

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

**A PUBLICATION OF DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH
A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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It Wears On You

by Brian Dawe

“I love you, but you’re not the same person I married. You’ve changed.” How many of us have heard that? I know I have, and not only from my wife and family, but from my non-correctional friends as well. (At least the “You’ve changed” part anyway!) When you have to discipline your children, does “Go to your room!” really mean, “Get back in your cell?” How many of us take the uniform off but keep the attitude switched on?

The job of Correctional Officer can change you forever. It’s a different world inside the prison. Different from anything you have ever seen in the movies or have read about in the newspaper. In order to survive in this world you must adapt—you must change. The question is, can you make the adjustments that you need to survive behind the walls and not have them impact your life in the real world? Unfortunately, the answer is usually “No.”

In corrections, a secure prison means an orderly one. Meals are served, lights are turned out, programming is provided, counts are completed, recreation is offered, visits arrive and depart, and mail is delivered, all by a strict and predetermined schedule. As any seasoned Correctional Officer will attest, any sudden change or disruption of that schedule can have severe consequences. Things that the outside world takes for granted take on an entirely different level of importance in our nation’s correctional facilities. When you work in these conditions you begin to adopt a rigid mentality to conform to that environment. Little inconveniences in your personal life like an appointment being canceled, the car not being repaired on time, or the cable guy not showing up can alter your attitude and turn that correctional “hot wire” switch back on.

As a Correctional Officer you come to understand

that the inmates in your charge are going to challenge you and your street smarts. They are going to test you, especially if you are a “new jack.” They are going to monitor your actions and reactions, and may go so far as to stage events just to gauge your response. You quickly learn that how the situation appears to you and what the reality is can be starkly different. You get burnt a few times, the cons get over on you, and management comes down on you. So you begin to question, you begin to distrust most of what you hear and even some of what you see. Slowly you begin to change.

After just a few years, that mistrust can seep into your personal life. You start to think everyone is conning you or trying to get over on you. When you’re at a restaurant, you sit with your back to the wall so you can survey the room. You count your change more intently than before. The friendly nod that used to accompany your smile when you happen to catch

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INTENSIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY TREATMENT PACKAGE

As of August 2007, DWCO will be offering corrections staff and spouses a confidential 20-hr, week-long (four hrs/day) individualized intensive psychotherapy treatment package for work-related psychological trauma, and other personal and marital issues.

For more details please go to www.desertwaters.com or call 719-784-4727.

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It Wears On You

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a stranger's eye is replaced by an emotionless stare. The world in which you live has become corrupted by the world where you work.

Many of us who find ourselves in this profession hope to make a positive impact. We hope that our efforts will help public safety and maybe even turn some of the inmates in our charge into productive members of society. These things might or might not happen. But the one change that for sure takes place (and which we didn't expect) is the change within us.

If you are to survive in this world, and if you hope to be able to separate your real life from the world of corrections, you must be extra vigilant in checking your attitude at the time clock. Remember your fam-

ily and friends aren't trying to con you or get over on you. Life is not a game for them as it is for many inmates behind the walls. Your family loves and values you. Your friends, although they may think you're nuts for doing this job, mainly respect and admire you for your willingness to do it. Behind the walls, kindness, compassion and a willingness to compromise can be seen as weaknesses, but in the real world those are the very attributes you hope people will see in you. When you punch that clock, leave the attitude behind the walls. The real world awaits. You may not be able to change the nature of corrections, but don't let it change you.

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From the Old Screw

We Take Care Of Our Own

Printed with Mac's permission.

When I went to Sterling Correctional Facility as a housing Lt., I met a young man that I would grow to not only like, but to also call friend. My wife was in Penrose, Colorado and I was living in a small motel room. Mac and his lovely family had me over for meals more than once in the three years I was at SCF. When I retired, Mac was there to say goodbye.

Recently I received a phone call from another Lt. at SCF informing me that Mac was really sick. I found out that he was in the VA Hospital in Denver and had lost his left hip and left leg to cancer. You could have slapped me with a 2x4 and it wouldn't have hurt any worse.

I called Mac and was amazed at the strength and determination he had to survive. I don't know if I could have been as strong. Mac made it a point to tell me how proud he was of the Staff at Sterling Correctional Facility and how much they were doing to help him and his family. He laughed when he told me of both male and female Staff selling their

heads of hair. He said I should see the bald-headed picture he was sent. I know one of the female Staff and can only say *Thank You!*

When it comes to Correctional employees and families having problems, the first thing that comes to mind is, WE TAKE CARE OF OUR OWN. SCF has raised approx: \$5,000 to help Mac and his family. They are also helping in other ways. I am so proud to have worked with these people.

Mac knows he has a long way to go, but he is a fighter. He also has his first grandbaby coming and can't wait to see and hold it. His loving wife is staying in Denver and at his side everyday. I have told Mac, if he needs to talk to someone day or night, I am there.

We Take Care of Our Own, no matter whether State, Federal or Jailers.

God bless you and yours, Mac, and thank you for being my friend!

Take Care,
The Old Screw

Corrections: From Fatigue To Fulfillment—Part V

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The ABC's of Corrections Fulfillment at the Personal Level

Here are five key areas staff need to cover at the individual level to be able to enjoy fulfillment at work.

1. Awareness, Acknowledgment and Accountability

Becoming and staying aware of one's thoughts and feelings in an objective, non-critical way. This needs to be followed with confiding in trusted others and seeking help from appropriate sources as warranted.

2. Balance

- ◆ Engaging in healthy routines for transition from work to home life (downtime)
- ◆ Keeping a balance between work and rest / play / healthy distractions
- ◆ Keeping a balance between seriousness and laughter
- ◆ Keeping a balance between strictness and compassion
- ◆ Keeping a balance between judgment and mercy

3. Connection

- ◆ Nurturing personal relationships

- ◆ Building and maintaining a healthy support system
- ◆ Nurturing respect-based and compassion-based relationships with co-workers

4. Discipline

- ◆ Making time for self-care
- ◆ Making time for de-stressing and renewing activities
- ◆ Maintaining an optimistic perspective (finding a positive point in everything)
- ◆ Challenging and correcting beliefs, assumptions and thinking patterns that become distorted due to the work environment
- ◆ Maintaining professional boundaries and "repairing" any damage to them that stems from work experiences

5. Emotional Intelligence Skills

- ◆ Acquiring and practicing self-management skills, such as self-control
- ◆ Acquiring and practicing interpersonal skills, such as empathy, conflict management, and teamwork

The Bigger Picture

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As inmate figures continue to rise and increasingly bigger portions of State budgets get devoured by corrections, offender rehabilitation is once again at the forefront. For example, the new Executive Director of the Colorado DOC, Mr. Ari Zavaras, has made recidivism reduction his focus.¹ Along the same lines, the Florida DOC recently revised its mission statement to include a renewed emphasis on preparing offenders for re-entry.²

How can preparation of offenders for re-entry in the community become more effective? Of course, programs such as vocational training, anger management and substance abuse treatment are vital. However, an often underestimated resource is the line staff, correctional officers who interact with offenders 24/7.

Security staff is not just "guarding" offenders. Whether acknowledged or not, corrections officers are offenders' main role models of how law-abiding citizens behave.

Learning by example, through role modeling, is one of the most durable means of acquiring new behaviors.

Every offender-staff interaction is either "corrective" or destructive. When staff treats inmates with professionalism and benign justice—being firm, fair and consistent, offenders experience and observe a rightful use of authority, limit-setting, privileges, and power. They are thus given the opportunity for positive transformation by example. And when offenders are released back to society, they can take these alternative responses with them back to their communities.

So the line staff's conduct may end up shaping and influencing offenders far more than they can imagine. The unspoken responsibility (and opportunity) that rests on correctional officers' shoulders is enormous. In a sense, offenders' families and futures fall within the correctional officers' sphere of influence.

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization
for the well-being of correctional
staff and their families*

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BLOGS

<http://desertwaters.blogspot.com>
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For Corrections Staff by Corrections Staff & Friends

The Corrections Ventline™
1-866-YOU-VENT
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The Bigger Picture

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If each correctional officer helped just one offender take steps toward positive change, the ripple effects of that transformation would be invaluable.

Support staff who also interact with offenders, such as educators, mental health and medical staff, can impact offenders in similar ways.

In a nutshell, through their example, healthy correctional staff offer offenders opportunities for correction.

That is why DWCO's mission to increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of corrections staff has broader implications. Staff needs to remain healthy for their own sake, their families' sake, and also so they can actualize the highest aspect of their calling: impacting offenders positively in small ways that add up over time.

How can staff act as positive role models for offenders, even while they operate as shock absorbers in environments of negativity, frustration, and heartache?

For staff to maintain their effectiveness, they need to:

- Keep processing how they are affected by their work environment, and amending work-related distortions in their thinking. This can be done through reflecting and then sharing with appropriate others.
- Be taught how to renew themselves psychologically and spiritually.
- Be rewarded for treating coworkers respectfully.
- Be given ways to address psychological trauma (whether deemed serious or not), so they do not dehumanize offenders and even one another.
- Be shown how to find meaning in their work.

So let us keep helping line staff make a difference where it counts—through the positive shaping of offenders who can then function better upon their return to society.

¹http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2007/01/co_crammed_stat.html#more

²<http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20070603/OPINION/706030443/1030/OPINION01>