

50 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

How one warden dedicated 50 years to the field of corrections

BY ALEXANDER CARRIGAN

Warden Edsel Taylor begins his mornings at MacDougall Correctional Institution in Ridgeville, South Carolina with the usual staff briefings, followed by checking emails and getting all his obligations out of the way. It's then when he begins his favorite part of the job: touring the housing units and yard of the institution. It's here that he spends his time communicating with staff and around 700 inmates currently held in the facility. It's a routine that Taylor has been doing for the last 50 years at MacDougall, and it's one that has led to him having one of the most unique and enriching experiences in the corrections field.



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In October 2019, Taylor celebrated his 50th anniversary at MacDougall Correctional Institution, the last 46 spent as the warden. This milestone makes Taylor the longest-tenured correctional employee in the U.S., according to *The Post and Courier*. They also report that the next closest individual to the title is a warden at a Louisiana correctional facility who has held the position for around 30 years. Taylor was surprised with a celebration at the facility surrounded by dozens of family, friends and employees.

Bryan Stirling, the director of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, spoke highly of Taylor to *The Post and Courier*.

“MacDougall is one of our institutions that is a shining light, and one of the reasons for that is because it’s got good leadership, and it’s got a very good warden,” Stirling said. “He’s dedicated his life to the state and the department.”

Becoming a warden



Warden Edsel Taylor, 1974

In an exclusive interview with *Corrections Today*, Taylor spoke about how he started working at MacDougall following his time in the Vietnam War. With a background primarily in teaching and coaching, Taylor approached MacDougall, which at the time was a juvenile facility, for a coaching job.

He ended up working as a coach and teacher for about four years but started to want more.

“I started applying for warden positions and associate warden positions and was lucky after a few tries to gain a warden’s job at our central reception and evaluation center,” Taylor said. “That would have been around 1974. And it went on from there. I’ve been a warden ever since.”

The transition from coach to warden was quite a challenging one, but Taylor found it one worth taking on. Over his 50-year career, Taylor saw how the role of warden changed dramatically.

“Probably the greatest change I have observed as a warden has been the change from having the institution warden almost exclusively being responsible for everything,” Taylor said. “Making the shots, making the moves and procedures, doing everything almost independent

of headquarters ... to the point now where headquarters pretty well sets the standards and policies and procedures and I, as a warden, am put more in a role of setting those procedures and rules and try to make them fit the institution when sometimes it’s very difficult.”

One of the most notable instances of this development Taylor observed was the procedure involving escaped inmates. According to *The Post and Courier*, over 170 inmates have escaped MacDougall in the 46 years Taylor served as warden.

“Years back, if we had an escape, the warden got out and he pursued that escapee and caught him and brought him back to custody,” he explained to *Corrections Today*. “Today, if we have an escape, we simply call an agency, the escape apprehension team, and they pursue the escapee.”

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Taylor told *The Post and Courier* about one escape in the 1980s where two inmates managed to escape, and he happened to run into them on Highway 176 after being radioed about the missing men. While Taylor was able to handcuff one of the men, the other tried to flee, forcing Taylor to shoot at him. The man escaped and was later caught by authorities.

“It’s improved a lot in a lot of ways, yet it takes away a lot of a warden’s creativity, I think, and his ability to run that particular facility, and the environment it’s in and the type of custody level inmates that are assigned to that facility,” Taylor said. “It’s considerably different than it was from a warden’s level. I’m not trying to say it was better back then, but it’s certainly different now.”

Taylor also noted how improvements in technology have both helped and hindered his role as warden. While

Taylor does appreciate how technology aids in the flow of information and makes it immediately available to everyone in the facility, he has noted that it has changed a lot about how he acts as warden.

“It ties me to a computer and cell phone a lot and takes away time I would otherwise spend interacting with my staff and inmates,” he explained. “There’s never any off time for a warden now. With a cell phone, you’re on duty 24/7, so you got to make sure those don’t weaken as far as your ability to clear your head occasionally and get some things off your mind and concentrate on health and wellness for yourself.”

Rehabilitating inmates

Despite the changes in the field, Taylor is still dedicated to working to rehabilitate the inmates at MacDougall Correctional Institution. While he takes his daily walks around the facility, he makes sure that he has a chance to keep the inmates feeling hopeful and well. According to Taylor, one of the most important things wardens and correctional officers and employees can do is make sure the inmates feel safe.

“If inmates don’t feel safe and feel worried about their safety, they do not think about trying to improve,” Taylor explained. “It’s hard to get them engaged in programs if all they’re thinking about is, ‘Am I going to be safe?’

That’s one of the first things you’ve got to do. You’ve got to show concern for them, you’ve got to show that you respond to their needs by being out and about and listening to them and responding to their requests as they come in, either verbally or written requests.”

Taylor said that one of the best things to help inmates is to keep them occupied with projects and activities. These include programs like GED courses or vocational programs. According to The Post and Courier, Taylor has instituted a farming system at the facility, where inmates help produce farmed and canned produce for correctional institutions all over the state. The facility also raises 120,000 chickens which can produce over 100,000 eggs per day.

“We expect one egg per chicken,” he told The Post and Courier. “If we don’t get close to 120,000 eggs, we go out and try and see what chickens aren’t pulling their weight.”

Taylor also explained that these programs are able to run as well as they do thanks to the number of volunteers who offer their services to the facility.

“I’ve found the more volunteers you have come into an institution greatly enhances at a very low cost you can offer to the inmates. They can respond very well to volunteers who come in,” Taylor said.

It’s also because of volunteers that the facility was able to raise money and construct a chapel on the facility grounds in 1986, something Taylor was “particularly proud of,” as it didn’t require a single bit of state government funding to achieve.

It’s also in his tenure that Taylor got involved with ACA, something he’s been a part of since he began working in corrections in the 1970s.

“Probably one of my biggest achievements has been passing ACA accreditation,” Taylor told Corrections Today. “It’s probably one of the most difficult things we did as an institution, but after achieving accreditation it was probably one of the most satisfying and rewarding. I don’t think I have ever felt that the institution functioned better than it did after we achieved accreditation.”

Taylor also told Corrections Today how he always looks over the newest ACA manuals and how he refers to them for training and standards.



Photo courtesy Edsel Taylor

Warden Edsel Taylor speaking with some of the inmates at MacDougall Correctional Institution during one of his daily walks around the facility.

“I find it’s a good read as soon as I receive it in the mail, and I try to do everything I can to pass it on to the staff. I’ll send articles around to the staff and use it in training,” he said.

Into the future

Now that Taylor has spent 50 years in corrections, he has had time to reflect on what has worked for him to survive this long in the field and what he can pass on to other correctional employees. The biggest, he says, is probably his focus on health and wellness. Taylor, who bikes and jogs regularly and tries to physically exercise daily, stressed the importance of staying healthy and active when working in corrections.

“I’ve been blessed with good health and a lot of energy, but I’ve learned a long time ago that you have to really work at that to maintain fitness,” he explained. “I try to instill that in my employees. We start all of our staff meetings with wellness tips, so I’m trying to motivate them because I realize how important that is.”

He also spoke about how difficult the career can be, and how correctional officers and employees need to maintain their mental and emotional health alongside their physical health.

“I try to instill in all my employees the importance of maintaining good health and wellness. You can’t do this job if you’re not mentally healthy and physically healthy. I’ve been blessed with good health and a lot of energy, but I’ve learned a long time ago that you have to really work at that to maintain fitness.”

“A lot of people go into corrections and it’s clearly not for them,” he continued. It’s a unique career, and if it fits, then it will be a very rewarding career. You must be a person that is self-disciplined. You must be a person that has concern for others and be able to relate to that. You must have good communication skills. ... I try to engage myself with each of my employees and follow their career, and I find I get great rewards from seeing each employee progress through their professional career and make promotions.”

He also notes how important this is to also teach to the inmates at MacDougall. Aside from promoting healthy lifestyles, Taylor focuses on the mental and emotional wellness aspect. One of the more notable methods is to maintain routine in his facilities so the inmates can have

something to focus on daily. Taylor also spoke about how the facility giving tablets to inmates has helped them immensely.

“Inmates can now improve themselves in any number of ways and simply through the tablets, without even going to the treatment programs,” he explained. “They can do it from their housing units. They can also correspond, and the benefit of that is that we can monitor the correspondence if need be. It enhances their connections with their family and community. They don’t have to constantly be escorted back and forth to the law library. They can do their legal work using the tablets. Things like the tablet ... will greatly enhance prisons in the future.”

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With all of the developments and changes in the field, Taylor doesn’t see any sign of stopping. As he explained, “the day [he doesn’t] look forward to getting up and going to work, they’ll have [his] resignation and [he’ll] retire.”

“I’m not sure how many additional years I’ll have to work, but as long as I feel good and I feel up to the chore and feel capable of taking the institution forward, I’ll continue to work,” Taylor declared.

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