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The Best in the Business

Devon Brown

Progressive Leadership In The New Jersey DOC

By Gabriella Daley Klatt

The Best in the Business

Devon Brown, a Maryland native, began his corrections career in 1974 as a forensic psychologist for the New Jersey Department of Institutions and Agencies. Since then, he has steadily climbed the career ladder with positions in Maryland and the District of Columbia. Today, as commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Corrections, a position he has held since January 2002, Brown is recognized as a first-class public administrator whose leadership and initiative have been chronicled in numerous publications from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal* and even *Sports Illustrated*. As head of the department, he oversees more than 9,500 employees, 14 institutions and an inmate population of approximately 27,000 housed in state facilities, county jails and community halfway houses. Brown's family has a history of employment within the various criminal justice professions and has included judges, lawyers, police and correctional officers.

"In a very real sense, criminal justice is literally in my blood," Brown said, adding, "I was in many respects predestined to follow this trend and benefited from the knowledge and experience they had amassed."

Since earning a bachelor's degree from Morgan State University in 1971, Brown has continued to pursue his education, including earning a master's degree in psychology from the University of Toledo, a master's degree in public administration from the University of Baltimore and a law degree from the University of Maryland. In 1997, the National Institute of Justice awarded him the John B. Pickett Fellowship at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. While his early academic training was in the behavioral sciences, Brown says he knew "that this too would be a broad road that would ultimately lead me to my preordained destination within a criminal justice occupation."

Brown's background in forensic/correctional psychology has led him to make educational enrichment and social responsibility the core focus of the DOC's offender programs. Behavior management modalities and initiatives such as the Stock Market Game, Shakespeare Behind Bars and A Study of Heroes all reflect Brown's emphasis on ensuring offenders leave prison better equipped to become good citizens. Primary among Brown's recent initiatives is the "Be Smart — Choose Freedom" crime prevention program, which is aimed at discouraging those at risk from becoming criminal offenders. This program is nationally recognized and 11 states currently have plans to replicate it. "The alarming fact that one out of every 138 residents in the country is in prison or jail clearly shows that we, as a profession, have potentially assumed an unprecedented role in the structuring of the American culture," Brown said.

Brown is just as devoted to staff development and recognizes the importance of education and training for those whose primary mission is public safety. The one piece of advice he would give to someone entering the corrections field is to "always strive to bring honor to the badge, your family and yourself." He added, "It is an indisputable truism that employees are the heart of all organizations and their professional growth must be regarded as an essential strategy in effectively meeting the ever-evolving challenges and imperatives of our field."

Brown noted: "The increased attention on our internal workings has revealed the high quality of our staff and managerial techniques, thus fostering greater appreciation of our skills and resources throughout the law enforcement community, including homeland security. However, this elevated attention has spawned intensified demands for accountability, professionalism and staff credentials that are commensurate with the enormity of our rapidly expanding duties." Brown believes that correctional leaders must be mindful of these realties and strive to reflect integrity, fairness and honor on and off the job. "Leadership in our profession is not for the faint of heart. Our challenges are complex, ever-changing and constant," Brown said.

Charles Ellis, DOC chief of staff, said of Brown: "He is an employee-centered administrator whose sensitivity to staff and practice of taking a personal interest in their well-being have done much to enhance employee morale while fostering pride in membership within the corrections profession. ... [Brown] represents the finest any profession currently has to offer and through his example has proven that competence, commitment and compassion are not mutually exclusive administrative traits no matter the task."

Brown said the biggest challenge he has faced in his career has been "to inspire others, most prominently politicians, to understand the enormous contributions that corrections as a field is capable of making in the nation's efforts to formulate sound public policy." Brown continued: "I have found no other profession as dynamic, challenging and rewarding as corrections. More so than any other specialty, corrections encompasses all of the components of the criminal justice arena while providing the most substantial opportunity to positively impact troubled souls and further public safety." Brown is truly a progressive leader who strives to have the public understand that "correctional employees undeniably walk the meanest beats in the community and they do so with pride, proficiency and professionalism."

Gabriella Daley Klatt is director of ACA's Communications and Publications Department.

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