

Military OneSource Podcast — The USO: Bringing More to the Lives of Service Members

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

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

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. This week I am in Jacksonville, Florida. Right now, I am at the Naval Air Station Jacksonville's USO. I have a bunch of people in the room with me, and they're all affiliated with the USO. Some are managers, some are volunteers, some are just really happy to be here and happy about what the USO has brought to them. We're going to capture all of that.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Hi, everyone.

Bruce Moody:

Let's just get right to it. What is the purpose of the USO in general?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yeah. The purpose of the USO, really our mission is pretty basic and pretty simple and that's to support our military active-duty personnel.

Bruce Moody:

It's pretty wide open.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

It's pretty wide open. Exactly.

Bruce Moody:

When we say it's wide open, one of the things that is done from one USO to the next is knowing your audience, knowing your environment, knowing what the needs are. Am I correct in saying that?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yes, Bruce, you're absolutely right. Depending upon the need at each of the locations that we service out of our brick-and-mortar center here which we service the entire Northeast Florida sector. Then my staff basically creates an event that's certainly going to meet those particular needs for that particular area.

Bruce Moody:

This is a small building, and you guys have a huge mission. Just give us a sense of what your footprint is in this area. What areas are you serving?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yeah, so certainly we're supporting all the major bases in the Northeast Florida sector. That includes Kings Bay, Mayport, of course, NAS JAX, Camp Blanding, Blount Island, which is a Marine detachment, the 125th, the Armory. So really that's the Armed National Guard. It's a pretty large base that we service just out of this one location.

Bruce Moody:

My background is that I'm retired Navy — a retired Navy chief. And the first tour that I had was the now closed, sad to say — Keflavik, Iceland.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

[Inaudible].

Bruce Moody:

The USO-

Zola Foret:

We just got back from there.

Bruce Moody:

You just got back from there. Alright. The USO for me was like my living room. It was like where all my friends are. And I could still tell you to this day, Wednesday was a mozzarella stick — a cheese stick — Wednesday. And we had fish and fries every Friday, and that's just the way it was. And that was my life, and it was good.

What are the sort of things that you do specifically? And let's bring other people into the podcast and Eric has pointed to you guys. So, all right, who's going to? Let's talk about some of the things that you have, some of the programs that you have, some of the things that you offer the military community.

Zola Foret:

Hi, I am Zola Foret. I am the center operations specialist here at NAS JAX, basically the USO here in North Florida. Some of our programs that we have that a lot of people don't realize is we have a mass size. Basically, we do stuff for our children for our youth programming, where we offer a summer program for the kids to come in once a week and really connect with other military kids to do a craft and a learning class basically. And then we give them a goodie bag and we send them home.

But most of our programs are about an hour. We have our Canine Corral, which brings our moral support basically to our service members from all branches with the therapy dog that we bring in. That is-

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we're going to talk more about that. That's a lot of fun. You guys just came back from doing that, so you're fresh with stories on that topic.

Zola Foret:

Yes, and I'll let Shantel say some more. And then we have where we feed our service members once a month, we have community partners that come in and we serve a free lunch. Basically, you find maybe the week that it's a non-payday week and we bring in food and this week is, tomorrow is Jambalaya. You're missing it out. Jambalaya is coming.

And then we do entertainment, our entertainment program. It consists of any of the local, maybe a concert at Daly's Place; maybe it's a Jaguar game; maybe it is the illusionist at one of our local colleges. It's basically a magic show for the family that they're doing. It just depends upon what the community partners donate.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so that's a big thing. Sorry for jumping in, but community partners is a big thing, but let's talk about the food. How much food do you move through your office here? Who can talk food?

Zola Foret:

Well, it depends upon where we're using it. We use a lot of food. Basically, that's the way to a person's heart is through their tummy. We have a great community partner with Wawa and their foundation really helps us out a lot. We can feed service members all over and quickly.

Basically, we just did a USO combination with our MWR, with our EFMP children and some of our local military children here at the base. We did a carnival, which is great, and we fed them subs and cookies and popcorn. And then usually roughly once a month we try to feed out of here about 50. And it can be their family member, or it could be the service member.

Bruce Moody:

Food is a huge ... So, we were in the back room and there is a, what's left of 650 pounds, did I get that right? 600?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Six hundred and fifty pounds of candy.

Bruce Moody:

Six hundred and fifty pounds of candy that were donated and you're bagging them up. So, there's a lot of food. A lot of food. And that's how we get people through the door.

Zola Foret:

Yeah, there's about 3,000 pounds in our USO.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, all right, good.

Zola Foret:

If we want candy, come and can get candy.

Bruce Moody:

I mean if you want a reason to go to a USO near you, food is a good incentive. Food would be a good reason.

Chantille Wooten:

All right. My name is Chantille Wooten. I'm one of the other center operations specialists here at USO Jacksonville, and I was going to talk a little bit about one of our programs tomorrow. Once a month we get together for what's called Coffee Connections. It's meet-and-greet for our local spouses — and tomorrow our — we have a different theme pretty much every month that we do. And tomorrow's theme is Friendsgiving.

We will use another one of our community partners to bring in food for that special meet-and-greet. And it's a place where we just meet for an hour, the spouse and the children can come as well. The kids get a little goody bag and it's just that little time to connect and meet other spouses. And as a military spouse myself, that's actually how I got connected into this NAS JAX community and meeting new people and new friends.

Bruce Moody:

A lot of what we're talking about here is specific to Jacksonville but also applies to any USO that you would go to around the world. And I really hope people appreciate that. We're going to talk about some of the more specific things that are happening, but people need to understand that if they go to a USO, there will be food and there will be people who know them and know their community. And that combination is really powerful.

Because it's rolling a lot of support from the community into the military community via the USO. Yeah. We were waiting for you to get here to get started. You were up at a Naval Submarine base, Kings Bay, just over the border in Georgia. Give us a sense of the people, the Marines that you're serving. What are you doing for the Marines up there?

Chantille Wooten:

We bring our USO therapy canine out to the Marines. It's called our Canine Corral program. We basically bring the therapy canine out for about an hour. We bring along a cooler full of drinks, a wagon full of snacks and the dog of course. The therapy canine is specifically trained to really just be a little loving machine and get their pets in.

The smile that was brought to these Marines' faces, they just lit up. The canine really lit up the room and just changed the whole attitude of the afternoon, I think. And these Marines might be in this location for one to two weeks at a time and really there's not all that much to do there. So to bring something in, to put a smile on their face is just really brightened everybody's day.

Bruce Moody:

We have Marines here who are on a regular rotation, they're leaving for two weeks, roughly. They're gone, they're back, they're gone, they're back. But when they're gone, they're truly gone because of the nature of their mission. They're not bringing their phones; they're not calling anyone; they're not texting anyone; they don't have any electronics.

They have a mission that requires them to be totally separate from the community, from their families. It's really stressful. And then you show up with these dogs. What are the qualifications of this dog? Where do you get this dog? Tell us about this dog. Is it from a good family?

Chantille Wooten:

Oh, absolutely. This therapy canine, actually the mom of the canine actually was a winner at the AKC, one of the AKC shows. Very well-trained dogs; very well-taken care of dogs.

Bruce Moody:

What does a dog of that training and caliber? What does that dog do once it's around a stressed-out person?

Chantille Wooten:

Our therapy canine will really just, will lean into the person. Will sit and relax and honestly, Singe, our therapy canine that we had today really just leaned into everybody to be able to be pet and just very calm and well-nature.

And really just hung, even was trying to hug some of the service members that were out there today.

Bruce Moody:

And how are the Marines responding to that?

Chantille Wooten:

They all surrounded him. It was so sweet to see the smile on their faces.

Bruce Moody:

But in terms of, I mean the mission and just the stress of the work environment, that dials things down quite a bit?

Chantille Wooten:

Yes, absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

Maybe we can touch on some of the things that you do through partnerships in the community.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Our objective is to create quite a few partnerships that will help us carry out our mission here in terms of serving our active-duty military. One of the partnerships Zola gave you was Wawa, who's a great partner. And they provide us with the food that we need to be able to feed them.

Another partnership we have is, for example, with our NFL team here in Jacksonville, which is the Jacksonville Jaguars. They provide us with tickets that we can distribute to our active-duty military at no cost to them. They have the opportunity to attend a game. Many of them have never attended a game at a stadium, so it's a great opportunity for them to go and enjoy a game. And the USO provides that at no cost to them.

Bruce Moody:

Can you give me a sense of the scale? Because you were talking about the tailgate party and just how much.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yeah, certainly. I mean, you see the staff here, everybody was engaged, fully engaged in this grandeur event that we put on, which is probably one of the largest events we put on for the year. What we did was in addition to just giving out free tickets, which in this particular case we had over 1,000 tickets to distribute equally among all the bases.

We also went ahead and with the staff, they put together a humongous tailgate event party, which was directly across the street from the stadium. It really made it really appealing for everyone to attend. All they had to do was basically cross the street and go into the stadium.

With that event, which was a tailgate event for the Salute to Service Military Weekend, we were able to feed through our partnerships with our local vendors in town, over 500 military personnel at that tailgate party at no cost to them. It was just a tremendous event that we put together for them. They got free tickets, free food.

And with that, the Jacksonville Fair was in town at the same time. So, with those tickets, they had access to the Jacksonville Fair at no additional cost for them. And so, they saved a family of four and easily saved 40 bucks to get into the fair.

Bruce Moody:

I was going to say the cost of all of this multiplied by family members, plus food, plus parking, plus everything else; it's a huge amount that they're saving.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

I mean, they got well over 250, \$300 day at no cost to them.

Bruce Moody:

That's awesome.

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

The USO was able to provide that through our affiliations with our partners.

Bruce Moody:

Which doesn't happen naturally. You're out there a lot talking with the community. How much effort does it take? How much of your time are you spending out in the community letting people know what they can do for you? Or what you need from them? How does that work?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yeah, certainly it's really bringing awareness into the community with the commercial and private sector in terms of what the USO does. If they're a big advocate of military and they hire military in their firms or companies, it's really advantageous to them to be a supportive partner for us.

Because we get the word out for them in terms of how they benefit from us. And it's a time-consuming effort to bring that brand awareness and actually educate them as to what services we provide for all our active-duty military and how everyone benefits from that joint relationship.

Bruce Moody:

Got it. There's a bunch of things that are offered through the USO. We've ticked off food and sports and a lot of the entertainment and stuff. And I'm turning toward you.

Katrina Robinson:

Hi, I'm Katrina Robinson. I am a volunteer. I work on base and I'm a military spouse.

Bruce Moody:

Yes. One of the questions you had when you came in was, "What am I going to bring to this interview?" And then you started explaining your affiliation with the USO and I said, "That." So, share with us that please.

Katrina Robinson:

Do you want the whole story or the quick notes?

Bruce Moody:

I want quick notes with some embellishment. How's that?

Katrina Robinson:

Okay.

Bruce Moody:

All right.

Katrina Robinson:

Okay.

Bruce Moody:

Do you guys do the cut off? Do the cut off sign when she's gone?

Katrina Robinson:

Yeah, give me a five-

Bruce Moody:

Give her the sign when she's gone on.

Katrina Robinson:

The story starts about four years ago now. We moved down here during COVID, everything was shut down. And I was not a new mom, but I was new to being a stay-at-home mom. Very isolated, nothing was open. My husband was working all the time. Life was rough back then.

When things started opening up, I would see the USO would post about their Coffee Connections. I didn't go for the first couple because I had a small toddler in tow. And a lot of things that are available to this community aren't child-friendly.

I actually, I think I left a Facebook comment, or I called or something and Zola was like, "No, bring your child, bring the kids, bring them all." And that really started my appreciation and support to the USO. And then I started attending those monthly. Got me out, got me involved in the community, wasn't so isolated. Made a couple friends.

Started volunteering more on base. And I volunteered only a little bit with the USO in a official capacity because I took a full-time job here on base supporting military families just in a different way.

Bruce Moody:

What is your pitch to ... Maybe the USO has branded itself so beautifully as taking care of the troops, but you really take care of the entire military community. If I were to ask you to sort of make your pitch to military spouses who have not gone to the USO. I mean Jacksonville of course, but anywhere around the world there's a USO nearby and there's military spouses, what would be your encouragement to them?

Katrina Robinson:

I think if you don't go, you're doing a disservice to yourself and your family because there's so much available to everybody involved. They're in airports, they're in the little installations around the world. There's snacks, there's food, there's community, there's resources. This is like your first stop shop for those resources that are available to both service members and the families.

Bruce Moody:

When I was brand new to the Navy, and I think everybody can just relate to how awkward things are when everything is new. Absolutely everything, including the culture of just being in the military, is new. What does it mean to have a place like the USO to go to?

Katrina Robinson:

When you have people who have been in your shoes and who are willing to not just give you what you're looking for specifically, but also, "Oh, look at this. Or maybe this would also interest you. Or you have children that are going to school, have you checked out the school liaison?" They're just a connection to all of the other things that the military has to offer.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. We have other people in the room. I'm wheeling my chair over and I'm going to go to Chris. Now Chris was actually the first person that I saw when I came into the USO. Hello, again.

Chris Rakowski:

Hi.

Bruce Moody:

What is your full name?

Chris Rakowski:

Chris Rakowski. I'm a volunteer at the USO and NIS.

Bruce Moody:

How long have you been here?

Chris Rakowski:

Here is only one and a half, but total three years volunteer. I was a full-time worker at my job, but after I retired last year, I'm involved more.

Bruce Moody:

What was your decision behind coming back as a volunteer?

Chris Rakowski:

I want to give it back to the military because of I'm a dependent from the husband. He was 25 years US Army and Special Forces Missions. He's gone overseas all the time. But the USO helped me to stay focused on my life and my career.

And my first USO experience in overseas in South Korea. It is a very winter, cold, snowy day. I was supposed to meet my husband's at train station, but he didn't come over two hours. I was so worried. I worried. And finally I walked down to the USO center and I stayed there over two hours again.

And he finally came to the USO center and he phone me over there because he had a car accident. And so the USO staff gave me a lot of comfort. And I want to be involved now I have time so I'm giving back to them.

Bruce Moody:

What do you see in the people who come through the door? I mean you're sitting right by the door; you see them come in. How do people change when you see them come into the USO?

Chris Rakowski:

Our USO volunteers give them for first smile and welcome them. And they are not only isolated themselves, they are involved with the community. They just come to embrace themselves with our center.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Nice. Okay.

Zola Foret:

The best for last.

Bruce Moody:

The best for last. There we are. No, can you please introduce yourself and provide your title with regard to the USO?

Steve Mertz:

I'm Steve Mertz and I am a volunteer here. And I think out of this group I'm the only one not associated with the military.

Bruce Moody:

Alright, okay. How did that come about?

Steve Mertz:

My wife came from a Navy family, and we also work for the state department. And when we're overseas, we're allowed to use the bases and USO.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting. Okay.

Steve Mertz:

It was a way to give back after we got back home.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. How long have you been here?

Steve Mertz:

About three and a half years.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. What are the sort of questions that mostly sailors, but when service members are coming in here, what are the sort of things that they're asking? Or what do they think they're hoping to get when they come to a USO?

Steve Mertz:

It's all different. A lot of the ones that talk to me because I came from the DC area, want to know about jobs in the DC area. And one thing they need to know, it may pay more up there, but it costs more to live there. Be careful what you ask for.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. I feel seen. What are the sort of things that you wish you could tell others service members about the USO?

Steve Mertz:

Again, like everybody said, this is an awesome place. You get comfortable seating; you get food; you get drink. There's always somebody in here that if you have a question, if they don't have the answer, they will find it for you.

Bruce Moody:

And it has to be said. We're in a very comfortable space. I mean comfy sofas and comfy chairs and big screen TV and lots of books. And again, a ton of food. I mean you've got two refrigerators just in this room and there's more in the back. The back room just looks like candy land back there. It's incredible.

All right. So maybe we can wrap this up and just sort of globally speaking, when we talk about the USO. Talk to young service members, new to the military, life is just going in all different directions. What is your pitch to get them through your front doors?

Erick Lallemand Sr.:

Yeah, absolutely. That's a great question. Our objective is really just to offer them and extend that comfort level that they would have normally being at home. We understand the sacrifices that they're making, the loved ones they leave behind.

And what we try to do is just create an atmosphere, a welcoming atmosphere, a loving atmosphere where they can come in and feel relaxed. Feel that they're appreciated and that their utmost priorities are basically what's important to us. And deliver on those promises. And that's what the staff does, each and every person that's involved in ensuring that our soldiers are taken care of.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we'll leave it there. I just want to say thank you to everybody for taking time to join me in this circle that I've asked you all to sit in, so I could reach you with my microphone.

And just say thank you so much for all that you do to the service members and their families and the food and an open door and lots of smiles. I really thank you for allowing me to come and spend some time with you today and for what you do. And you have one more thing to say. Remember first names and then off you go.

Zola Foret:

Hi, Zola. I just want to say that the best part about the USO is a lot of people don't realize is that we are home away from home. And people come in here and I always say that that tangible item might bring them back and that smile. And we're all together in this, so you're not alone.

And so, these two spouses that are here that are talking Katrina and Shantel, basically they were moms that came through the door, sweating, in tears. And "I got all these babies, and I don't know what to do and I want to volunteer." And I'm like, "Okay, it's okay. We're all in this together. I know you want to volunteer, and I know you want to be here, and you want to help, but there's so many opportunities for you to be involved even if you don't come here and sit in the center."

That's one of the things that I always try to tell the moms and the young spouses. Because they come in here and they're lost and they're like, "Why do I want to come back to a center?" And I'm like, "Because this is your community. That we are in this together and we want to help you."

And Katrina made a big point is that if you don't know what the resource is, that's why we partner with them. And we enhance each other's programs to enhance and show that these spouses like, "Look, you can come here even if you're alone and your spouse is deployed." Because Shantel, she's here by herself, her husband's gone to a school.

It's one of those things that we are together and that's the feeling that I want them to know. And I always say our center might be small, but we're mighty in what we do.

Bruce Moody:

That's true. Half of what I do on the podcast is let people know that there are so many avenues of support. And just to raise your voice to anyone, you're going to find a resource like the USO. But it can be a very isolating experience to be new in the military, either in uniform or as a service member.

But the fact is that there are people who just want to be there and to make you feel like you're in your living room back home and feel comfort and normal, life is normal again. There's so much of that and a lot of that is through the USO. Thank you for adding that.

Zola Foret:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. All right, and we will end it there. And you're all going to watch me as I do my readout, so there we go.

Thank you so much for joining us. I want to remind you of all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always love to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can send us a question or a comment or maybe an idea for a future episode or maybe you can invite me to your base. There we go.

Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to cover military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening and take care. Bye-bye.