

Ruby Clay

A Little Lady Makes A Big Difference

By Susan L. Clayton

Ruby Clay, 88, has been volunteering her time for the past 25 years to adult and juvenile offenders in east central Florida. And she has no plans of stopping any time soon. Clay now serves as chaplain and ministry coordinator at the Brevard Regional Juvenile Detention Center in Cocoa. She oversees the ministry schedule, which includes religious instruction on Sunday afternoons and three evenings each week. In addition, Clay ministers to young offenders at the Brevard County Detention Center in Sharpes.

Clay began volunteering in the early 1980s after working most of her life in retail. Some of her early volunteer work was performed at the state correctional institution in Sharpes, where she taught a Bible class for eight years. "The more I got involved, the more I saw the need out there," Clay said. She also ministered to inmates and taught Bible classes at the old county jail. Additionally, Clay worked with youths at the detention center. "I just became so interested," Clay said, noting that children have many questions. "They need someone just to listen." Recognizing this need, Clay started a Bible study class at the detention center. Not only did she point out the moral and spiritual values that youths gain from the class, but she said having someone to listen to them makes all the difference.

"If in my lifetime, if I only touch one life, it's worth it. I have been more than well paid," Clay said, adding, "When you are sitting down talking to a man, woman, boy or girl who is incarcerated and you are trying to build them up, give them encouragement, you don't have a problem in the world. I consider it an honor, a privilege and a pleasure and I'm so blessed to have the opportunity to work in these facilities as a volunteer."

Clay noted that her job is most rewarding when she sees a life changed. "It's such a blessing ... sometimes you walk in and you see a smile. And when you walk out, they say, 'Thank you Ruby so much for coming to see me.'" Many of the offenders with whom Clay comes into contact are very appreciative that she takes the time to meet with them. She recalled that years ago at the state correctional institution she asked inmates to write something — anything they wanted — and one wrote: "Ms. Ruby I can't understand why you take your freedom to come down here and visit with us and see us." Clay said it still boils down to one thing — because she cares. "I look at them and say, that's some mother or father or daughter, son, grandparent, grandson or granddaughter, and I encourage them as if they were my own."

According to David G. Burns, captain and assistant superintendent for administration at the detention center, Clay's dedication to people who have strayed from the "righteous road" and followed a path that led them to incarceration is heartwarming. "She is our local version of Mother Teresa. There are no words suitable to describe her contributions and the impact she has on our youth," Burns said. He is inspired by the fact that Clay has volunteered for so long, particularly during her golden years "when a person is supposed to take it easy and enjoy the good life." For her, Burns said, "the good life is being able to reach out and touch someone in need of spiritual renewal or just to make them feel human again."

Clay has been recognized before for her dedication. In September 2006, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush named Clay a recipient of the Points of Light Award, which weekly recognizes a Florida resident or organization that demonstrates exemplary service to the

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community. A panel of judges, comprised of leaders in the areas of volunteerism and service, evaluates all nominations and makes recommendations to the governor. Volunteer Florida Foundation manages the program. Also, on Oct. 24, 2006, Clay was recognized with the Outstanding Volunteer of the Quarter Award and presented a plaque by the Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Anthony J. Schembri. "I really appreciate those things but I always say someone else deserves it more than I do," Clay said. "But it's a humbling experience, and I'm very grateful and appreciative."

Born and raised in West Virginia, Clay has a son and daughter, as well as several grandchildren and great grandchildren. She is a long-time member of Christ Central Church and is involved in several church ministries.

Clay admits that once in a while her work can get a bit stressful. However, she is quick to point out that in any job one does there are times of stress. "Everything always works out," Clay said, adding, "It's a blessing to be able to do what I do, especially because of my age." Although Clay is small in stature, she has a big heart.

Susan L. Clayton is managing editor of Corrections Today.