

19
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BECOME WORKPLACES OF CHOICE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

MAY 2022

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A non-profit for the health of correctional agencies, staff and families

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Some emails I receive from you bring tears to my eyes when I read them. (And I don't tear up easily.)

A couple of months ago I received one such email from Bryan Hughes. (Bryan has contributed articles to our Correctional Oasis in the past, on topics such as [how supervisors can be better supportive of staff following a traumatic exposure](#), and [corrections staff suffering in silence](#)).

Bryan's latest email and article still bring tears to my eyes when I read them, and even when I even think about their content.

They are tears of compassion for what Bryan went through, but they are also tears of relief and gratitude.

Folks, not too long ago, WE ALMOST LOST BRYAN.

BUT, I'm so very thankful to say, LIFE AND GRACE AND SELF-AWARENESS PREVAILED, and a disastrous outcome was averted.

What would have most certainly been a huge loss and a heartbreak for us all is now a clarion of hope, and possibly a beacon of light for others who may also feel overwhelmed by extreme emotional distress.

In his article below entitled What Does A Glock Taste Like?, Bryan's ultra-vulnerable sharing of his experience with strong suicidal urges, how he got past them, and how he is now maintaining, are some of the most courageous words I have read in a long time.

Bryan sent me this article in the hopes that, if we chose to publish it, it could possibly be of help to others who may be coming close to suffering like he was, and who need to reach out for help immediately.

We are publishing it, hoping and expecting that it will prove to be a source of hope and inspiration, and a gateway to life.

Caterina Spinaris

WHAT DOES A GLOCK TASTE LIKE?

BY BRYAN HUGHES

Have you ever pictured yourself laid back in your recliner, tears falling down your face with a 40-caliber Glock handgun laid across your chest? Your hand is squeezing the pistol grip so tight you feel the tingling of numbness as your fingertips and knuckles are turning as white as the Florida sand. You know how dangerous firearms can be, so you keep your finger down the side of the barrel and outside the trigger guard.

You hold the gun, laying it across your chest at first. Thoughts racing through your mind, wrestling with the pain in your heart. Still crying, you put the barrel of the gun against your temple.

So, this is what it feels like to have the cold steel of a barrel pressed against your head with your own hand.

You lay the gun back on your chest as another wave of pain overtakes your body and makes you tremble. Never realizing your heart could hurt this bad, you wonder if you're going to pull the trigger.

No.

Let's start over, this time talking about me – because this is about me and my story.

I lay back in my recliner, tears falling down my face with a 40-caliber Glock handgun laid across my chest. My hand is squeezing the pistol grip so tight that I feel the tingling of numbness as my fingertips and knuckles turn as white as the Florida sand. I know how dangerous firearms can be, so I keep my finger down the side of the barrel and outside the trigger guard.

I hold the gun, laying it across my chest at first. Thoughts are racing through my mind, wrestling with the pain in my heart. Still crying, I put the barrel of the gun against my temple.

So, I think to myself, this is what it feels like to have the cold steel of a barrel pressed against my head with my own hand.

I lay the gun back on my chest as another wave of pain overtakes my body and makes me tremble. Never realizing before that my heart could hurt this bad, I wonder if I am going to pull the trigger.

I ask myself:

Is this the day my life ends?

Is this the day all my pain stops?

I put the barrel of the Glock in my mouth and the reality of what is about to happen is overwhelming. With the taste of gun oil on my lips, my hand is shaking so badly that until I close my mouth tightly around the barrel, it bounces against my teeth. The metal against my teeth equates to fingernails on a chalkboard or scraping a fork across a dinner plate, and it makes "that" noise.

Do I say, "fuck it" and pull the trigger?

Maybe I should call 911 and report a suicide so my wife doesn't come home to the messy scene I just created? Even though the affair she had for the last year that I just found out about moments ago help push me to this breaking point? Do I call my adult children, not to tell them my plans, but to hear their voices and tell them I love them one last time?

For some reason I can't pull the trigger at that moment. I lay the Glock across my chest and cry a little while longer. I pick up my cell phone and snap a picture so I can send it to my wife and tell her I love her one last time.

Then I have an AHA! moment. How pathetic is this? I just took a picture of a gun laying across my chest, in tears, to send my wife. I realize this very second that I do not want to die. I want the pain to stop. I ABSOLUTELY want the pain to stop, but I don't want to die. I don't want to put my 4 adult children through the pain of losing me and asking themselves "Why?" for the rest of their lives. And even though I'm absolutely crushed by my wife's actions, I truly don't want to put this guilt on her either. I also realize that sending this picture is more of a manipulation move to make her feel the pain I'm feeling.

I lay the phone down. I lay the gun down. I think about how my life has just been changed forever. Right now, I feel lost. I feel hopeless. I feel helpless. I'm scared of the future. But I know I do not want to die. As I said before, I want the pain to stop, but I don't want to die. I have many more things I want to do with my grown children and three granddaughters.

Life is hard right now, but it's getting better. Some days are worse than others, but the better days get a little better every time.

I'm back to work. I'm enjoying my family, even though it looks different now. I have an amazing therapist I see weekly. I have a new outlook on life, and I am very excited about my future and this trip to New Orleans coming up - a place I have never been, but have always wanted to go to. An all-guys trip with friends from work. We all need to decompress sometimes.

Tasting the gun oil on a Glock. **Never again**



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT – SUICIDE

BY SUSAN JONES, PHD

When was the last time that you talked to an incarcerated individual or a correctional client about their suicidal feelings or actions? Most corrections people talk to the incarcerated or clients about issues surrounding suicide quite often. It is what we do. Moreover, after the first couple of times, we do it well. I have seen many corrections people have a kind, caring conversation with an incarcerated individual who is contemplating suicide with as much ease and professionalism as having a conversation about a work referral process. We know that many of our clients have a history of suicide attempts, or they have considered making a suicide attempt. We also know that it is our job to try to prevent them from taking their own life.

I could go on about our legal obligation to protect the people we are charged with supervising. I could also talk about the risk that suicidal incarcerated individuals pose for the staff and other incarcerated individuals – but I won't. I want us to consider, just for a moment, the ease with which we deal with this potentially volatile conversation and the "facts" that we know about this process. Then, I want each of us to consider using those same skills when we deal with each other and with people in the community.

You see, I have a friend that has been dealing with depression during the past five years. One day she started to tell me about it and, of course, I asked her whether she had any suicidal thoughts. She started to cry and told me that I am the only friend she has that will talk to her about this very dark part of her illness. She has many other friends who work in corrections and none of them will have a real conversation with her about this very serious issue.

I was surprised and saddened when I heard this. I reflected on why these same people who I know deal with suicidal issues on a frequent basis, were not able to help their "non-corrections" friend without feeling the social stigma that goes along with this topic. This particular instance is not the only time I have seen this type of reluctance of highly trained corrections professionals, turning away from having a real conversation with a friend about suicide.

I am amazed that as corrections professionals we can deal so effectively with incarcerated individuals but we don't want to acknowledge this issue with our friends. I know this is a part of the stigma that goes along with suicide and suicide attempts, but I also believe that if we can normalize this conversation, we will very likely become better able to help each other.

The awareness of the number of suicides among correctional staff seems to be increasing, and leaders are creating programs or calling for studies into the reasons behind the deaths. I know that with each suicide comes a very complex set of circumstances and there is not one simple solution. However, I also know that we as corrections professionals are ideally situated to help with this crisis. We must begin to talk to each other, both at work and in the community, with the same level of professionalism and concern as we do with incarcerated individuals.

We need to become more comfortable with having this conversation when the need arises, and make it a key part of taking care of each other and ourselves. By talking about it, we can bring the issue into the light and quite possibly make a positive difference.





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DWCO FOUNDER'S STORY

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD

As some of you may know, I am the founder of **Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO).** Prior to getting immersed in your world - the world and lives of correctional staff and their families, I resided in Denver, CO, where I worked as a psychotherapist in private practice, specializing in treating psychological trauma.

As a result of nearly two decades of being exposed to traumatic material through my clients' stories, I noticed negative changes creeping up in my outlook and mood. I began to have an increasingly negative worldview, and I felt like I perpetually was heavy-hearted, mourning continually for the state of humanity and the harm we sometimes cause to one another. I also became increasingly more reclusive, avoiding close relational interactions.

The awareness of my negative personality changes alarmed me. After all, as a psychotherapist I was supposed to love and care about people, but, instead, I was finding that my dislike for humanity was growing.

This drove me to look for help for myself, and that is where I came across literature on subjects like vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue. To help myself, I immersed myself in this material.

After I felt I was able to "turn the corner" and regain my positive outlook, I began to offer seminars and workshops in Denver, Colorado, to other mental health professionals, animal control officers and animal rescue volunteers on the impact of their vocation on their mental health and how to counter that, taking care of themselves and bouncing back to a healthier worldview, to a renewed love for their vocation, and to the pursuit of healthy relationships.

In the year 2000 I relocated to Florence, Colorado, in Fremont County, after what felt to me as a strong spiritual prompting to do so. Unbeknownst to me, at that time Fremont County housed 12 prisons—8 State and 4 Federal, and a county jail, and immediately adjacent counties housed 5 more prisons and 7 more jails.

When I moved, I thought that the purpose for that was for me to semi-retire, working part-time in private practice as a psychotherapist, and "playing" at being a "flower child" by raising goats and growing garlic. Indeed, I embarked on all three of these projects soon after my move.

However, this was not to be for very long. After setting up my private practice in nearby Cañon City, Colorado, I began treating individuals who were active or retired correctional employees or their family members (including former spouses).

From the outset I was taken aback by the high incidence of post-traumatic symptoms and depression symptoms that correctional employees exhibited, even years after retirement. All too often, alcohol misuse seemed to be the coping strategy of choice. I also began to hear about correctional staff's high suicide rates in our community.

It was evident to me that employees and families had no awareness that they were exhibiting mental health disorder symptoms, and the significance of that. When I'd point this out to them they'd simply shrug, chuckle cynically and say, "That's corrections for you."

While treating these individuals, I sought resources suitable to share with them, but I was able to locate little research that specifically addressed the effects of occupational trauma on corrections staff, and there was hardly anything suitable that I could find for staff and their families to read or view.

Moreover, correctional departments did not seem to recognize that their employees were suffering from mental health problems due to work conditions that were inherent to the job, for example, due to repeated exposure to traumatic material whether directly or indirectly, and also due to repeated exposure to other high-stress events. Many agencies provided their State's free Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) services in case employees decided to seek professional help. However, there was nothing in place from the outset to prepare and equip staff for the job, and employees tended to not seek mental health services through their EAP due to the associated stigma of being "weak" or due to fears about lack of confidentiality. Additionally, some State's EAP providers were at times unaware of the burden and peculiarities of corrections work and its possible toxic impact on staff, causing those who did seek professional help to discontinue their efforts and give up on seeking professional help.

That is when I started feeling a very strong spiritual prompting to "do something about it" myself. I had absolutely no desire to do so, feeling completely ill-equipped for the task, since I had never worked in corrections, or any other type of law enforcement, or the military. Plus, I reasoned, I had moved to the area in order to semi-retire. It was obvious to me that raising awareness about staff's wellness issues, and breaking hard ground to provide specialized services for correctional employees and their families was a tremendously difficult, uphill undertaking. In my estimation at the time, such an endeavor would take "everything I was and everything I had" (an assessment which proved to be correct).

To appease my conscience, in the year 2000 I originated the term Corrections Fatigue to give a non-clinical name to what I saw staff struggling with. I wrote a few articles on correctional staff's exposure to occupationally-related trauma and its effects (which were published in the local newspaper). And I gave three trainings on the subject in the community, the last one in November 2002. The material I presented was based on what I knew about occupational psychological trauma and its effects, and what I had learned through my professional and personal experience about dealing with these effects successfully.

After writing these articles and offering these trainings, I felt I had done my duty, so to speak, and that I was free to move on. However, in December of 2002 I had an intensely spiritual dream in which I was confronted with the stark reality that if I did not pursue the corrections staff's cause, I would miss my life's calling.

This absolutely terrified me, as to me missing out on the purpose of my existence would be a complete catastrophe and an absolute heartbreak. I could not bear the thought of living with such a regret forever, that I missed out on my life's calling simply because I did not want to be inconvenienced or have my "semi-retirement" plans derailed.

Upon awakening, I told my husband about the dream, adding, "We're signing up!" I felt drafted. Thankfully, my husband Ted was FULLY supportive of that endeavor, and remains so to this day, 20 years later. And that is how we gave ourselves to this new-found, even though at the time not welcome or anticipated, mission.

As a result, Desert Waters Correctional Outreach was incorporated in Colorado in January 2003. We received our 501(c)(3) designation from the Internal Revenue Service in March 2003 – at lightning speed, as if to make up for lost or wasted time.

I opted to name our nonprofit Desert Waters Correctional Outreach because my desire is that we would reach out to provide a place of refreshing resources and respite customized for corrections professionals and their families, and be a source of increased health for corrections agencies – "...waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert"



TRUE GRIT:*

Building Resilience in
Corrections Professionals™

INSTRUCTOR TRAINING

Online Training &
Independent Study

2022 Online Instructor Training Dates

> Dec 6-9 & Dec 12-14

Times

- > Times Online: 9am–1pm Mountain Time (8am Pacific, 10am Central, 11am Eastern)
- > Independent Study: 12 hours
- > Phone Coaching: Two 1.5 hour individual sessions following the online training

*Recently revised and updated

7-day (43-hour) Online Training & Independent Study

- Science-based factors that promote resilience
- Skill-based tools that apply to corrections employees' work and home life
- Positive, practical, empowering, engaging, motivating—and FUN!
- Sequel to the award winning CF2F course, but also stands alone
- Certification for the 1-day training with the same title

“This course will have a profound impact on all correctional staff both at home and at work.”

Upon Successful Completion of Certification

Requirements Instructor Candidates Will Receive:

- Certificate of Completion for 43 Contact Hours
- Three-year certification and license* as Instructors** or Co-instructors** to offer the 1-day TG course to their agency staff***
- Electronic copies of TG course materials
- TG updates during their three-year certification

Fee: \$1,495.00 per Instructor Candidate.



True Grit

Course Author: Caterina Spinaris, PhD., is DWCO's Executive Director and a Licensed Professional Counselor with over 30 years of clinical experience. Caterina conducts research, and offers research-based trainings and interventions to corrections agencies to counter the effects of occupational stressors, and to increase organizational health and employee well-being.

In addition to TG, she authored the award-winning course "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™," as well as the courses "Correctional Family Wellness™," "The Supportive Supervisor™," and Peer Support Training. Caterina is the 2014 recipient of the **Colorado Criminal Justice Association's Harry Tinsley award.**

What staff have said about True Grit

- "This course delivers the answer to the 'Now what?' question after CF2F. It builds and strengthens the toolbox for employees working in such high stress environments in a simple yet profound way. 'True Grit' generates bond-building discussion with real life application."
- "By far the best training I have been through."
- "I would like to see this class in the future in Block Training. The class opened your eyes to the different ways of being a better partner at work as well as at home."
- "This class is a great tool for work and more importantly HOME LIFE!!! This should be given during Block Training. I feel it is an important tool to help people take a step back and look at things they may be doing or not doing. Overall an EXCELLENT class!!!"

Criteria for Instructor Candidates

- Prior classroom training experience
- At least 5 years of working in corrections
- Experience working through work-related challenges
- Ability to motivate others
- Ability to manage classroom discussions



DESERT WATERS
CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation (EIN 30-0151345) with the mission to advance the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training.

REGISTRATION FORM

Dates: Dec 6-9 & Dec 12-14 Fee: \$1,495 per Instructor Candidate

We also offer in-person instructor trainings for 10 or more.

Instructor Candidate Name(s): _____

Corrections Agency Name: _____

Address: _____ City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Method of Payment: Check enclosed, payable to DWCO, P.O. Box 355, Florence CO 81226

To pay by Credit Card, call us at 719-784-4727. Purchase Orders accepted.

admin@desertwaters.com

Cancellation Policy: No refunds less than three weeks prior to the training. Registrations are transferable to another instructor candidate of the same agency as long as instructor candidate criteria are met.

*TG licenses are renewable for another three years by passing an online exam (fee \$490)

**Instructors can teach on their own if necessary; Co-instructors must always team-teach with an Instructor

***Instructors and Co-instructors are NOT certified to train other instructors or individuals outside of their agency

CFW INSTRUCTOR CANDIDATE COMMENTS

Our **Correctional Family Wellness: For Adult Family Members (CFW)** online Instructor Training course offered in March 2022 was well-received by participants from across the USA and one additional country. We were greatly impressed with the commitment and passion of corrections staff eager to participate in this training for the purpose of impacting the lives of not just their colleagues, but also the families of their colleagues!

Here is some feedback we received about the course:

This is a good addition to the catalog of courses from Desert Waters. Family was the missing piece. Thank you!!
– D.A., Sergeant

Thank you! The training is excellent as always. Participating is both informative and refreshing.
– M.W., Prison Chaplain

This training is crucial for the well-being and survival of corrections professionals and their families.
– K.H., Corrections Training Officer

Great class. Much needed.
– M.M., Training Officer

Due to requests from various stakeholders, we have now developed and plan to make available soon a Correctional Family Wellness course for **staff** on how to help their family members navigate stressors associated with corrections work. For more information about how become certified through your agency to teach CFW to the families of your colleagues, click [HERE](#) or [contact us](#).

A FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

BY ANONYMOUS FAMILY MEMBERS

The following narratives were written by the wife and the teenage daughter of a correctional professional. This individual has served in a custody/security role for more than 22 years at a midwestern Department of Corrections.

The wife's story:

How does someone with 20+ years cope with stress and the everyday concern for their personal safety, as well as their co-workers'?

You become a different person, or you develop an alter ego, if you will. This allows you to keep a stern profile and not allow people to see any other side of you. For safety and security issues this is more than acceptable. However, one needs to be able to turn that off when they leave work and go home to their family and friends.

Although I've never worked directly with offenders, because my husband deals with it on a daily basis, I feel as though I have lived the experiences, situations, etc. that he has. He has always been a wonderful provider, soulmate, father and friend but recently I had noticed, that those traits were slowly diminishing. He was becoming someone that I did not feel as though I knew anymore. The stress of the job was getting to him and that stern profile he had to maintain eight hours a day while at work became his profile every hour of every day.

Our daughter had even noticed the change in her father. Before they had always had an inseparable bond, as fathers and daughters often do. His change was breaking our daughter's heart, and after a recent disagreement they had, she lashed out at me saying some very hurtful things about her father. I knew in my heart she truly did not mean them, but she was so angry, she had just reached her boiling point and had exploded. I asked her to give herself a few days to calm down and then discuss her concerns with her father. A few days went by and she did what I asked. I did not witness the conversation, but I came in towards the end of it and I could see the pain and hurt in my husband's eyes. He had no idea things had gotten this bad. We, as a family, then also discussed other issues that needed to be addressed.

I felt that we had made progress, but I did not have any idea how much until my husband went to the CF2F class. (Desert Waters' course From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™.) I remember him coming home from the class and immediately hugging our daughter and apologizing for his behavior and who he had become. I saw an immediate change in him after this class and his passion for this program.

Now my husband has once again become the same man I fell in love with and married 27 years ago!

These changes because of work are not something to be ignored. Corrections is a very stressful job, and your family and friends are the ones who suffer from it. Don't shut them out. They are the ones who love and support you every day.

The daughter's story:

My father has always been my biggest role model. He set me up for success every morning. Words of encouragement were spoken, he told me I would do amazing things, he said that he loved me, and out the door to work he went.

The mornings, they made me happy. It was always the afternoon I dreaded, when dad came home from work. Dad would come home defeated every day, answering constant phone calls, and just looked like he had given up. My cheery, loving father seemed to vanish when he was off work.

People started telling me things about my dad, like how power-needy he was, how he had to be in constant control, how his emotions always affected his attitude. I began to realize that my dad was becoming his work. I struggled with connecting with him, never feeling like I could disclose information to him, and instead feeling scared to tell my dad about my life in fear of him disapproving or snapping at me.

My mom and I brought this to his attention, and that's when things began to change. After we spoke to him, my father was so hurt. He had never realized what was happening.

Next thing I knew, Dad was gone for a week attending the CF2F workshop and instructor training. I remember the day he came home. He came into the door and hugged me, and started giving Mom and me a summary of his week.

While doing that, Dad broke down, sobbing. He told us all about these things that he learned, the stories he was told, and how he didn't feel like he was alone in his struggle of becoming his work. I broke down right along with him. From the moment he stepped into the door, I knew my dad was back. He was given the right tools to understand and cope with what he was going through, and he used them.

Now, once again, Dad channels his rough patches into productivity, and I have never been so proud of him. Dad and I have never had such a strong relationship before, and I look to model myself after the person my father has become.

IN MEMORIAM

Sara Zimmerman

Correctional Officer
Douglas County Department of Corrections
Omaha, NE

Arthur Basher

Sergeant
Erie County Holding Center
Buffalo, New York

Quote of the Month

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.”

Brené Brown

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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DWCO Mission

Advancing the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training

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Your gifts are tax-deductible.

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Inc., is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.



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