

Jwenty years ago, as an assistant district attorney in the Juvenile Court of Nashville, Tenn., I was hard at work one morning when an older gentleman walked into my office and asked to speak to the district attorney. I immediately put down my case file and offered to help him. With a look that suggested I get him a cup of coffee and then make myself scarce while he conducted his business, he again stated that he needed to talk with the district attorney. When I boldly assured him that I was, indeed, the district attorney, he stood up to leave and said, “No, I need to talk to the real D.A.”

Recently, my husband and I were celebrating an anniversary and made reservations at a local restaurant. When we presented ourselves for seating, the young lady serving as hostess came up to us, smiled ever so sweetly, looked straight at my husband and said, “Judge Green, I’m so glad you and your wife could join us for dinner.” Before I had a chance to educate the young lady, my husband turned toward me with a twinkle in his eye as he responded to her and said, “The little woman and I are looking forward to our night out.” (For those of you who know me, I am happy to report that due to my remarkable self-control and restraint, my husband is still alive.)

Progress Made

Although more than 20 years and a lot of other incidents separated these two situations, I think it is safe to say that stereotyping is alive and well, not only in the corrections profession but in all areas of our lives. I was first employed as a childcare worker in a girl’s correctional school 40 years ago. No eyebrows were raised, because after all, it was a girl’s school, and I was just a summer replacement for the “real” staff. It soon became apparent to me that the expectation was for women to work in women’s facilities and for men to handle the men’s facilities and the central office jobs — except, of course, the clerical jobs. This was in the 1960s. We have only to look around us today and see the large number of women in all types of correctional jobs to see the changes that have taken place in the profession. A quick check of the American Correctional Association’s *2004 Directory of Adult and Juvenile Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Probation and Parole Authorities* indicates that almost 200,000 members of the corrections profession are women. More than 25 are serving as directors of adult, juvenile or parole agencies. We now have women filling virtually every role in the correctional system — and doing it with enthusiasm and professionalism.

As I sit back and reflect on my 40-year career, it is rewarding to see the progress that has been made — but

frustrating that many still stereotype the role of women, particularly in the corrections field. I think it is important to remember that just because many women have succeeded in the corrections field and are accepted as the true professionals they are, there are others just starting out who will need the benefit of our experience and support. There are still those who consider a successful woman in the corrections profession to be an exception to the rule. While we have entered a brand new century, we have brought with us some perceptions and baggage from the previous one.

It is my humble opinion that the best way to destroy a stereotype is to prove it wrong. We can bemoan the fact that we are viewed differently from our male counterparts or we can roll up our sleeves and work even harder to establish women’s vital roles in corrections. During my 40 years of work in a variety of different yet very challenging jobs in corrections, I have been fortunate to know and work with many talented and dedicated individuals, both male and female. They have been there for me through the good times and the bad (and believe me, there are always going to be some bad times in this business — but after all, that is where most real personal growth begins). One lady stands out in my mind and I want readers to know her.

A Helping Hand

Judge Elizabeth McCain was the Juvenile Court judge in Memphis, Tenn., during the 1960s and early 1970s. There were very few women in this type of role at this time in Ten-

A Tribute to ALL
LITTLE WOMEN

nessee's history. She was very prim and proper — an older lady with dignity and charm, with an abiding faith in the system. When she was no longer on the bench, she went to work for an advocacy agency for children, which is where I met her. Tennessee had a mandatory retirement age of 70 at this time, and after only a few years with the agency, she was forced to retire. Judge McCain had never married; her work was her life. I was hired to “replace” her, and I could not help but wonder how she would react to a young “20-something” trying to fill her shoes. Her response was to support and guide me as I learned the ropes; to introduce me to individuals I needed to know but did not; to challenge me to do more than she had; and to remind me that a woman could be tough, articulate and successful and still be a lady.

There is a lesson here for everyone: Each generation makes progress, but no generation ever finishes the job. Corrections has made much progress as a profession. Corrections

professionals only need look at the improvement over the years of the programs in their facilities, the evolution of humane and fair policies and procedures both for inmates and for the daily operation of programs, the field's improved training and training opportunities, and in the professionalism that encourages correctional employees to do their best. But corrections professionals are not perfect, and from time to time, we are embarrassed by the actions of a few. Just as we will continuously need to look for new and better ways to manage our clients, we also need to look for ways to improve our personal performance. We all need a Judge McCain to challenge us and to encourage us to push forward. Too often we are so wrapped up in our own life where demands are heavy and the day just does not seem to have enough hours in it that we miss opportunities to help those working beside us to reach their true potential. Wasted potential feeds the negative stereotypes that still abound in the world. Until each individual, male or female, is allowed and

encouraged to develop to the fullest and until we refuse to settle for anything less, many talented individuals will be lost.

So who is responsible for encouraging this frontal attack on the status quo? We all are. For every woman who has established a successful career in corrections at any level and is enjoying that career, there is an obligation to help and support those women coming behind her. The best exercise is bending down to help someone up. It is not enough to be successful. It is somewhat intimidating to realize that others we come in contact with in our daily lives may emulate the behaviors they see in us, but the fact remains that those of us working in the field have a wonderful opportunity to break down barriers and help raise expectations for all in corrections. Only when we are willing to show others the same support we have enjoyed will we truly make a difference. Perception is not always fair, nor is it always accurate. Perception is based on superficial information, which words alone will never change. It is not usually intended to be harmful or hurtful, but when someone assumes that something is fact without full and complete information, the result is often an unfair stereotype.



By Betty Adams Green

Being Proactive

The truth is, if people do not act to educate others and demonstrate by their actions that a perception is not fair or accurate, the perception easily becomes the reality. I have been fortunate throughout my life and career to have had support and encouragement from family, friends, co-workers and mentors — but I sometimes wonder where I would be today if these supporters had not been there for me. Would I have believed I could be a lawyer, a judge, a commissioner, a corporate officer, a teacher or whatever? If perception does become reality, are there young women in the corrections profession today who believe they cannot aspire to be wardens, directors, commissioners, etc.? I hope not, but life tells me I am wrong. All members of the profession must join together to see that the best and the brightest have the opportunity to move from entry-

level positions within corrections to positions of decision-making and authority, regardless of gender.

Progress takes time and an understanding that mistakes along the way are not fatal but can enrich our level of experience and be an opportunity for growth. While I am personally proud of the progress that has been made in the four decades that I have been a part of the corrections profession, I believe there is much more to be done. Women cannot sit around and agonize over the inequities that may be present, but must become a force to be reckoned with. To be treated fairly, we must treat others fairly. To be promoted and advance, we must prepare ourselves through education, training opportunities, hard work and experience. To survive the tough times, we must support one another. To be truly successful, we must share our success by being a friend and a mentor to others.

It is not enough to be a “successful woman” in this field. Women in

corrections must also be an example and an encouragement for the women who will walk in our shoes in the next century. Looking back on one’s career is a humbling experience. I now realize how much of my success is attributable to others who have helped me along the way. While there are still worlds to conquer and those whose perception of a woman’s role still needs some enlightenment, this “little woman” is proud of the dynamic women who serve in a wide array of jobs, including correctional workers, teachers, clericals, policy-makers, wardens, probation officers and commissioners. The corrections field is better served by their presence and commitment, and the future of corrections is in good hands. Hats off to all the “little women” of the world.

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