

MFLN: Okay. So good morning! I'm here today with Ms. Juanda Bryant who is an educator and a veteran. She is also an author of two children's books *The Mini Adventures of Danny and the Deployer* and *The Mini Adventures of Danny and the Deployer: Operation Care Package*. We are here this morning to hear her story and learn more about her journey as an author and also as a veteran. Good morning!

Ms. Bryant: Good morning, Robyn.

MFLN: If you would, just give us a brief introduction of yourself and maybe your background, that would be really great.

Ms. Bryant: Yes ma'am. So, I am Juanda Bryant I am a native of Beaumont, Texas and I did 12 years in military service in the United States Army as a transportation coordinator. While I was in the service, I served as the transportation coordinator as well as the Family Readiness liaison. Once I completed my 12 years of service I was able to become an educator. I've been a first-grade teacher for almost eight years now here at Sam Houston Elementary and while I was here I decided that it was important to provide information to families concerning deployment so that's how Danny and the Deployer miniseries became a part of a book.

MFLN: Okay, great! Well that's very exciting. I noticed that you have an illustrator as well, Mitzi Stone. Do you happen to know if they have any background or experience with the military? We just like to kind of know who has personal experience or even from extended family. It's just something we're always curious about.

Ms. Bryant: So, she does not. Being the author of the books, one of my jobs was to try to portray through words so that she could draw the pictures. She does not have any ties to the military or any military experience at all.

MFLN: Okay. We are just always interested to know. The one thing I have noticed about the books for sure that I wanted to make mention of, is that there is a diverse group of characters represented. The children are diverse in both gender and race and background it appears. I know as we look for books to recommend, one of the things that we really try to look for is that there's a broad representation there because that's important. Now you mentioned that you noticed a need for children's book surrounding deployment when you began working as an educator correct?

Ms. Bryant: Yes, ma'am. And while I was in the service.

MFLN: Okay so was there any specific kind of incident or multiple experiences that really inspired the work you did in these books in particular? Or even just the desire or the recognition of the need to write children's books.

Ms. Bryant: Yes ma'am. As I stated earlier that even at the time I was deployed and even before then, I do have a family history of military service members such as my father. He served in the Army Reserves. One of my brothers served in the Army and the Marines and then I have a younger brother right now proudly serving in Marines at Camp Pendleton as a Marine instructor. Then my late grandfather served in the Navy and retired. My uncle and aunt are both service members in the Navy and they served all the way up until their retirement. I'm sure my family list just goes on and on. But as well as that, me having the training to become a Family Readiness Group liaison which the military is called the FRG, one of my jobs was preparing soldiers and families for deployment. It was in that position I discovered that there was a need for engaging and educating children as it pertained to deployment and family members. Most of the trainings with the families required information for only the spouses but not the children at the time when I was getting ready to deploy. So, you would see first-hand when we got ready to get on the bus and travel to Fort Hood or get on the plane, you would see the separation anxiety and there just wasn't much talk about it, which was like several years ago. Mostly the family members, and most of the children were experiencing separation anxiety. I know that even at the time that I was deployed we only had Skype. So, children and military families endured separation anxiety when mom and dad were deployed and so *The Mini Adventures of Danny the Deployer* series is written to help children cope with that issue.

MFLN: Yes, gotcha. Thank you. That adds some definite context to that. So, my husband is a veteran as well, and he was doing tours in the early 2000s and you're right there wasn't a lot that was focused on the children in the family. But certainly, most of what was provided through the FRG was geared towards spouses. So, I can definitely see where this has kind of been a need for quite some time. So, it's great that's very insightful and that then you took action to come up with a solution to the need. So that's definitely appreciated. What messages do you hope children and families receive as a result of these books here but also as you continue your work as an author?

Ms. Bryant: One of one of my goals or my desires is to captivate young audiences through the series of *Mini Adventures of Danny and the Deployer*. Military children can identify and relate to Danny and the deployer because most of my content comes from real-life experiences although they are picture books. I have created, like you stated earlier, more characters in my second book to include the other branches of service because I also had the opportunity through deployment to work with service members such as Navy, Air Force, and the Coast Guard. So, I wanted to do a little play on their names. Like Maya, the Marine and Carlos, the Coast Guard to bring in the diversity and celebrate us working together - the different branches. Throughout my

military experiences I've had the opportunity to train all over the United States and my goal is to just help young children develop an appreciation for service members and their sacrifices and to help them cope with mom and dad's deployment. Sometimes there is a stigma and sometimes the military branches get a negative connotation because we're associated with deploying and losing life. But also, what they need to understand on a positive spectrum is that someone is giving up their human rights for the rights of others and that should be noted. I want to connect with military families experiencing deployment. My books are to connect in solidarity and guide the conversation for children and service members and spouses just to get the conversation started if this may be their first deployment. Last, I also wanted to give civilians a glimpse into the life of military families because civilians - now that I'm on a civilian sector as a teacher, they're not always privileged unless they know someone in the service, as to what we go through and so now that they have a glimpse or insight. My book has made it to the AR book quiz. So now civilians have the appreciation for and students receive points for reading my book and AR is called the Accelerated Reader is through Renaissance Learning. Now across the nation children can read my book and receive points for reading it and now they have just more insight as to what military families go through.

MFLN: That's really great especially that that you were able to have it as a part of Accelerated Reader because that is a widely used program across the country. Good! Wonderful! So, have you received any feedback from military families? Or even in your work as a teacher from kiddos maybe who are military kiddos and who've read this book or who, you know, maybe you've read it to them or their parents or caregiver has read it to them. Have you received feedback and if so, what has that feedback been?

Ms. Bryant: Yes. So, my goal for book two in *Operation Care Package* was for me to spotlight military families which included those families reading the book before it was released. You'll see right before you open the book or get to the story you'll see those four families and their pictures and the statements they made about *Operation Care Package*. For example, one of them is Liz McMurray and I met her at Fort Polk Louisiana when I did my first book signing at the AAFES store. When she was able to read book two she stated, "I love how this book opens doors for military children to be involved and participate positively in their parents deployment." She was speaking more about how I have "Command Central" for children to keep in contact with their families as well as in *Operation Care Package* how the child takes the initiative of finding things to send to their loved ones. The other family member, I met through social media. Her husband was first a Marine and now he's an Army service member who's recently deployed and she's a wife of four and her statement was, "This is a book that every military child should read because it is a constant reminder that we as a military family are not alone." Moreover, I have received a great amount of feedback for my work with *Danny the Deployer* on Amazon and through Facebook. Most importantly I was proud that "Operation We Are Here" (the website for military families) feature my book on their website as a resource

for families. So, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and inspired me not to only finish the *Danny and the Deployer* book series but expand the stories to higher heights.

MFLN: Great. I noticed a couple things that you mentioned there. I noticed when I looked at the books particularly the testimonials, again the family spotlights that you have in the cover, and then when you mentioned the command center and Danny taking that initiative to put together a box. That's all a very intentional, right? To give ideas to families as well as children, you know, about ways they can maintain connected but also still feel as though there's this family member who still is present even if not geographically present, right? And so, I definitely appreciate the intention there for sure. Do you have any plans to write other books or more of these in this series or what kind of plans do you have and what should we keep our eyes open for?

Ms. Bryant: I always envisioned the book to be a trilogy and as well as an animated series. That is the biggest goal. I know we're so used to seeing the "olden" type of representation for military, like GI Joe. But I've always envisioned for *Danny and the Deployer* to be somewhat like *PJ Masks* and *Dora The Explorer*. So, I want it to be a household, family-type name that children love to grow with. When I began writing the book, I wrote it out as a three-part adventure. We're just at part two but part three is on the way, so you can expect to see much more from *Danny and the Deployer* series. Let's just say in book three the reuniting of dad and Danny will be an adventure to read about. I also want to say with that as well, like I said it about being in the civilian sector, just recently my first-grade class put together a care package for someone's husband who's deployed right now overseas. They really did enjoy this. Once I read the book, the children were excited to just say, "You know what? I would like to put together a care package." It was just a beautiful thing to see. Every day they brought things to put in his care package. It was funny to me. You know, being a prior service member, but it meant so much to them. They sent him like tissue paper germ-ex, pencils to write with, erasers sunflower seeds beef jerky. It's just something to teach the children how to not only appreciate but to be a good community service member and how to give back.

MFLN: Wow that's really neat so the children had birthed that idea after you had read the book; is that right?

Ms. Bryant: Yes ma'am. So once I read the book to them they were like elated to say, "We want to do something." And if you go to my Facebook page, you'll see he even sent us a video. He received it a week before Christmas and he opens the box and sees like Christmas cakes and pencils and stuff. So, he sent us a video saying thank you and then he put all their pictures on his wall. So, he enjoyed it as a service member.

MFLN: Oh! That's really wonderful! What agency and encouragement to the kids right? That they were able to come up with this idea and bring it forward and then it all came together. That's really important for them. That's really great. So are there any other books that you are familiar with children's books that you would recommend or that you think are particularly relevant for young children that you might suggest? Or do have any other ideas?

Ms. Bryant: Yes, ma'am, I do. So, this is a whole new world for me - becoming an author not being a soldier, but becoming an author - so you always want to do your research. I do a lot of research concerning deployment and connecting with other agencies. Throughout this journey of authorship, I conduct research for resources and providing my readers with substantial content. I want to refer everyone to not only your website but also the Operation We Are Here website because not only does it provide a platform for *Danny and the Deployer* but it also has a platform for other arms of service members to reach military families. This website has over 100 plus books for spouses, family members, and children so that they can read about deployment. Not only this, Operation We Are Here, because it might just be a small bit, but Barnes and Noble and Amazon also have good books to read concerning deployment for children and among those books you will see *The Mini Adventures of Danny and the Deployer*.

MFLN: Great! We will definitely include the links that you mentioned in the blog post where we post this audio content for our listeners and then those who are able to read through the website or the transcript. Well I just want to say thank you so much for your participation and for the work that you do both as an educator and an author and for your service as a veteran. Just again, thank you for being willing to talk to me and for all that you do.

Ms. Bryant: Thank you so much, Robyn. I greatly appreciate it.

MFLN: Absolutely.