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By Vanessa St. Gerard

Teacher Gives Students Hope for the Future

Denwood Barksdale not only likes to teach, he loves to teach. As a result, he has been committed to the students at Blandford High School for nearly 20 years. Barksdale, however, is not the typical teacher, and Blandford is not the typical school.

The high school is located in southern Virginia at the

Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center, which is home to medium- and maximum-security male offenders ages 16 to 20. Barksdale, 52, is an English teacher whose ability to see the potential of the young boys who end up at the facility allows him to visualize a future far greater than anything his students have imagined for themselves.

For the past two decades, Barksdale has watched as many teachers have come and gone from the facility, which has a longstanding reputation for housing the most difficult

juvenile offenders, but he says he does not plan to go anywhere anytime soon. "It makes the job more meaningful," Barksdale said of working with inmates. "I can offer them something, through the grace of God, to turn their life around." Barksdale, who is also chairman of the English Department, explained that many good teachers are already in public schools and there is not as great a need there as within the Department of Corrections. Solid teachers are needed in correctional facilities, Barksdale says, because "lives can be lost otherwise."

Barksdale sees hope for his students and lets them know, which results in their motivation to succeed. "Commendations tend to go a long way. ... They buy into the fact that you have confidence in them" and they work hard to achieve, he said. "They know I have their best interests at heart. They know that there isn't anything — within reason — that I wouldn't do for them." And just because his students have shoplifted or been involved with drugs does not mean that Barksdale accepts anything less than excellence. "I don't ... 'dummy down' the work for them. I raise the bar and tell them they can do it."

In addition to teaching English, Barksdale takes a great deal of pride in a project that he created that many would not expect to find in a correctional facility — a program that helps inmates prepare for and get accepted into college. The College Bound Program was founded in 1994 by accident, Barksdale says, but for the past 10

years, it has positively affected the lives of many of the inmates at the Beaumont facility.

The program began when one of Barksdale's students took him aside to ask for assistance in getting into college. Barksdale happily obliged, agreeing to keep their sessions undisclosed to the other students, at the student's request. But after the inmate was released, word somehow got out about his college preparation sessions, and Barksdale soon began receiving numerous requests from other inmates for help in the process. Barksdale brought some order to the program, the SATs began being administered at the facility, and more and more students sought to get involved. Ten years later, Barksdale is proud to talk about his program's promising statistics: 760 past and present participants, 214 college acceptance letters, 35 former inmates currently in college, three students earned an undergraduate degree, one earned his master's degree, and one is currently pursuing his graduate degree — at Georgetown University, no less.

Barksdale says that some of his former students contact him to update him on their progress. "They write to let me know what's going on, to say, 'Hi, I made it.' ... It's very rewarding," he said. The program also offers scholarships to the students for college, with money raised by student fund-raisers such as yard sales and selling chicken dinners, as well as students working the concession stands at amusement parks and the nearby coliseum. "Getting accepted is not enough," Barksdale said, because if they cannot afford to pay for college, their efforts are all for naught.

Barksdale's commitment to the program is seen through the countless hours he spends with his students. "Lives can be changed in a classroom, depending on the way a teacher conducts himself," he said. His normal teaching schedule runs from 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. on weekdays. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays he meets with College Bound students from 3:45 to 6:20 p.m. On Mondays and Fridays, he continues his College Bound work with students who are restricted to their living quarters and usually leaves the facility around 10 p.m. He also stays for an extra hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and every other Saturday, he tutors his College Bound students.

"At the end of any given day, I want to know that I've done the best that I can do, that I haven't shortchanged anybody. ... I want to share as much as I can," Barksdale said. "I love the program. I love being on the side of the underdog. ... I love the ability given to me as a teacher."

Vanessa St. Gerard is assistant editor of Corrections Today.



Denwood Barksdale (right)