

Cheryl Graf

Cook Serves Camaraderie, Hope and Respect

By Lisa Leone

Cheryl Graf cannot say enough good things about her job. And the people around her, cannot thank her enough for all she does. Graf's dedication to her job, the inmates and the community is unparalleled.

As an adult corrections cook at the Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC) in Monroe, Wash., Graf plans and cooks meals, but she also trains and works with inmates in the kitchen. There are usually one or two cooks on duty, and each supervise 13 or more inmates. "I start them off from scratch and teach them to do things, and I work right alongside them," Graf said. She also focuses on the quality of the food and encourages the inmates to take pride in their work. She tells the inmates, "If it doesn't look right and you don't want it in front of you, you're not serving it."

In addition to serving food to inmates, she works with a select group of inmate cooks to provide food to the correctional complex staff. Graf also plans and provides food for special events, such as inmate banquets and staff-appreciation banquets.

Most of the inmates have no prior experience in cooking, and Graf delights in hearing about individuals who continue in the profession after their release. She tells them, "You may not want to be a cook, but if you don't have [a job] pending right away, this is something you can always fall back on, so let me teach you the basics." In addition to being a cook, Graf is also a mentor to the inmates with whom she works. "Every day is a new beginning. ... If you can learn to work with people and be a crew member, that helps on the outside no matter what you do," she said.

Graf's job is not confined to the kitchen, she is in constant contact with counselors regarding the inmates, and she writes inmate evaluations

every three months. She primarily works at the Minimum Security Unit (MSU), which is the camp for short-term, minimum-security inmates who are participating in work release and treatment programs. However, Graf said the cooks all pitch in to work overtime throughout the complex.

As far as running a cost-efficient kitchen, Graf makes sure that all inmates receive the same portions and takes the time to figure out how many inmates will be coming to each meal, so as to avoid leftovers. This is a challenge in the transient camp atmosphere where inmates come and go depending on their work schedules.

Graf is especially recognized for her work with the Red Cross to provide meals to area flood victims. Unfortunately, in the past few years, the Monroe area has been subject to flooding of nearby rivers because of its close proximity to the mountains. Heavy rains or unexpected warmth that melts snow in the mountains have contributed to the high flood rate. Graf and the DOC have stepped up to help displaced victims. Because MSU is a lower-security area, it is easiest for the Red Cross to access, putting much of the work on Graf and her team. With 45 minutes notice, Graf can put together 100 to 200 meals that include casseroles, chicken, soups and lunchmeat. The Red Cross may show up as often as twice a day in times of crisis. Food Manger John Holeman remembered one particularly time of harsh flooding, "In all, more than 1,200 meals during six days were completed to assist victims that were cold and tired. ... [Graf's] professionalism in working through crisis is most noteworthy."

Graf is proud of the inmates and the camaraderie they have in the kitchen. "There's a lot of talent throughout the world, and a lot of it is at DOC," Graf said. She noted that one inmate even volunteered to paint

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murals in the dining hall; the five giant paintings depict animals and natural scenes. "It's something that just makes you proud ... and they're beautiful," Graf said. She wishes that more people on the outside knew and understood what goes on inside correctional facilities. "There's a lot of people there ... really trying to come out and do better," she said. Graf acknowledged that people make mistakes and said she is not there to judge the inmates.

Graf has cooked for 37 years, the last 11 of which she has spent at MCC. Before joining the department of corrections, Graf worked as a chef and sous chef at the Wenatchee Convention Center, giving her experience in cooking for a large crowd. She truly loves what she does at MCC. "The job is not for everyone, but it is something I wish I would have done years ago because I could have done 50 years here and been very very happy," she said.

Lisa Leone is associate editor of Corrections Today.