

Military OneSource Podcast — How Courage and Compassion Shaped the Military Youth of the Year

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

What if you could find a way to channel your experience with mental health to help others heal? That's exactly what Jacob, the 2025 to 2026 National Military Youth of the Year, has set out to do.

Hi, I'm Bruce Moody, and in today's episode, Jacob shares how performing arts and support from his youth center in Kings Bay, Georgia, gave him the courage to speak openly about mental health and how he's using his voice to lead real change, from launching a \$25,000 teen mental health initiative to making support more accessible to military youth nationwide. 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 warfighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. You can visit our website or call us anytime. We've got our phone number and website in the program notes.

All right, let's jump into today's conversation.

Well, first of all, we want to say congratulations on becoming the 2025-26 National Military Youth of the Year. Now, for listeners who don't know you, we want you to introduce yourself and let us know what you've been up to since you were awarded this title.

Jacob:

Well, thank you very much. I am Jacob, I'm the 2025 National Military Youth of the Year. My teen center is Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay. My platform really is to help kids express themselves and heal through the performing arts. As me, myself, I'm very passionate about theater; I've been in about three productions since I was awarded this wonderful title, and I've been helping kids at my teen center and other teen centers alike, truly guiding them through the process of youth of the year, how to truly be themselves and how to tell their story in the best way. As well as I've been able to be a part of a lot of projects within my club to better the community, and that's all I'm about. I'm really about pouring back into my community because I don't think I would be here without the people who supported me. So I want to be a support system to the next kid who has a big idea.

Bruce:

Great. We're going to really spend some time on that. And for those who don't know, Kings Bay is Kings Bay, Georgia, which is, I mean, really right on the Florida line. So you've got Mayport and Jacksonville just down the road. So when you talk about a community, it's a large military community. There's a lot going on there.

Jacob:

Yes, there is.

Bruce:

Yeah. So we've had some conversations leading up to this recording, and you've described your story as an untraditional military story. So what makes your military connection unique?

Jacob:

I would say it's more about the thoughts that everyone has about a military story. When they think military story, they think you've moved around a lot or you've just been to a lot of places, and that's how people usually view military youth but me, I say there is no cookie cutter military youth experience. I think every single military youth goes through something different, and I would say what makes mine personally unique is my father was in the Army, and my mom is the CYP director on my base. So I get a very different view on things as I've never moved around, and I've never had to experience an active-duty parent, as my father was no longer in the Army when I was able to speak and walk.

So I view my military experience as very unique, but I don't think that discredits my story, any other youth story. The thing that connects military youth the best is our uniqueness, is our ability to adapt and our ability to say, "Hey, I know you come from somewhere different, and I know I come from somewhere different, but we're still connected because we're still military youth."

Bruce:

And I'm going to unpack a few things along the way as you're saying them; CYP, your mom was with child and youth programs, to give everybody an understanding of what your background is like. You've been talking a lot about your family's mental health challenges, and you've been pretty open about it and have really have come to this planning, this interview to want to speak openly about this. So where did you get this courage? Where did that come from?

Jacob:

It really came from being confident and not being ashamed of my story. As my father was diagnosed with schizophrenia after the Army, and it caused him to go down a progression of bad mental health, drug use and crime. And so this was the thing I was very ashamed at first, and I just came to realize that it's my story, and I have the power to tell it, and also I need to be the voice for what if there's a kid out there who's going through something similar and thinks that their story is shameful in any way. I think everybody has a story, and I think it's their right to tell that story no matter how hard it may be. I think the confidence or the strength really comes from my mom and my family really establishing my sense of self and accepting where I come from may not be the prettiest or may not be the easiest to hear, but I do think it's a story that needs to be told.

Bruce:

And the way you're telling is through the arts. So let's talk about that. I guess it's acting and performing is what you do. How does that help you process your emotions and understand other people's experiences?

Jacob:

Yes, so when I was very young, I was cast in my first theater production, and it was High School Musical Junior, the musical junior. And so, going on stage and portraying another character that

wasn't me — I really found the beauty in acting. And why I love it so much is many in my life, I felt emotionally muted. By not having a present father figure in my life and just being raised in a very hectic time I felt like there was certain emotions I couldn't feel, I couldn't not be happy because then I get in trouble, or then I bring other people down. But being on that stage just allowed me to express my emotions, and it's allowed me to be whoever I want. I could portray this emotion, I could portray that. I can work through the things that have haunted me so much on a stage, and not only to better myself, but to portray a story to the audience that's there. I think that's what I really love about acting is you can be anyone in the world and still find that connection and find that empathy. I think theater has really helped me develop the skill of empathy — thinking, how must that person feel right now? And not only has that helped me develop my character and helped me portray the roles the best I can, it's helped me be a better friend, be a better son and honestly be a better student. I've really learned how to not silence anyone's emotions or not just shoo anybody away because acting made me realize that everyone is just a person, and we all have emotions, and we all go through things. So I think the tool of acting just helped me express myself and learn how to truly hear others.

Bruce:

So when you're using acting for that purpose, when you're working through so many things, through acting, has there been a particular performance or a role that really stayed with you?

Jacob:

Yes. So my freshman year in high school, I have been a straight actor, so I have not sing or danced at this point. And I was asked to be in a production of Annie, and this was at my local middle school, and it had just become an art school.

So I said, yes, of course. And my first day in there, it was very daunting because I didn't know how to really sing that well. And through this process, I just really learned about having to value myself and having to really work on my skills because I went from someone who didn't know how to sing at all to someone who's very proficient and someone who knew how to dance. And I'll say this story just really reminded me of the hard work and perseverance that comes with life. Like nothing will come easy, but it's important that if you want it bad enough that you work for it and that you really try to achieve it. Because, I'm going to be honest, that first day that I walked into that room and I couldn't sing the role, I felt really discouraged and I felt like I couldn't do it, that I'm not this type of actor. Or, this is applied to other assets in my life, I'm not this type of military kid. My story isn't applicable, but through this story just really reminded me that hard work and perseverance will pay off. And also that it's okay when you're feeling down to rely on those people that you love so much. I remember my mom being a great anchor. She was like, "Jacob, you've never let anything stop you before. Why would you let this — you love acting? Why would you let this one hurdle stop your process of the thing you love so much?" So it's really just leaning on those people and finding within yourself, being like, this is a big problem, but I'm going to work through it, and the people who I love are going to help me do that.

Bruce:

There's two interesting things in there because you talk about the challenges and the people who help you through them. And with that I want to pivot and talk about youth programs because that is going to be a great source of both challenges and opportunities and people. So I really would like you to talk about how you first got involved with your local youth programs and also the Kings Bay Teen Center.

Jacob:

Yes, so when I was very young, my mom was the child and youth program director of Naval Air Station Jacksonville, and so that's where I first started my youth center journey. I would go there during the summer or sometimes before school, and it was a place where I could relax, hang out with friends, and see different aspects of life.

As I went to a public school, I didn't know that some kids were military kids. I never had thought about the possibility of kids being affected by their parents' job choices. So that really opened my eyes. And then my mom moved to Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Kings Bay, Georgia. And so here was where I really flourished and where I really found my community is, it was during the summer, my seventh grade, summer, my mom, she woke me up and she was like, "Jacob you're coming to the teen center," and I'm not an early riser whatsoever, so I was not having it, but my mom forced me to go. And going there, it just felt so inviting. I wasn't scared of being made fun of or being looked at any different. I remember my advisor, Ms. Maria, she welcomed me. She introduced me to everyone, and that day she took me to lunch and she sat me down and she said, "Jacob, what do you like? What are your hobbies? What are your beliefs?" And I never received this type of engagement with an adult that wasn't a family member. None of my teachers had connected with me on this way, and it just really made me feel at home with not only Ms. Maria, but with the team center. And so I started going more and more, being a part of more projects, using my voice and sharing my story. And it was funny, actually. The other day, it was after I won state level for youth of the year, my mom, she was like, "Jacob, you know why I started making you go in that teen center?" I was like, why? To wake me up early in the summer? And she was like, "No, because I saw Ahsha Bass," which is our 2021 National Military Youth of the Year winner at our Kings Bay base. She's like, "I saw her up on that stage and share her story, and I knew that you could do it one day, and so I wanted you to connect with people and be able to have that confidence to share your story so you can impact kids too one day."

And that really stuck with me because it showed that, while at the time I viewed the teen center as a place to go to not be afraid of judgment and a place to go to truly be myself, it was something more. Not only was it that, but it was also a place for me to go and share my story, a place for me to go and better my talents and to find new passions and to truly be myself.

Bruce:

I was actually at the Kings Bay Teen Center, I'm going to say about a year ago. Really great vibe, great people. And your hashtag, as we all know, if you've been to the building you know, it's KB Teens. It's Kings Bay Teens and because you guys have it painted in ginormous letters across the building, you can't miss it. It really does have a vibe of being like a, a second home for teens.

Jacob:

Yes, it truly is.

Bruce:

Yeah, so talk about that.

Jacob:

I would say how, for me, it became a second home and how I've heard a lot of other stories is being a place full of people who accept you no matter what. We have so many different teens in our club. We have neurodivergent teens. We have teens of all different backgrounds and races,

teens who have active-duty family members and teens who do not. But I think this one thing that we all share is that we go to the club, and we have a fun time with each other, and it's a no-judgment zone. I have made so many different amount of friends there, and I have been accepted in ways I've never been before just because of the atmosphere of Kings Bay Teen Center.

And I would say that Ms. Maria, Mr. Kevin, Ms. Shaya, these are all advisors within the teen programming, they truly, truly help with that. They're more like, honestly, family members that you can talk to. Whenever I'm going through anything, I can go to Ms. Maria and ask for advice, go to Ms. Shaya, go to Mr. Kevin, and they're just there. They're a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on, seriously, with any of our teens. And I think that's what makes our team program different than any of the rest, is that we're seriously focused in getting to know the teens and showing them things that they like. I remember, my second year there, Ms. Maria had known I like theater, and every summer we do a theater production within a week. And so she vouched for me to do it, and I was able to participate in my passion. And that's the thing that Kings Bay Teens programming is so good at, is investing in their teens and making them feel welcomed in places that, I am going to be honest, it might not be as welcoming. Like, public school can be very harsh on certain teens, especially teens who just now moved to this new place. So the Kings Bay Teen Center has been an amazing tool for new kids who just moved to Kings Bay to make friends, to have experiences, to get to know the area. And that's the most beautiful part to me, is getting to know new people and just seeing them get comfortable and seeing them truly be themselves in ways that they might not have been before.

Bruce:

I want to spend a little bit more time on that because you mentioned being at school versus being here. It really is different, right?

Jacob:

Truly, truly.

Bruce:

It's different from the structure and the vibe of being at school because at school you've got the teachers.

Jacob:

Mm-hmm.

Bruce:

And the students, and they're sort of an adult authority figure, and then the students. It's different. And it's, and it's not, they're still in charge and they're still the adults in the room. But help me to get at, just clarify for me, what is your take on this? What is the vibe with regard to the activities and the people and how the adults and the teens gel?

Jacob:

So I would say the activities that truly bond us together at Kings Bay is the field trips because these are moments where you're kind of in your element, I would say, you're kind of free. And I'll say this, where the teens and the advisors really bond because, in these environments, some

people may view the public as scary, or some people may view the public as a second home. Many people view different situations differently, but with the advisors, they truly cater to the needs of every teen.

If a teen is scared or if a teen just needs someone to talk to, to decompress, the advisors will stay with that teen and will make sure that they have a fun field trip as anywhere else. I would say this is also the best place for teen-on-teen connection. When you're not confined to the walls of a closed space, you can truly express yourself however you may like. So I say with the teens, I've got to know people that I didn't even know their names when we started on the field trip but by the end we were as thick as rice. And I think the advisors help with that, as advisors always have us playing these bonding games or they have us truly getting to know each other with questions or with music takes.

I say my advisors, for sure, have helped me meet new people and have helped me know it's okay to go out of my comfort zone. Believe this or not, I can be a little bit of a nervous guy sometimes.

Bruce:

You've learned a lot, obviously.

Jacob:

Yes.

Bruce:

What about leadership skills? So I'm hearing a lot about helping you discover you and be comfortable with you and how to engage with other people. When you think about just sort of healthy habits and leadership skills, what is the youth center doing for you?

Jacob:

It has taught me to be a far more collaborative leader, and this goes hand in hand with my other one that I have. I am truly a visionary. As a leader, I have this grand vision of stuff, and I want to shoot towards it, And as a creative person, I can sometimes get lost in the what-ifs of my ideas. And I think this teen center, my teen center, has truly helped me with this by being a more collaborative leader. By sitting down and being like, okay, I have this vision, what are you guys' visions, so we can add and make the best possible outcome.

I would say my teen center has especially helped with this for my Think, Learning, Create Change Club I mentioned this earlier with you guys, but here the topic was teen mental health, and I had all these wonderful ideas, but I get caught up in the vision of it and not the actual facts and not the analytical data. And so the, my teen center helped me by pairing with my fellow teens and being like, okay, how can we elevate this idea to affect more people because now I have the view of if I can share my idea with someone, if I can better this idea to impact more people, then that's the way we should do it. And it really helped me just truly not to be too farsighted and to my ideas, to truly help me to be a collaborative person and to truly rely on others and places I fall short, and to be willing to accept that, hey, that area of expertise is not my personal best, but I know that with all of us, we can get it done and we can make it happen. And also I would say my teen center has really helped me with speaking out in groups, as many times I get scared about having too much ideas or scared about, oh, I have all these ideas, but oh, they might be overwhelming for the group. Okay, let me just take the back seat here. But my teen center has shown me that you should present your ideas and when you do this, you should

be able and you should be willing to receive feedback and to be willing to compromise or change certain ideas to better the group and to better the outcome.

Bruce:

Do you have any specific ideas that you can share with us? A moment when a staffer or a mentor at the youth center stepped in to help you guide or cheer you on? What did that do for you?

Jacob:

Yes, I can. This was a story I love to tell. So with the Think, Learning, Create Change Club, I had the idea of the block party. And the block party was a way for kids to hang out with their friends, play games while talking to mental health professionals.

And my idea with this was making it a big grand thing, inviting so many people. But with my fellow teens' advice and my advisor's advice, they said, you should present this idea because it's wonderful. But you also have to think about, you do want to remain the intimate and the close unity that we have within it. You don't want to make it too big because it might scare some people away from going to those mental health professionals and truly talking with them. So I had a big vision of what I wanted to do, and it wasn't necessarily that that vision was wrong or that that vision wasn't going to work out. It was just there's ways I needed to present it and there's ways I needed to collaborate with my fellow teens to make it its fully best self. And I would say my advisor, Ms. Maria, has really helped me with that as, in my speech or in interviews like this, I can get on super big tangents about things I'm really excited about, and she's helped me — and also my school liaison, Ms. Cleneta. They both helped me properly articulate my ideas and shorten down, not say the content, but to truly make the biggest impact with your words, as I view words as the most powerful things as humans can do. It's a way of expression, and it's also a way of connecting with other people. I would say my teen centers really helped me just combat those ideas, put them into a greater format, and to present them with my peers.

Bruce:

Your home life gives you such a powerful perspective on issues of well-being and mental health. From your perspective, how can youth centers support teens who might be struggling with their well-being or their mental health?

Jacob:

I would say to have an inviting and non-threatening environment. As a teen myself, and when I've gone through mental health issues, I viewed telling the adults in my life as harmful, something that will get me in trouble or something that will get the people I care about in trouble. But I think when youth centers can build the positive environment and can build that inviting environment, not making mental health a stigma, not making it, oh, you have bad mental health. Because as people, as humans, we all have mental health. That's not something that we should be ashamed about, it's something that we should talk about, and it's something that we should be willing to talk about with teachers, friends, adults in our lives. And I think a youth center can fully be inviting with their teens by not only making an inviting environment, but by also providing those resources. If a teen were to go up to you, or for a youth were to go up to you and say, hey, these are things I'm dealing with, I think those advisors, those staffs, those adults should be able to respond with helpful advice and lead those youth to a mental health professional.

Bruce:

You know, if you're comfortable, I would like you to share a moment when the teen center helped you through a tough time.

Jacob:

Yes, I can. So with my father's diagnosis of schizophrenia and him being imprisoned, when he was released from prison, it was a very hard adjustment, having my father back in my life growing up so long with him not being there. And not only that, but now he has a mental condition. And so I found it very hard sharing that story. Because it wasn't something I was even sure of myself, I didn't really want to know people to know me as the child with an absent father but now present father but he has mental health issues. And this was because of the stigma that had been built up about mental health in my life. And so my advisor, Ms. Maria, she sat me down and I just started talking to her about it. And she just asked me these insightful questions about how I felt and asked me these questions about if I wanted my father to continue being in my life and if I wanted to be a voice for kids who may be going through something very similar. And that truly gave me a different perspective because I shouldn't be ashamed of my father's mental illness, and I shouldn't be ashamed of having an absent father to begin with. And Ms. Maria really helped me realize that it's my story, and I can find the power in it, and I can tell it to help youth going through the same things that feel just as ashamed as I did. Because now Ms. Maria continued to ask me about my father. Now, me and my father have gotten back in contact, and it's just something that I was struggling with so hard, being open about and being willing to tell not only my fellow teens, but the adults in my life. So my teen centers really helped me grapple with me and my father's just reconnection and me accepting my father's story, not only me accepting my father's story, but me accepting my own.

Bruce:

I think that there's a tie between your father's story, your story and the journey to becoming a Military Youth of the Year. And I'd like you to talk about that because it does seem like that experience taught you something about yourself. And what were some of the standout moments from that process?

Jacob:

Oof, this is a, this is a good question. Man, youth of the year. I say this to my friends who don't know what youth of the year is, or I say this to any adults who's wondering what I've been up to. Youth of the year truly made me figure out who I am inside. Because the thing I can get used to being an actor, being a stage presence is I get up there and I play the character and I say the lines with these theatrical effects, and I have all this charisma in a certain way. But Mr. Brent Edwards in here and also Ms. Maria, they really helped me find that balance between performance and being myself. Commanding that stage but not portraying a character and not putting on a face, but it's truly being Jacob. And with youth of the year, I learned that I'm going to have to go through my process being me, and it's not about winning. It's not about getting the award. It's about being myself. It's about answering truthfully in these interview questions, truly presenting myself within my speech. That was something that was very eye-opening within youth of the year because I figured out, man, I actually have a story to tell. And there's these rooms of people who want to hear it. There's these organizations that want support into me that want to hear my story, which is something unheard of before that. My story was valuable, my gifts were powerful and I learned that this world truly needs my life. This world needs my talents, this world needs what I can bring. And I need to live every day being my full self,

because that's all I can do. I want people to know Jacob. I want people to connect with Jacob's story, and I want people to truly be impacted by it and to help those who are going through something similar. So youth of the year really helped me figure out who I was and how I wanted to present that and also to be confident in my story and to be, yeah, this is my story and you know, I'm going to share it with as many people as I can because I want to make the biggest impact that I can.

Bruce:

So for this year, while you are the National Military Youth of the Year, you have the opportunity to do that. So what do you hope to achieve during that time?

Jacob:

I hope to make ARC programs more accessible to military youth, as I view that military youth sometimes can get confined into a box of pursuing a certain career or get confined into the box of only being military youth. And I would say I want to extend the hand of arts to show them, hey, there's other ways that you can express yourself. You can try this, you can try that. Really being that extending arm to military kids alike because I think a lot of military kids get boxed in not only by their communities, but by society itself. When you're told someone is a military kid, you have a already predisposed viewing of them, and I want to be that person to bridge the gap between traditional military kids and be like, guys, at the end of the day, we're all kids. We all share the same things. We all go through similar things. We should all just be connected, and we should truly all just accept each other for who we are. And we shouldn't box anyone into anything. And I want to use the arts to help military kids express themselves and to truly heal through any issues that they might be going through. And with this, I think in my platform, arts and mental health are hand in hand. I want to break down the stigma of mental health within military communities, as very many times mental health is viewed as something that you shouldn't talk about or something that is distasteful, but I think that's not the case at all. I think everyone has mental health and as a community, we should be promoting it and we should be really helping those who are struggling because, as I've said this before, my father being diagnosed with schizophrenia and the military community, he didn't feel comfortable in sharing his diagnosis. He didn't feel comfortable in going to other people. And that did not help him in the long run, and so I want to limit on those not-so-positive stories by just making people knowledgeable about mental health, by educating the youth and parents alike, by telling them that mental health isn't a thing that you should be ashamed about. It's a thing that you should openly talk about and that you should be a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on if anyone comes to you. And so I truly want to make arts accessible for military youth and break down the stigmas of mental health within our communities.

Bruce:

With that, you're doing a lot of mental health advocacy work, and I really want you to kind of walk us through one of the projects that you've helped lead. I think that includes mental health focus events and grants that you've worked on. What were some of the impacts that you saw with your other teens?

Jacob:

So for the Think, Learn and Create Change Club, we were given a \$25,000 grant to pursue any issue that we felt strongly about. Me and my teen center decided on teen mental health. So we had these \$25,000 to give back into our community, and we started with surveys, so getting

honest teens' thoughts. We went to a football game and we had a tent, and we had the tablet to do the test on and Chick-fil-A as a gift, as a reward for doing these tests. And we really found out the perspective of many teens being harmful or maybe helpful that teen mental health is a prevalent issue within our community. And so we did self-help days, teens being able to relax and to truly self-care. And that was very beneficial because a lot of teens hadn't had days like that where they could truly just focus on themselves and truly focus on bettering themselves.

And after this, we had a free mental health screening for teens and parents alike to know if there was anything that they might've been going through that they weren't privy to. This was very helpful, as many teens became knowledgeable on things they might be going through. And I would say this was helpful for me as well because I'd always viewed therapy and as getting mental health as something that wasn't favorable. But through this process I was preaching, being so adamant on mental health and being true with yourself, and I realized that I wasn't being true with myself. So I start to seek help with those people in my life that can get me that professional experience I need, which is just having someone to talk to and truly being one with my emotions. As well as the big event, the block party. So we had hosted this event where teens can come play games, eat food, relax with friends, but we also had resources there. Resources would be there for teens to go to and talk to about their mental health and receive the resources that they needed.

One example is Fleet and Family. They were a table at the block party that you could go up, talk to them and get the resources that you need to better your mental health. So these were all things that I did in my community, as well as in certain schools, on ID cards, on the back, there's numbers you can call. Say if you're going through any mental health issues, any domestic issues, or any issues that may be affecting you personally. We are pushing to have every high school student at Camden County, which is the nearby high school in Kings Bay, Georgia, to have that on the back of every single ID, as we think something so accessible to teens is amazing. To have teens just on the back of their ID card have those resources to call and get help with.

Bruce:

Jacob, you have a powerful story. You're doing even more powerful things with it. I'm so grateful to have this conversation with you today. Maybe as we wrap up, you could let us know what is the one thing you want every military-connected teen to know about getting involved in the Military Youth of the Year program?

Jacob:

I'd say I want every military youth to know to truly be yourself, so don't be anyone but yourself on that stage or when you're being interviewed because you all have such impactful, you all have such beautiful stories, and it's your job as those people who are holding those stories to tell them and to truly express them in the greatest light and to make the biggest impact with them. I would say bottom line, just really, really be yourself. And with this, I would say to find confidence in your story, not to be ashamed of not having a cookie cutter or the "military kid" experience because there's no military kid experience that are exactly the same. The power that we hold is our difference, and I think that when military kids can fully accept that we are all different but we're all going to make a good impact in the world, I think that's beautiful.

Bruce:

I think so, too. I mean, I really do. You know, I'm listening to this from the perspective of being of a different age, and I know a lot of parents are listening to this and warfighters who are trying to

focus on the mission when they have their kids at the teen center. And having experiences like yours, I know they're better able to focus on what's in front of them.

So I'm grateful for what the teen center has to offer, and I'm grateful for what you are giving back to yourself and the people around you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Jacob:

Thank you for allowing me to have this opportunity to share my story and to be interviewed again. It's been a little while since I've been interviewed, but I love it, man. I love telling people about my story and I love possibly helping anyone out there.

Bruce:

Good, good. Well, come back again sometime. Maybe I'll see you again at Kings Bay.

Jacob:

Yes, sir.

Bruce:

All right, excellent. Thank you so much. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is by the military and for the military. We are your first line of support, giving warfighters 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.