make friends all over again. She was able to find connection with her peers and she started blossoming so much, which I saw. Her confidence skyrocketed. She was a social butterfly. She had more confidence and self-esteem about herself that she believed that she could do anything. She ended up joining student council. She ended up joining cheer. I mean, you name it. And she was signing up for it. And her parents came back and told me that they didn't know what I did, but I had changed her daughter into becoming something positive that they couldn't do within themselves.

And they were just very grateful and appreciative for what I did for their daughter and all reality. I just said, you know, I just gave her some tools, and she figured it out and she knew how to put it into place to feel that confidence again within herself. So, I just love sharing that story because I feel the LAC program was able to support her in a way, and that she may not have gotten support somewhere else, but she was building that resiliency. Seeing the connection and the right moment at the right time, and she was ready to be out in the world.

Moody:

Nice. Elicia.

Juarez: This one always stands out to me because it was my second day working as an MFLC and I am on a walkabout, right? Because MFLC, one of our roles is to remain visible, right? We're out there serving the community or the school.

And so, I see a girl crying in the hallway and I mean, she is just hysterical. And I go up to her and you know, she's all alone. And I'm like, okay. You know, "Hey, what's going on?" And she's like, "Well, I just moved here." [Unintelligible] And I was like, "Oh, this is, this is it." She's military, and so I start working with her and we handle her credits.

You know, one of her woes was she was from across the country, so it's a whole new culture that she's in. She had to start late into the school year because we started a different time than in a state across the country, and she was worried about her credits not transferring, and then she wasn't taking the right class and she was in classes with all freshmen and she was a sophomore, and this was the end of the world.

And so, I found out what she was interested in. I found out what her skills were. I created that safe space for her, and she got involved in the school. You know, she became an officer with student council. And you know, I watched her grow and blossom from being very inward to, okay, "Now I have found where I belong. And I found my friend group, and I found student council to join and I'm contributing to the school." And by the time she graduated, she was a leader at school. She's gone off to do great things and, you know, wrote me this long gratitude letter about how she doesn't even know if she would've graduated if she wouldn't have had me to support her and help her get through the new environment and get accustomed to the culture.

Um, so that's what it's all about. And that will always be, you know, my first story of really experiencing, "Okay, this program can help these students profoundly."

Moody:

You know, I'm loving these stories and it's pretty obvious to me, but I'm going to ask the question anyway because I'm really curious to hear your thoughts.

But what is it that keeps you going on with this work? What makes it so rewarding to be an MFLC in a school setting?

Lopez:

I think it's a very different experience working in elementary to high school. I could only imagine, but one of my biggest rewards is having the students come up to me and be like, "Ms. May, when are we going to do session again?"

And just seeing their big smiles, wanting to be in groups again, or when I'm outside playing with them, they love interacting with me and just sharing their stories and just seeing them feel better about themselves and just feeling happy, finding new connections within their friends. And I mean, I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'm like Beyonce at the school. Wherever I go, they're always like, "Ms. May, Ms. May, where are you?" And they're just looking for me, and I love that because that means that I'm doing a good job and it just keeps me going and it brings a smile to my face knowing that I'm doing something for them, you know. I'm an extra friend at the school that an extra support system and whenever they're having a bad day, it makes me feel happy to know that they can count on me and especially because they tell me, "I know that you're always here for me, Ms. May," so I love that.

Juarez:

Yes. Well, fortunately — the school I work at — our principal does this awesome thing at the end of every month where students and staff kind of nominate each other for employee of the month, student of the month, things like that. And I love that because that's when I get that feedback from students of "Ms. Juarez made me feel so safe and I could tell her anything. Ms. Juarez really helped me through a dark time," and sometimes it's, "Oh, I didn't even know that, that 20-minute conversation with that student that one time was going to be that impactful." And another thing that are right, and another thing that our principal did at the beginning of this year that I thought was pretty genius to encourage our staff was she had different students write letters, two letters to each staff member and put them where we're centrally located throughout the day for when we came back to the school for the school year. And one of the letters was about how "Ms. Juarez saves lives, and she doesn't even realize it with preventing suicide." And I think that really touched my heart and gives me the motivation every day of like this, it's almost like suicide prevention for our young teens because they have that place where they can go and if they are feeling that way, then we can make sure that they get the help that they need and just make sure they have that connection so that they don't have to act out their pain.

Moody:

And I know you know this, but you know that the help that you give extends beyond the kids to the parents and even beyond that.

And so first of all, I would like to say thanks to the both of you, we're running along, and I appreciate you staying with us to have this conversation. It means a lot, but my last question is really the ultimate effect of what you're doing, which is really supporting the war fighter. So specifically, I want to hear from you examples of what you see when a service member's life is in order.

They can go to work and they can focus on the mission, and that's what it's all about. So, what are you specifically seeing in your orbits that give an example that the work of an MFLC is ultimately contributing to the mission?

Lopez:

Well, I would like to say that. As I mentioned earlier, we're an extra set of layer of support for

the family, knowing that we are able to connect with the spouse, with the children, able to connect them out to resources out in the community.

I had a mom recently that they just PCSed to Fort Bliss. They just had a baby, and then she had school-aged children, and then her husband had to go on deployment. So, it was very quick, and she was like, "What do I do?" And I was more than happy to help her out and connect her with resources and especially because she was brand new to the area.

So, I was able to put her in contact with other local agencies in regards to having the newborn and extra resources for the school-aged children as well. And I just feel it's a community collaboration as well. But apart from that is having the opportunity to meet with the spouses, getting to know them, letting them know that we're here.

And sometimes they just need to vent. They just need an extra, you know, little support. Support for them to come in and just acknowledge what they're going through and for the students as well, just to listen to them and to let them know that we're in it together, we're here to help them out. And then more than anything is that we're able to have, like I mentioned, those magical moments when the student is feeling down, we're able to help them out, helping them find their coping skills, being able to have a little time out throughout the day and able to connect with them.

Or even if the parents want to check in with them, with us, to let them know like, "Hey, I don't know how my child is doing," and we're able to relay that information to them, and I feel like that makes such a big difference for the parent at the end of the day, knowing that their kids have an extra support system at school and then that makes them feel a little bit more relieved because as a military counselor, we are trained to understand what our military families are going through. That's our specialty compared to the school counselors because they have so much on their hand as well. So, we're there to offer that extra support for their families.

Juarez:

Mayela, I think that main word you used, it just sticks out to me nonstop of what I hear, and that's relief — Relief for our service members to know I have another set of trained professionals, a set of eyes on my child, making sure that they're okay, physically, emotionally, academically, socially, and that if they're not, they're scanning. What does this child need that they're not getting? And how can I fulfill that need, whether it's for them or whether it's for the family.

And I think that relief is awesome. And in fact, the first. Year I was an MFLC. I was going to the base to get my base ID, and I knew the MFLC program was powerful because right when I walked in, you know. They said, "Oh, well what are you here for?" I said, "I'm the new MFLC," you know, all excited. And the service member said, "Oh, I know who y'all are.

Y'all really helped my son when I was deployed, and I am grateful for that." You know, it wasn't me, it was just the program. And I just got goosebumps though all over my body knowing that that was what I was involved in and that I could be a part of this.

Lopez:

Definitely. Yes.

Moody:

Wonderful. Wonderful.

Lopez:

I just want to say thank you so much Elisa. I think you wrapped it up perfectly because I feel like it does take a community to help, you know, raise a child, so I feel like we're very fortunate to be part of that community.

Juarez:

Yes.

Lopez:

For the families.

Moody:

And we're fortunate to have you on the podcast. And I just want to say, "Thank you," to the both of you. Thanks for what you do. And please come on back sometime.

Juarez:

Yeah.

Lopez:

Yay. Thank you so much, Bruce.

Moody:

You're very, very welcome. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military for the military. We are your first line support giving war fighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive.

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I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.