

20  
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

AUGUST 2023

From The Director's Desk

Wellness Playbook For Champs

The Erosion

Being Nice Could Save Your Life

What CF2F Taught Me

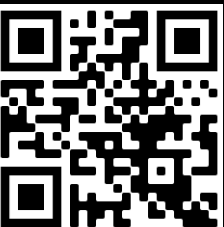
Wellness Culture – Part 1

Quote Of The Month



Volume:20

Issue:8



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

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

In this issue of the Correctional Oasis, and hopefully, in several subsequent ones, we focus on the importance of workforce culture. “Why do that?” you may ask. Who cares?

And what do we mean by workforce culture anyway?

The short and simple answer to this last question is that workforce culture refers to “the way we do things around here,” what are considered by the majority (or by leaders/influencers) to be **acceptable behaviors, attitudes, and values** for that setting, team, or workplace.

Culture can be barely noticeable because it is ever-present, like the air we breathe. We get used to it, stop noticing it after a while even if it reeks of fumes, and tune it out for the most part, unless something drastic happens that jars us out of our ignoring it. However, if the culture is unhealthy – toxic in any way – all of us who inhale it pay the price. On the contrary, to the degree that it is healthy and clean, we all benefit.

Given Desert Waters’ focus on correctional staff wellness, we will be discussing at some length why culture must be factored in when dealing with staff health and well-being. And we will describe Desert Waters’ “do it right from the start” strategies for building sustainable, long-range ways for shaping ever-improving correctional workforce cultures that truly support staff wellness for the long haul.

*Caterina Spinaris*



# WELLNESS PLAYBOOK FOR CHAMPS

BY STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, MSC

It occurred to me one night during a conversation with a fellow corrections friend that the wellness game being played in corrections agencies seems very déjà vu (French for “already seen,” AKA “old news”) for some reason. It hit me when I was driving to work this morning: the corrections wellness game is mostly about defense.

Correctional agencies have long suffered the effects of not being able to change, this we know. We have been saying for decades that prison reform is needed, yet we never seem to achieve that reform. We sit at conferences and trainings that show us immediate steps we can take to respond to the “issue of the year,” and yet meaningful long-term strategies elude us. There are always reasons given for that (even good reasons) that include staffing, political climate, budget constraints, etc. But then I have noticed that over the years when litigation strikes and mandates come, there seems to be a fairly immediate strategy for the next snap (anyone else missing football?)

Traditionally, corrections training has centered around reacting to the situations that arise in our facilities. When this happens, we do such-and-such; when this behavior is present, we use this amount of force; when we find contraband, we shake down this way. We have defensive strategies for every eventuality we can think of – and there are many such.

But even the best defense needs an offense to win the game. Now, I know there’s always going to be “that one time,” so let me save you the Google search. In 2006, the Chicago Bears defense scored more points than the offense to win the game by 1 point over the Arizona Cardinals. However, this is not a strategy that any coach leans on regularly ... except maybe in corrections.

**“WE HAVE TO START BUILDING WELLNESS SYSTEMS THAT LOOK PAST REACTING TO BAD MOMENTS, AND START BUILDING PREVENTION STRATEGIES.”**



What does this have to do with correctional staff wellness? A lot, in my estimation.

We have to start building wellness systems that look past reacting to bad moments, and start building prevention strategies. How many of us have gone to work to hear about another failed marriage, substance issue, conduct issue, or coworker who has died early of a heart attack or by suicide, and thought to ourselves, "Here's another corrections casualty"?

We may do a fundraiser for the family or make some jokes about dating sites, but in the end, there is probably little, if any, discussion about preventing future occurrences. And so corrections goes. Defense is necessary to fight the enemy off so the strategy can advance the mission. Defense will always have a vital role to play. We sing chants about it. But let me ask you, when the game is tied and time has run out, which team has the better chance of winning the game?

Offense. The strategy, the playmaker, the pathfinder. **Wellness strategies in corrections have to play offense, too.** What does that look like in corrections? It looks like prevention education at the beginning of the career, teaching staff how to prepare now before the career gets hard and has them worn down. Helping them put in safety rails for their relationships with loved ones, making sure they have a care plan in place before trauma exposure finds them, and creating an environment where asking for help is embraced instead of ostracized.

**Offense includes leaders who model wellness and make it part of their values when they make decisions and interact with staff.** Staff wellness takes investment of both finances and human capital. It requires a well-thought out implementation plan and a voice at every decision table. Staff wellness is not an after-thought when something has gone bad or wrong, it isn't solely a recruitment and retention plan, it isn't a show to put on one week every year in May.

**"STAFF WELLNESS IS A CULTURE THAT STAFF AT EVERY LEVEL SUBSCRIBE TO. IT'S MAKING THE STAFF WELLNESS TRAINING OR EVENTS AS HIGH A PRIORITY AS SAFETY AND SECURITY TRAINING."**

Staff wellness is a culture that staff at every level subscribe to. It's making the staff wellness training or events as high a priority as safety and security training, and by doing so sending a loud and clear and convincing message to our frontlines that YOU matter, the whole you, not just "the body to fill the post" you.

Offense is passing when we can't make a run, and owning our part in a turnover. Most importantly, offense is a shared responsibility between the individual and the agency. **"Prison reform and staff wellness hold hands; one can't happen without the other," as Caterina Spinaris says.** Let's make sure they play for the same team with a good strategy



# THE EROSION

The statement below was written in 1980! It reads like it could have been written today.

Let's work together to PREVENT and REVERSE this decline!

**"Watching their initial entrance into the prison can be quite an experience. The hope on their faces, the positive anxiety of their motivated gait – at first, it's all there. Then, slowly and almost methodically, the smiles wane, the expectations atrophy, and the desires to perform in a positive fashion succumb to escapist fantasy and verbally acknowledged skepticism. After six months to a year the period of hope and enthusiasm should almost be all over."**

Wicks, R.J. (1980). *Guard! Society's Professional Prisoner*. Houston: Gulf Publications.

# BEING NICE COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE – NOW AND LATER

BY BRENT PARKER, BA

Working in corrections is a very complex endeavor. It's difficult, boring, challenging, and full of contradictions. Are we cops, social workers, enforcers, or teachers? Actually, we are asked to be all these things. And while training has improved over the years, today's correctional professional remains under-trained in some important areas and maybe over-trained in other areas.

People come into corrections for a variety of reasons, but most probably want to help on some level. We want to help protect society, be part of the law enforcement team, and maybe even help the offenders. Most corrections professionals begin their career with a positive attitude and an empathetic heart for humanity.

Unfortunately, after some well-intended training and a few months on the job, we quickly become jaded, cynical and may even feel to "fit in" we need to become more hardened in our approach. Becoming hardened may be the result of being hurt by offenders – physically injured or scarred from emotional and mental manipulation. We see hardened veterans who appear to be doing well and we tend to emulate their tough behavior. We may have even heard the words, "firm, fair and consistent" so many times that we forget working with people is a nuanced activity. Our attitude turns negative and our empathy for humanity begins to fade. After a few short years, we are disenchanted, grumpy and stressed. We become consistently angry or "hardened," and it effects the way we manage ourselves in our social interactions. We're just not as nice as we once were. Our family and friends see the change, but we may not want to hear that they no longer recognize us.

I was a decent corrections professional, which meant I was nice to people. I was blessed to have good mentors who taught me to communicate well, and keep a sense of empathy when working with offenders. I think I managed to stay pretty nice, most of the time, because that's how I was raised. I was once told by a grumpy old veteran, "We never say please and thank you to offenders." Of course, that's not how I was raised to interact with other humans, so I discarded that notion and "please and thank you" served me well for over thirty years ... thankfully. I believe now that being "nice" can actually save your life – **now AND later.**

Don't get me wrong. Safety and security are always the priority, but how we achieve safety and security varies greatly with each situation. Certain situations dictate a more hardened and measured response based on policy and sound training. But, when possible, let's try being nice.

I'm not suggesting we bend the rules, cross professional lines with the offenders, or become so soft that we give away the farm. Nice might just mean staying positive, and exhibiting an optimistic attitude. Maybe we smile a little, or at least save the grumpy face for when it's really needed. Maybe we use positive language and empathetic tones, and refrain from name calling, swearing, and belittling comments. Maybe we practice a little empathy, and remind ourselves that offenders are humans, too. They often have mental health issues,

and some have been hurt beyond measure. These are not excuses for crimes and bad behavior, just something we might consider when interacting with all humans.

I think most correctional professionals were raised to be nice people, which probably led us to public service in the first place. And over time we just lost sight of our better self. Sadly, at times, we may have even found ourselves sinking to an offender's level of poor behavior. Give yourself permission to be your better self, again.

So why should I be nice? What's it going to help? How's it going to keep me safer?

I'm so glad you asked!

Treating offenders nice is not new. There have been offender programs for years that relied on more empathetic approaches ... staff modeling positive behavior, communicating effectively, and even collaborating on plans so offenders might succeed upon re-entry. Isn't successful re-entry the goal of corrections?

Real public safety is a low recidivism rate. Yes, it's their responsibility and their actions that bring them back to jail and prison, but, while we have them, don't we have an obligation to expose them to positive, prosocial possibilities? Don't we have an opportunity to model decent language and encourage good behavior? We can be nice, even when they aren't. It's not hard, and we never know when it might pay off. Don't tell me this only applies to Mental Health, Teachers, and Program staff. This obligation belongs to all corrections staff and you are either part of the solution, or you are part of the problem.

Beyond the benefits to offenders, being nice is good for YOU, the corrections professional. Being nice NOW is a simple conversation about shared safety. It's not guaranteed, but the nicer, more respected staff are not usually the ones getting assaulted. Rather, they are often warned about pending problems, and can often be the staff who de-escalate situations. Again, this is not a guarantee. Nice staff still find themselves in tough situations, but the odds can be reduced.

The ripple effect of being nice is also a benefit to the entire team. It's not unusual for a staff member and an offender to have an altercation that results in the offender taking his/her revenge on another staff member on another shift. So, if I'm not inciting offenders unnecessarily, I'm not likely to endanger my partners. (By the way, as an added bonus, the nicer staff may be passed over in this scenario, as the offender seeks to assault staff "they already don't like.")

It may be impossible to measure but, my experience informs me that grumpy staff end up writing more reports and using more force. This is not because nicer staff won't enforce the rules or use force. I just think staff using positive communication skills are less likely to escalate situations. I never shied away from backing up my partners or responding to alarms, but there were times I wondered later if the responding officer's sour attitude and negativity contributed to that conflict. Hard to say. Every unit has its grumpy staff, and you know who they are. The grumpy staff bring anger, negativity, and conflict. Sometimes they even



enjoy it and brag about it. Nicer staff bring calmness. I was blessed by the fact that my early mentors taught me the value of *correctional calmness*.

Experienced corrections staff also know how a unit's personality changes from shift to shift, day to day. The offenders don't change, but the staff do. The staff - good or bad - have an influence on the atmosphere and the tension felt in the unit; it's palpable. Often one grumpy officer or one power-hungry supervisor can make life miserable for everyone involved, staff and offenders. Staff complain about this in private, but often shy away from confronting a partner's negativity. They usually think a supervisor should manage this, or they sink to the same level ... presumably to fit in. For a group of brave people, and we are ... we often fail to stand up to the bullies in our own ranks.

One other consideration for being nice NOW ... If I can maintain my respectful, nice demeanor at work, I will have fewer stressful days and probably bring less stress home to my family. Maybe my home life will be less troubled, my relationships might be better, and maybe I won't need a six-pack to wind down after each shift. That's right, those problems we experience at home are not always someone else's fault. We bring work home with us, more than we think.

And how will being nice save our life LATER? Later is after corrections, in retirement. In the Desert Waters' training, ***From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™***, we discuss the cumulative effect of daily stress experienced by corrections staff. Decades of stress builds up and takes its toll on our life. If we can do our work peacefully, reduce some of the stress, and avoid some of those bad days, our accumulation of Corrections Fatigue might be reduced. Happiness and positivity also counter the unavoidable stress! Maybe we get to live longer and maybe the life we have left can be more enjoyable – free from health issues, isolation, strained relationships, substance abuse, sleepless nights, and exhaustion. If we can avoid bringing stress and negativity into our golden years, we just might live longer, happier lives.

I don't know of any retired correctional professionals who don't have scars from their years inside. These are sometimes real physical scars, but often they are mental and emotional scars from doing hard, stressful work in one of the most negative environments known.

Corrections work is often done with little or no real support along the way, and a complete erosion of our better self. We learned how to be hard and in retirement we begin searching for that good person we once were. Hopefully we live long enough to find that person again.

Be Nice!



# FROM CORRECTIONS FATIGUE TO FULFILLMENT™

Online Instructor Training

Send your vetted staff to become certified CF2F instructors to offer this potentially life-changing training to their coworkers.

Starting  
**September 11, 2023**

[MORE INFORMATION](#)

Click or scan the code to register.



# WHAT CF2F TAUGHT ME

BY CORRECTIONS OFFICER RON MASON

**W**hen you attend a CF2F Desert Waters class, drop your gauntlets, drop your armor, drop your sword and shield at the door. You are a simple person with simple needs. Provide for your family and provide for yourself, in that order. Strike that. Provide for yourself. Without that, you cannot care for the ones you care about and love.

What CF2F offers you is a space. A space to be you, free from the physical and mental armor that you use to protect all that you are. It gives you a moment in time to come together with other correctional staff. A brief moment in time to learn you are not alone. A chance to learn you are not alone. A moment to learn those around you face the same battle that you do, walking into this world where you are expected to keep all the people you know safe from those that desire to harm the world you love.

My time in CF2F taught me it is not my battle against a world of evil, it is all of us working together to ensure we all go home at the end of the day. Together, a little battle worn, but TOGETHER, physically the same way we walked in the gates but with a little mental damage from the day.

We return to our families, the loved ones we sacrifice for, but we do it for them. We return and value them all the more. AND WE KNOW WE ARE NOT ALONE. My partners feel and endure the same journey.

As for me, after I got home today, I sat back and started to process what we all did today. Then it hit me after about an hour. I realized I came home and FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG TIME I WAS IN A GREAT MOOD. It is true. I am not alone. This job changes all of us, not just me. To see 23 other people say they hurt like I do made me feel less isolated. It is alright to talk to someone. I can share my burden and by sharing I feel a little less weight and by listening, they carry a little less weight.

CF2F taught me this.

# INTEGRATING CF2F IN YOUR AGENCY

## MORE THAN A TRAINING – YOUR STAFF WELLNESS FOUNDATION

The vision of the CF2F course is to assist in **promoting the wellbeing of your most valuable asset**, your **STAFF**, as individuals and as teams, thus improving your agency's **culture**, and increasing the probability of **enhancing retention, recruitment**, and successful **fulfillment** of your agency's mission.

This vision comes to life over time through the persistent pursuit of successful integration of CF2F in your agency. It's as simple as **A, B, C**, while also requiring careful planning and follow-up.

# A

### Content Considerations: CF2F Specifics

- Provide information
- Encourage application
- Champion transformation

# B

### Strategic Planning: Sustainability Matters

- Solicit shareholder collaboration
- Determine direct delivery vs. instructor-led delivery
- Provide appropriate resources
- Track attendance and evaluations
- Plan for refresher trainings
- Plan for instructor support

# C

### Implementation Methods: Practical Approaches

- Plan the logistics
- Class numbers and composition
- Locations, dates, physical conditions
- Instructor selection and training process
- Deliver content with fidelity
- Prepare to respond to participants' emotional needs
- Protect participants' psychological safety

"In my 17 years in corrections, never has something impacted me the way this training has. I feel cleansed from the madness corrections brings into our lives. From this day forward, I will make changes within myself and make a difference in someone else's life. Thank you!" ~ J.V., CO



# WELLNESS CULTURE – PART 1

BY GREGORY MORTON, MSC

The concept of organizational work cultures was first defined in 1951 as the *“customary and traditional way of thinking and doing of things [in a work setting], which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must learn, and at least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service.”*<sup>1</sup>

For example, this might lead to a value, an overall belief of being internally collaborative. Or the opposite, an expectation that staff will be competitive with each other in negative ways. Or it might overvalue longevity on the job (“Dinosaurs rule, OK!”) and devalue new hires, as opposed to a culture that welcomes new members and their renewed energy and perspective.

While it can be hard to define “culture,” the importance of it to any organization is undeniable. As the legendary management consultant Peter Drucker purportedly said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” No matter what you want to accomplish, if your culture isn’t supportive of it, your desired goal will be difficult to accomplish, to say the least.

Using an example closer to home, when corrections is termed a “paramilitary profession” this is an indication of a rank-based, authority driven, hierarchical culture of toughness, where admission of emotional struggles is frowned upon and even shamed. This is so because admission of emotional difficulties is viewed by other staff as “weakness” and possibly lack of dependability regarding “taking care of business.”

A recent research document summarized that part of the corrections culture in this way: *“In the context of mental health, stigma impacts the willingness to seek help by provoking feelings of embarrassment. Individuals may also believe that peers or employers will react negatively to seeking help for mental health, which prohibits the individual from reaching out to managers at work, peers and friends, or health professionals for their psychological distress.”*<sup>2</sup>

One of the ways that new employees learn their organization’s culture is through a concept known as observational, incidental learning, as opposed to directed, intentional learning<sup>3</sup>.

For a new employee, learning is implicit through the simple acts of observing and behaviors present and modeled in the work environment, even more than being explicitly directed through formal instruction.

Hospitals expect soft-spoken interactions, emphasizing confidentiality and aiming to not disturb people who may be in physical pain or trying to sleep. A fan at a professional sporting event such as baseball, basketball, or football is allowed or even expected to make loud and public commentary, especially at certain moments during the game. But a sport like tennis or golf typically requires a more subdued type of interaction by the observers. Each setting has built-in, implicit expectations for behavior when a person enters that setting. This happens by simply taking in the behaviors we observe and conforming to them, matching our actions accordingly.

Think back to your first day in a correctional setting. You hadn't been given any written policies or procedures as of yet. You probably hadn't been introduced to upper administration, so you couldn't have heard their performance expectations. You might have been assigned a single employee as a guide as you went from ID card photo shoot to health insurance sign up to uniform fitting to your first tour of the entire workplace. And even if your first day didn't include any of those activities, you were in a new setting, where you were observing and being observed at the same time. And it would have been the first time you were introduced to the physical and psychological wellness culture in your new profession.

What if, as you were being fitted for your uniform, the clothing officer said something like, "See you in a year when you have outgrown this size." After which your guide and the clothing officer joked about how their uniform sizes had increased through the years. Or, as you walked past a small group of officers, if you heard, "They look weak to me. I'm not going to even bother talking to them for six months minimum." Or, from a male officer as a new female officer walks by, "Nice. She can join us at the Dew Drop after work anytime."

In the healthier case, your tour would include the employee fitness center where you see a dozen employees working out. Or your guide points out the salad bar in the employee dining room, and the quiet atmosphere in the employee incident decompression room. And at the conclusion of your first day, your guide tells you that he or she is a peer supporter, and how that program is used by staff.

In either event, you have learned a great deal about the wellness culture at your workplace without anyone even mentioning those two words.

So, before we go any further, ask yourself, what unspoken employee wellness expectations does a new employee to your workplace experience just in the process of seeing that workplace for the first time? (And as a side note, Desert Waters' brand new and upcoming SafetyNet Accreditation program

for staff wellness is built from that perspective, that your wellness culture is “baked into” your work environment to influence employee behavior from the first day on the job.)

### **Leadership and the work culture overlap in establishing wellness cultures in a correctional setting.**

From here, we start with the belief that all correctional employees are leaders regardless of their tenure, job assignment, or rank. In some cases, the leadership is formally established; in others leadership is more informal and based solely on serving as a role model to others. In a 24-hours a day, 7 days a week workplace the influence of informal leadership can be quite dramatic.

Each layer in the organizational hierarchy has unique responsibilities for establishing and maintaining a healthy workplace culture. We will examine those different responsibilities by discussing one wellness process, Training-to-Life Transfer, and one wellness outcome, Agency Recruitment/Retention, in upcoming issues of the *Correctional Oasis*.

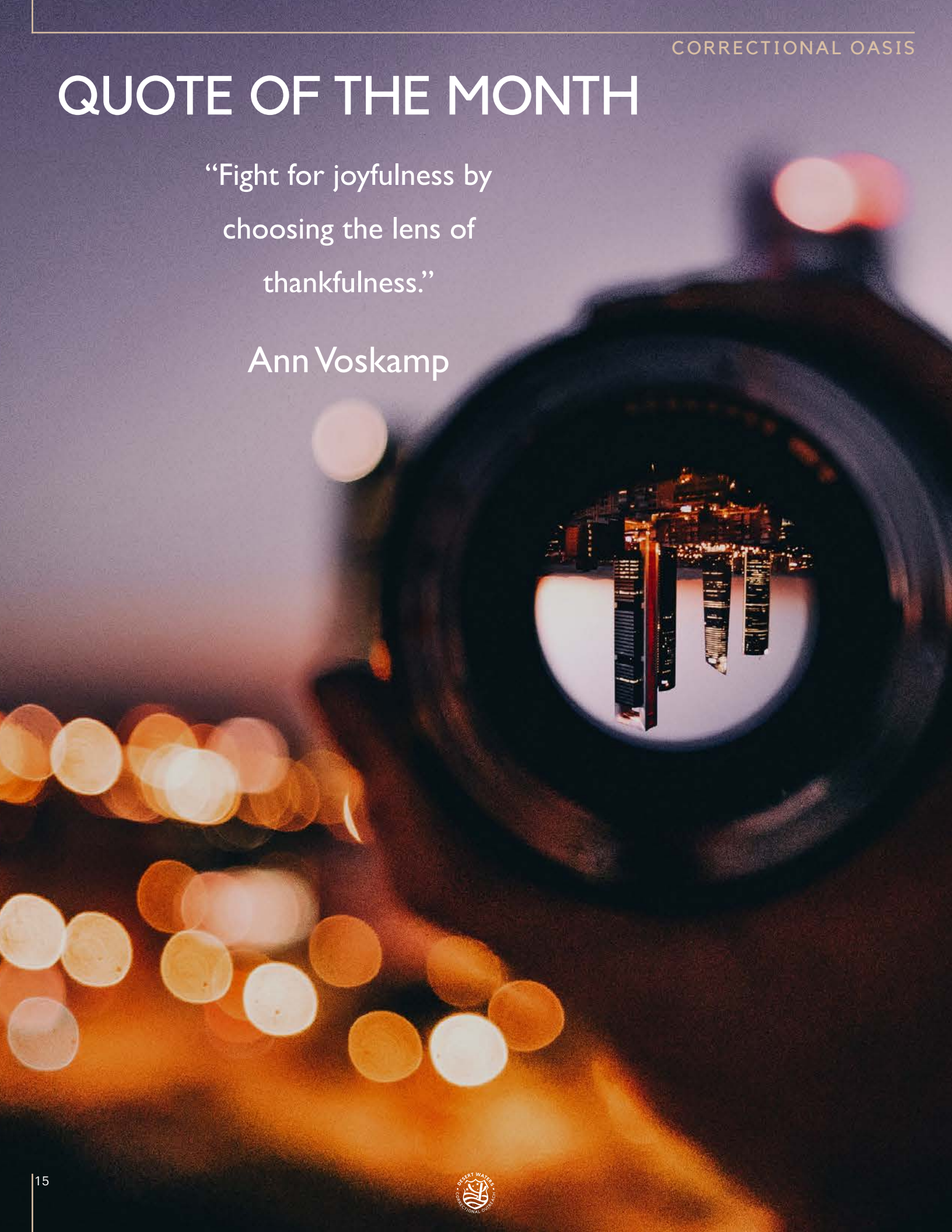
### **REFERENCES**

1. Jaques, Elliott (1951). The changing culture of a factory. Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. [London]: Tavistock Publications. p.251.
2. Wills, Candace; Bates, Kayla; Frost, Natasha A. & Monteiro, Carlos E. (2021) Barriers to help-seeking among correction officers: examining the influence of institutional culture and structure, *Criminal Justice Studies*, 34:4, 423-440. (pp. 424-425)
3. Bandura, Albert (1971) *Psychological Modelling*. New York: Lieber-Antherton

# QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Fight for joyfulness by  
choosing the lens of  
thankfulness.”

Ann Voskamp





# IN MEMORIAM

**Tyler Abel**

Correctional Officer,  
Minnesota Department of Corrections

**John Durm**

Deputy,  
Marion County Sheriff's  
Office Adult Detention, IN

**Arturo Romero**

Correctional Officer,  
Santa Clara County Jail, CA

**Maya Valledor**

Deputy Jailer,  
Henderson County Detention Center, KY

# MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



**CATERINA SPINARIS, PH.D., LPC**  
Founding Director

CONTENT CURATION, PRODUCTION & EDITING



**DARIA MAYOTTE, M.A.**  
Deputy Director

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT, EDITING



**JUDY MYERS, B.SC.**  
Executive Assistant

EDITING



**STEVEN MAYOTTE, B.DES., LEED AP**  
Chief Operating Officer

GRAPHIC DESIGN & LAYOUT

## DWCO Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in the Correctional Oasis are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions held by DWCO Board members, staff, and/or volunteers. DWCO is not responsible for accuracy of statements made by authors. If you have a complaint about something you have read in the Correctional Oasis, please contact us.

## DWCO Mission

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

**Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC, Executive Director**  
431 E. Main Street, P.O. Box 355, Florence, CO 81226  
(719) 784-4727  
<https://desertwaters.com>  
Your donations 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.

*All images are stock images or are presented with permission of the author.*



**DESERT WATERS**  
CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH