



After

fter spending decades in a profession, a feeling of having “been there and done that” can develop. Listen, we were living “La Vida Loca” before Ricky Martin was in middle school; we work in corrections. While there is nothing terribly wrong with believing there can be no more surprises or drama, no demands that cannot be met or crisis du jour, we all know serving this profession, no matter how many rings one has around the trunk, is all about possibilities.

A list of the most incredible possibilities one can imagine can transpire in the correctional environment: births, pickets, injuries, marriages and fights. All in the midst of a 24-hour/seven-day-a-week operation, where staff feed, clothe, count, counsel, treat and direct, all with an eye toward safety, security, mass movement and a good count. We move constantly from the intersection of what has been already done to the corner of what can be done and anything is possible. Should the truth be told, we have evolved from take-down squads to well-trained emergency response teams; arrests based on what we thought rather than what could be verified by electronic monitoring or substantiated by DNA; we have moved from cuffing and stuffing, same-gender-only caseloads; and we have shifted from paper files to automated tracking, convicts to inmates, penitentiaries to correctional facilities, 38s to automatic weapons and, thankfully, guards to correctional officers. I think you would agree that we are not simply about the three C’s typically held up in corrections — care, custody and control. We must bring to our work competence, compassion and creativity.

Supporting safe, dynamic correctional work environments must include the strength inherent in diversifying our work force. Diversity is not the “d” word; it is not simply about “mixing it up” in black and white. By attracting

LEADERSHIP & LEGACY

ONE WOMAN'S VIEW

BY MARY V. LEFRIDGE BYRD



minorities and women to the fold, the diversity I speak about has more to do with creating a culture of inclusion, able to be seen through the prism of possibilities. Has a nice ring, does it not?

At the 1912 National Prison Congress, Maud Ballington Booth, co-founder of Volunteers of America and a prison reformer who began her work in men's prisons in 1896, spoke of the warden's wife, whose role in men's prisons was unofficial yet very important, which represented another role played by women in prison work: "In passing, we want to say that we hope in our little association that we share has the aid of all our warden's wives. The warden's wife is not an official of the prison, yet, how often, as I have gone into those places, I have found her influence."¹

No doubt the 21 women among the 237 attendees who participated in the 1870 National Prison Congress were quite interested in its declaration of principles, which was adopted setting forth the ideals and methods of prison reform. The last of these principles addresses the use of women in prison work: "Principle XXXVII: This congress is of the opinion that both in the official administration of such a [prison] system, and in the voluntary cooperation of citizens therein, the agency of women may be employed with excellent effect."²

The truth is that those convened were focused on the "agency of women" having oversight for "fallen women" who were to be managed in separate institutions. These errands were to be managed by caring matrons who epitomized "true" womanhood whose firm, sensitive ruling was necessary for reformation; this was exactly what those wayward women needed.

These "retro" voyages reveal so clearly parts of the rich and fascinating history of women in corrections. As is true with many of our colleagues throughout North America, one comes to appreciate having the opportunity to learn of and understand the context for contemporary dialogue. Should the truth be told, it is only recently that learning the history, the roots of so many stories has become an earnest interest of mine.

It is important to note some careers may be moving at a pace that does not allow for time to reflect on the "mile markers" of a journey begun and road traveled over a generation. There may be an absence of considering the fact that one may be described, for example, as a female warden rather than as a warden without the propensity to add one's gender. While this is not presented as an issue, it is certainly presented as a reality. In many cases, there is also the reality that correctional administrators who are women of color may be further routinely defined by ethnicity. Clearly this is human nature, which is entirely comprehensible; however, attention must be paid. Our own biases have to be confront-

ed and understood, particularly as to impact on managing institutions and leading personnel.

THE CHANGING FACE OF CORRECTIONS

There is a story I often share related to the changing face of the correctional work force: Walking through the institution administration building lobby one morning, my eye was drawn to a group of young women and men being processed, chatting animatedly about the prospects of being escorted on tour through a state prison. The truth is, I was not certain what group they represented or the college or university from which they hailed. I did not have the time to stop and ask, as I was en route to new staff orientation. Walking into the training room, I looked and realized the same young people, those "students," were newly hired correctional officer trainees. This is likely the point at which I began to wonder to myself, as I met each new class of trainees, "Do your parents know you are in a prison this morning?" As I looked around the room, this is also likely the moment I realized the steadily increasing number of young women entering the work force, particularly as correctional officers.

Having entered the criminal justice field more than 20 years ago, I did not have the benefit of a coordinated or structured course of training. In the late 1970s, I sometimes felt isolated, as there were so few women and rarely several in one jurisdiction. Compounding my individual challenge was the fact that there were few women of color in positions as line, supervisory and executive personnel. The same scenario repeated itself 15 years later when I first became a prison warden. The rare status of being the "only one" can be quite challenging.

This was not an easy position in which to grow and become integrated into a peer group. At times, it has been my reality that what was done well was marginalized and what was not done up to standard was magnified. It is this experience that helped me understand, in an intimate way, what the quote over the entranceway to a library on the campus of a historic black college intended. The quote cautions, "In order to be equal, you must excel."

For the most part, encouragement came from outside rather than within the professional arena where the scarcity of individuals who looked like me had a profound effect on my professional development. A number of realities I have witnessed and been subject to have helped me grow, and a number have forced me to grow. Obviously, not all of these career chapters have been sweet or bring fond memories. The single most important life lesson had been to make a pact with myself that when I reached a position that could be part of recruiting, hiring, retaining, training, teaching and



promoting true diversity with a focus on women and women of color, I would do just that. Evolving shifts in the correctional work force has allowed the opportunity to work alongside staff and breathe life into that pact.

WOMEN AND MINORITIES IN THE WORK FORCE

It was not until the 1970s that any substantial change occurred as to the role of women, particularly in institutional corrections. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, historically, black women have had higher labor force participation rates than white and Hispanic women. Between 1994 and 1996, however, black and white women had virtually identical rates (approximately 59 percent) and Hispanic women participated at a rate of about 53 percent. Since that time, black women have edged ahead with a participation rate of 63.5 percent in 1999. White and Hispanic women participated at 59.6 percent and 55.9 percent, respectively. Women of Hispanic origin are gradually narrowing the participation gap between themselves and their white counterparts.

The increasing number of women working in criminal justice, reflecting these same changes nationally, can be attributed to several reasons: Enactment of civil rights legislation, welfare reform, changes in public assistance programs both nationally and locally, national movements resulting in increasing consciousness around diversity and inclusion. According to the American Correctional Association's *2002 Directory of Adult and Juvenile Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Probation and Parole Authorities* there were 36,121 black female corrections personnel as compared with 84,883 white females in corrections. These numbers obviously reflect a major difference, and the same is true when black females are compared with white males who number 192,343. It is interesting to note the number of black males in corrections totals 40,289, only 4,168 more than black females.

There are similar comparisons in juvenile justice agencies where 13,141 black females are employed as compared with 20,308 white females, and 34,860 white males are employed. Again it is interesting to note the relatively slight difference in the number of black males, which totals 14,440, only a difference of 1,299 when compared with their sisters in the field. The numbers of adult correctional administrators tells a striking story — there were more than three times as many white female administrators (3,902) as there were black administrators (1,163) and more than five times (5,510) the number of white male administrators. Relative to the largest classification of any correctional work force, the number of black correctional officers who are female total 22,592 as compared with 27,289 white females. In the same classification, the number of whites totals 127,285 and the pattern repeats itself relative to the

parallel numbers in black males, which is 30,001. These numbers and their similarities and differences have set up a dynamic backdrop for the emerging and historic culture of correctional organizations and institutions.

Considering the realities of traditional business organizations that typically are constructed in the hierarchical model, it has been said that history or “his story” has demonstrated only part of the work world, how to do the work and who should or can do the work. The power structure the nation has held up, if only by what has been routinely shown or demonstrated, is one that is slow to effectively acknowledge the role of women in a way that suggests inclusiveness to be invaluable. What we know is that the U.S. presidency has not been held by a woman; that the authors of the U.S. Constitution are not women, that women in congressional bodies, though increasing, are clearly still seen as pioneers; that the original founders and leaders of religions have not, for the most part, been women; that world leaders, at least those we see on the nightly news, are not women. These obvious examples of leadership may have an even greater impact on minority women than their counterparts given the similar dearth of black leaders in the corrections field and the low number of representation in popular culture. That our secretary of state is often referred to relative to gender and personal appearance, including hair and clothing, cannot be disregarded. The former secretary of state was also thoughtful, experienced, challenging, incredibly intelligent, a leader motivated by a deep sense of purpose, but can someone help me remember when, if ever, any reference was made to his well-tailored suits and conservative haircut. I have wondered about the impact on one's psyche when extraneous information becomes a part of defining a person.

CREATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

With the now quickly changing demographics of our profession, there is an unusual and indeed unique opportunity to influence the culture of corrections by maximizing and valuing the most important resources we have — our staff — all of them. There must be the willingness to understand and have others understand that hiring a diverse staff is merely the beginning. Leaders must ensure that forecasting strategies are built around valuing human resources and inclusion as paramount guiding principles.

It is held by some that corrections remains the most gender-segregated stop along the criminal justice highway. In addressing staff during orientation, it is wise to address issues of sexism and racism found in the larger world and how these issues can leech into and, in part, define institution culture. It is dangerous to pretend the esprit de corps found at terrific levels during preservice training, especially when the training is at a residential academy, will continue



to exist and be sustained at the same levels upon assignment to one's actual work site.

That there are challenges is undeniable. It is important that those in leadership on all levels of an organization confront and address these challenges. How we lead through those challenges is what needs to be internalized. Since our staff come to their work and responsibilities from so many avenues, we must see and celebrate the strength in diversity, but not make an effort to blend their experiences. Instead, weaving the distinct, colorful and sturdy threads creates the quilt that heralds a rich work force. A one-dimensional work force may only be equipped to deal in one way with edginess often felt in correctional facilities. Equal parts of integrity, intellect and creativity make for a dynamic organization when staff come from many different places equipped with their experiences and a willingness to be part of the whole.

I compiled a list of touchstones that was conceived when thinking about and in response to the emergence of culture clashes between and among certain staff — a rub often falling along the lines of gender and ethnicity. The object was to create a document built on common ground that would engender dialogue toward understanding that in the middle of what appears to be vast differences, commonality can be found. In addition, there was a concurrent effort to provide guideposts that could be most useful to younger staff that have entered, but may not yet have embraced corrections as a career. Perhaps these touchstones would be of use to others.

- I am more responsible than anyone else or any place else for my place in the universe;
- Begin with the end in mind;
- Strut your stuff — humbly;
- Every sister (or brother) is not a sister (or brother);
- Define who you are by who you are, not by what you do or your title;
- Exercise key, tool and self-control;
- Know the difference between your professional and personal boundaries — make it clear;
- Conduct all interactions on the basis of mutual respect;
- Your departmental code of ethics is a dynamic reference document, not a coaster;
- If something sounds off key or peculiar, it likely is; and
- Never say anything or do anything you would not want your mother, a news reporter, your spouse or your children to see, know or hear.

The convergence of public expectation, responsibilities of corrections professionals and demand of the correctional environment coupled with the cultural influence of the larger world create incredible dynamics. For those who work with the staff on the block, it is critical that benchmarks are established, standards set and stops pulled out.

It has been said that women's way of leading is the very stage upon which peace can be given life and sustained. It may be the varied "points of entry" for women that allows for a more vibrant and textured future. The varied points of entry in corrections, particularly institutional corrections, through the disciplines of medical, records, treatment, culinary, business management, budget, etc., help in terms of creating and sustaining skills any leader needs. Thus, the point at which many women enter corrections provides institutions and operations with greater stability, as the entry points bring great expertise.

As a profession, I believe we are reaching an interesting place in our collective journey. We travel together or at least on the same road. When we arrive, I suspect, we will have done so together — perhaps on parallel roads; however, bound for the same destination.

I hope you agree that ours is a profession that thrives on a result of our staff — officers; treatment, human resources, maintenance, records, activities, fiscal, medical, safety and sanitation, information technology and support staff; and every other expert making paper, populations and procedures move.

There is no question our responsibilities can be onerous, as there is no question we can achieve what others may believe to be impossible. This I know to be true; a dynamic, committed, diverse team makes all the difference in the culture of departments and institutions. Let us create a legacy of leadership celebrating the diversity that strengthens each and all. This is but one woman's view.

ENDNOTES

¹Booth, M.B. 1912. Excellent effect – The Edna Mahan story; Hawkes. Annual address of the president of the Association of Women Members. In *Proceedings of the annual congress of the American Prison Association*. Indianapolis: Wm. B. Burford.

²Wines, E.C. (Ed.) 1871. *Transactions of the National Congress on Penitentiary and Reformatory Discipline*. Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons and Co.

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