

Military OneSource Podcast — Connected Through Change: Military Youth Stories

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Hi, I am Bruce Moody. Today we are spotlighting the finalists of the Boys and Girls Club of America Military Youth of the Year program. These are exceptional teens who share how their youth centers shape them, help them grow and inspire their leadership. Their stories are a powerful reminder of the positive impact that a supportive community can have and how youth centers empowered each one of these youths to embrace that. So, while you are listening to today's conversation, I hope you'll consider the following question. Would the service member in your family be better able to focus on the mission with a child involved in the local youth or teen center? Let us know what you think. We have a link in the program notes. Send us your comments. We read and respond to each of them. I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with personalized support, tools and resources for every step of military life. And a reminder, you can subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen. So, please do. Alright, let's jump into today's conversation.

Okay. We're going to do this real fast because you all have suitcases on the other end of the room, airline tickets, you got to be someplace real quick. So, literally if you have to leave in the middle of the interview, just do so. And some of your colleagues might be joining us in the middle of the interview, and that's just how we're going to roll. So, that's fine. What we're going to do is get some introductions and what I want you to do is give me your first name only, the base and the service that you're with. Alright, we'll start with you.

Avalie:

My name is Avalie. I represent the Army, and I'm from Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Taylor:

My name is Taylor. I'm the 2024 National Military Youth of the Year coming from Naval Support Activity, Bahrain.

Summer:

My name is Summer from Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado representing the Air Force.

Jacob:

My name is Jacob. I represent Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, and I represent the branch of the Navy.

Bruce Moody:

Great. Okay. Let's just talk about the Boys and Girls Club of America in general. For those who don't know what it is, how would you describe it to, say, parents?

Jacob:

I would describe it as a place for kids to feel safe and unjudged. I'd also describe it as a place for kids to really find out who they are. I would say the club reveals to even yourself and those around you who you truly are. And I would say the club also provides kids with the opportunities to pursue what they're passionate in, and as well as that, pursue other fields of work that they've may have never seen. So, it's just a place of creativity, support and inspiration.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Where is this club?

Taylor:

Everywhere. All around the world, there are clubs all across the United States. There are clubs overseas at military installations. I live in Bahrain, tiny island off the coast of Saudi Arabia in the middle of nowhere in the Middle East. And we have a club there and it's the anchor for all youth in this constantly changing world because life is crazy, but the club is always there.

Bruce Moody:

And how are you linking it? Is it the teen center, the youth center? How does it work?

Avalie:

For me, it's a teen center is what we call it. So, we are Boys and Girls affiliated in our teen center, which is 12 to 18.

Bruce Moody:

Is it part of other stuff that you're doing at the teen center?

Summer:

So, for us, Peterson, it's the youth center and we have school age downstairs, which are ages I think 5 to 12. And then we have open rec, which is nine to 12 for open rec. And then the teen center is 13 to 18 while you're still in high school. And within the youth center we have Torch Club, which is a little mini, preteen Keystone Club. We have Keystone, which is like a student council. It's a whole part of Keystone BGCA, and then we have 4-H as well that we love to do on the weekends. So, we have a little bit of everything within the youth center in the club.

Bruce Moody:

So, what is the thing that you feel you're most getting out of being part of the Boys and Girls Club?

Avalie:

It's more of a community. So, as many activities that I do at my teen center, I'm also getting that love and that support from all kinds of people. Whether it's in the homework room with Ms. V or Ms. Alexis or Ms. Brittany or it's with Mr. Brian with the tech room. No matter what you're diving into, you're still getting that sense of community, and it's really well-rounded.

Bruce Moody:

That community. Talk more about that. How important is community and if you're a military connected teen, where are you finding your communities?

Taylor:

So, the community at the club is essential, especially for military connected youth because when you're going all over the place or your friends are going all over the place, your life is totally inconsistent. It's always a constant; it's always an anchor. So, you can always find like-minded people that are being supported by the club, that are growing their talents, that are trying to help others and they're really just becoming incredible leaders at the club. So, you're surrounded by people that want to do as great of things as you, if not bigger. So, it really helps shape your aspirations and push you to do more.

Summer:

The center is the only constant in the life of a military kid. At every youth center, every base that I've been to, the youth center is the only constant where I can walk in, and know that it's there whenever I need it. Whenever I feel uncomfortable at home, whenever I need to have that emotional and physical support, it is the only thing that is consistent throughout the military life.

Bruce Moody:

So, what are the other things that are changing that makes that consistency all the more important?

Jacob:

Along with the community, a lot of the times your community may be leaving or they may not be around as much anymore. And so, I would say with the teens that are being consistent, it is the mix of the advisors and the teens I would say. Because in military life things are always changing. Your parents may be leaving or, if not that, your parents have unique experiences. So, I would say trying to find a connection only happens within the teen centers for a lot of military youth because a lot of outside youth really don't understand or not even understand, don't have an open enough mind to want to understand.

Bruce Moody:

So, adults are a big part of your community at the Boys and Girls Club, so how is that different from other parts of your life or how does that help you?

Avalie:

For me it helps me because it's stability. As much instability military teens have, whether it be teachers moving because they move in PCS through DoDEA high schools or other DoDEA schools, whether it's your parents or coaches, things like that. When you're in a military installation, everybody leaves at some point or somebody new comes in. But with the teen center, this is their job. They don't PCS, they don't get orders like our teachers or our parents do. They stay there. So, I've had the same peers and staff and mentors since I was in the sixth grade and I'll be a junior. So, that stability has created who I am and that stability has helped shaped who I am in my experiences.

Jacob:

I'd also like to add with teachers at school, a lot of them don't take an actual interest to me. I'm just their student, which is probably a factor of the amount of students they have. But within the club, the advisors seriously respect me. They want to know what I have to say and they take that time to get to know me. I think it has to do with their training and their goals as well because no teacher I've ever had has treated me like my advisors have. No teacher I've had has really shown that interest to me like my advisors.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Now. Hi. We have a person who has just joined us.

Avonlea:

Hi, my name is Avonlea. I'm the Northeast Military Youth of the Year and I'm representing the United States Army, Garrison, Italy, Vicenza.

Bruce Moody:

Italy, Vicenza. Very nice. Okay. Yeah. So, the reason you're joining us late and the reason why we're doing this rather hastily is because you're all trying to get to the airport. Y'all have a bunch of flights. This is basically the end of the time that we're all spending it together, and it's time for you all to go home. So, given the advantage of not having been here for the first part of the conversation, what do you want to say about the Boys and Girls Club of America?

Avonlea:

America needs club kids and the Boys and Girls Club of America has provided me an amazing opportunity and amazing safe space for me to feel like my ideas are important and that I can grow as a person and as a leader. And the Youth Center has provided me with a platform where I can take my passion for mental health advocacy and actually utilize it and make change in that area. And so, I would say the Boys and Girls Club of America, if you want to remain steady in academics, in sports physically and emotionally, the youth center is your safe space. It's your home away from home and it will provide you with that consistency and your constant in the hustle and bustle and transition of a military lifestyle.

Bruce Moody:

Speaking of the hustle and bustle ... You got to go?

Jacob:

Yes, sir.

Bruce Moody:

Say goodbye.

Jacob:

Goodbye guys. It's been great getting to know each and every one of you and I promise-

Avonlea:

[inaudible 00:08:20] military three years.

Jacob:

Okay.

Bruce Moody:

Alright. He's leaving. He's getting a lot of hugs. He's getting hugs from everybody, and then we'll just continue on with the conversation.

Avonlea:

Keep us updated in the chat.

Avalie:

Represent!

Bruce Moody:

Okay. Alright, here we go. Okay, we'll stay with you a couple more minutes. Give me a story, an example of something that the Boys and Girls Club did for you that you want to share.

Avonlea:

So, my parents are not active-duty military. We are civilians, but my parents work for the military. My dad is a fifth-grade teacher, and my mom is a psychologist. So, I've only moved once, and I've never lived in the United States. So, I was born in Japan and moving to Italy was my first move, and that was really, really hard for me. While that was my dream location for my parents, it was not the dream location for me. I was born and raised in Japan, and I wanted to stay there.

So, the move was really, really difficult for me. And switching from Japanese culture to Italian culture, I felt really alone and out of place living in Italy, but the youth center and the Boys and Girls Club of America made me feel like I could grow, I could find my home. And they absolutely helped me get immersed into the Italian culture and made me feel excited to be part of such an amazing country and helped me grow and put my roots down as a military connected youth. And they've helped me develop the confidence to now take my step and create my other move when in college I start my move later this week into Clemson University. Go Tigers. And so, the youth center has absolutely developed my confidence in making me feel safe and comfortable and welcomed in a new country and also feel excited to go start my life on my own.

Bruce Moody:

Let's talk briefly about being overseas and also maybe being in a remote area and what is remote anyways far from what you're used to. So, when you have that remoteness, that culture shock, what is something like the Boys and Girls Club doing for you?

Taylor:

Yeah, I think remoteness, especially nowadays is kind of an interesting term because we're more connected than we have ever been. So, the Boys and Girls Club allows us to filter through those connections through social media and such and allows us to really understand what is true about a place and what is not, which makes it a lot easier to transition, a lot easier to gain your own first perspective about somewhere going into it. So, going in with an open mindset that the club and the youth centers teach you to have and that global perspective allows us to be even more resilient than before.

Bruce Moody:

So, how close are you guys to finishing up? You just mentioned going to Clemson, you seem pretty excited about that.

Avonlea:

I'm very excited. My one recommendation for college was a big school with a big football team, so I'm so excited to go to my first American football game.

Bruce Moody:

Alright.

Taylor:

Go Tar Heels.

Avonlea:

So, he's my rival, but we beat him last year.

Bruce Moody:

And I don't speak sports, so I'll just tell you a friend of mine, he suggested if you ever get caught into a conversation about sports, just look disgusted and say, "I don't even want to talk about it." So, anyway, that's a little hack for all of you people who don't know sports anyway, but when you're getting ready to go to college, when you're getting ready to leave your home and go to college and maybe be out of military life and a campus life, how is the Boys and Girls Club prepping you for that?

Avalie:

So, I'm the youngest of our group. I'll be junior next week, so I don't get the same experiences they do with the campus life yet. I've got a couple more years, but through the Boys and Girls Club, so far I've learned to explore more options. I aspire to go to the University of Texas at Austin and so I've already been able to connect with Boys and Girls clubs near there so that I'd be able to represent where I'm from and who I am there and be able to speak and try and inspire other kids. And so, once a BGCA kid, you're always going to be a club kid. And so even when you've grown and you're 30, 40 and you're in your own career, you have your own family, BGCA still wants to be connected to you because we all make such an impact and our voices do need to be heard and BGCA really lets us do that no matter where we are in our life.

Bruce Moody:

Do you continue contact with BGCA after? Okay. What is that like?

Taylor:

So, like she said, once a club kid, always a club kid. So, I'm last year's National Military Youth of the Year, but they have been running me all over the place. It's been incredible. They nominated me for a scholarship to UNC Chapel Hill. So, I flew there on my own and learned these life skills and pretty much attended the school for a week. And then I flew straight from there to Germany for our State Youth of the Year event and I helped lead that. And then I was flying to New York on my own. So, they've just prepared me for a life on my own and I've become so much more independent than I ever could have been without it. And they keep using you, they use you and it's incredible. I'm so grateful for every opportunity I've had since then.

Avonlea:

And once you reach regional level, all of the Youth of the Year winners have the opportunity to join the Speaker's Bureau and we all sign an agreement and we all get invited back to different events. So, actually we just got invited back to an event in August where we'll all collaborate and share ideas that will help make the center better. And as well as the Sparkle Foundation, we have to give a huge shout to them. Each regional winner gets allowed a fund each month by sending a letter and then they respond back with a monthly fee for us to help pave our way and further our education, which I think is absolutely amazing. And like Taylor said, once a club kid, always a club kid, you will always remain connected with Boys and Girls Club of America. Even if you're not the national winner, you will be coming back, you'll be sharing your advice to other kids, or you'll be like Taylor and get an internship at BGCA and work with them and work with us, which is an absolute pleasure because I want to see these people again.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, I mean the friendships that I'm seeing are pretty amazing. So, it's obviously good on the proverbial resume, but do you just feel mentally equipped, emotionally equipped in a way that you would have been as you look forward to life in general, like deployments or getting ready for college or jobs or any of the stuff that's coming up that's maybe new for you? Do you feel more empowered had you not been involved?

Summer:

I feel so ready for the real life. Before I joined the center-

Bruce Moody:

You're definitely in real life right now. You really are. You really are.

Summer:

I feel more prepared for the future rest of my life. That's what I meant, I swear. But before I joined BGCA and the youth center, I felt so unconfident. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't know my passion. I had a little idea of what I wanted to do, but I didn't know how I was going to do it without any of the support that I really needed. So, when I went to the club for the first time, it was an overwhelming amount of support and love that I really never had before. And I was able to find my passion in mental health and working with kids and I was able to gain experience actually volunteering with the school-age kiddos and going on big trips with the younger kids to get that experience that I really do need for the rest of my life, for my future.

Bruce Moody:

Let me ask a different question. So, for those who are from a military family, you've got a military member or maybe two in uniform, they have to go to work and focus on their job and they can't focus on their job if their mind is burdened by concerns at home. And to what degree does your involvement in the Boys and Girls Club of America allow them to feel better able to say, "Hey, I'm at work and I can focus on work and I can focus on this mission?" I got hands all around, so I'm going to start with you.

Avalie:

Okay. So, for me, being a part of the Boys and Girls Club, it's a safe space. So, I've been going there since the sixth grade. My dad's very hands-on, so he wants a class by class, day by day. Who do I talk to? Who do I sit next to at lunch? He's very involved in our lives. And then he's the same way. Even if he's at work, he'll be texting me, "Hey, did you get to talk to this teacher today?" And stuff like that.

And so, he's kind of stepped back a little bit now that I've been so much more active in my BGCA program just because he knows I'm with Ms. V or I'm with Mr. Brian, I'm having a blast, but I'm safe and I'm able to do good things. I'm able to do right by these kids that I represent and now my little brother does the same thing. And so, seeing my family be able to open their mind to be like, "Hey, this is a really good place." My youngest brother is quite literally counting the days until he's a sixth grader, so he can come to the club because he knows what it's done for me and what it's going to do for my brother and what it's done for our family as a whole.

Taylor:

So, my dad was a child and youth programs director, and he worked in the child and youth programs for years and years and years before switching to the kind of service member-oriented side of the house with MWR. And I've been lucky enough to see how parents react to the club and how it sets their minds at ease. I've said this all over the place, and it's really just as simple as this effective child care is equal to effective service members.

Summer:

And I grew up as an only child for 12 years. My dad was active-duty security forces. He was always out in the field for several weeks every month, always out and about, always in the office doing whatever he had to do. And my mom, she actually worked at the youth center as well, child and youth programs at school age. So, I was in school age for a little bit. So, I was always in the youth center as soon as my mom joined. So, my parents, they never worried just as much about me.

Well, they did obviously, love them half to death, but they didn't have to really worry about my safety because I was either an open rec hanging with my friends or the counselors, the caregivers, or I was maybe at the Ketchup and Mustard Park as we called it with my friends right by the youth center. We were always in an environment that was safe on base and around people that my parents knew that nothing bad could happen and they just felt so comfortable being able to step away and focus on themselves mentally and physically knowing that I was safe at the youth center and the club.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. I think we're going to wrap it up there because you guys got to get to the airport. So, what I want to do is just to say thank you all for joining us. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and just stick around for a few seconds while I do the readout and let everybody know that Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department. We'd like to hear from you, so we have a link in the program notes. You can click on it and send us a question or a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode. 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.

Avalie:

Bye-bye.

Taylor:

Bye-bye.

Summer:

Bye.

Avonlea:

Bye.