To me, it just seems like this is what God wanted me to do,”

VANESSA (PATTEN) ADAMS ’77 said with conviction and an enthusiasm that is infectious. “When I look at the road I’ve traveled, little indicated to me or anyone else that I was on the path to be a warden. I definitely didn’t know what I was doing when I first entered into this type of work.

A Conviction of the Soul

BY JEROLD WIKOFF P’03
Sometimes it seems that life itself has led you in the direction you were meant to go VaNessa (Patten) Adams ‘77 certainly believes that happened to her.

Today, Adams is the warden of the Federal Correctional Complex (FCC)–Petersburg (Va.), a minimum, low, and medium security prison system with more than 3,500 male prisoners — one of the largest in the country. Her job is far from easy, but to her it’s “a calling.”

When Adams says she didn’t know what she was doing when she began prison work, she is not exaggerating. In 1977, after Adams graduated from Gettysburg College with a major in political science, she returned to her parents’ home in Seat Pleasant, Md. with absolutely no idea what kind of work she might want. “At the time the nation was in a recession, and finding a job was tough,” she said. “But I had worked in the summer for the National Alliance of Business in Washington, and my boss there, John Amore, was a lawyer and a former inmate who spoke in friendly terms about the prison system.” He would be the one to point Adams in the direction of her future career.

Amore first helped Adams land a temporary position with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, where for nearly six months she did nothing more than enter data into computers. “I was far removed from prisons,” she said. Amore then suggested that Adams join the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Initially, she was hesitant, wondering if such work would be safe. Finally, however, she accepted a position as a “correctional officer” at the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI)–La Tuna, a medium security prison in Anthony, N.M. (near the nearby Mexican border regularly used for a teaching position and was transferred to FCC–Butner in North Carolina — closer to home, which made her happy. A whole new experience in criminal justice began to unfold for Adams. When she learned at La Tuna that her certificate would qualify her to be a prison teacher, she applied for a teaching position and was transferred to Butner. Adams was also involved in a shooting at El Tuna, as well as drug busts and numerous scuffles. “I learned so much in one year,” she said.

From correctional officer to teacher

At Gettysburg College Adams had taken numerous education courses and already had a teacher’s certificate when she started working for the Bureau of Prisons. When she learned at La Tuna that her certificate would qualify her to be a teacher in the prison system, she applied for a teaching position and was transferred to FCC–Butner in North Carolina — closer to home, which made her happy. A whole new experience in criminal justice began to unfold for Adams.

When inmates are processed, they are screened to determine their level of education. If below a high school level, they must attend school in prison to work toward a graduate equivalency degree (GED). (Today, the law mandates that prisoners are required to take 240 days of school, a substantial reduction from the 1970s.) At Butner, Adams worked in the mental health facility — an experience, she said, “that encouraged me to get master’s degrees in correctional special education and behavioral disorders from Lenoir-Rhyne College” in Hickory, N.C.

For the next 14 years Adams worked as a prison teacher, moving every two to three years to a different institution. From Butner she went to the U.S. Penitentiary (USP)–Lewisburg, a high security facility in central Pennsylvania. From there, she moved to FCI–Mariana in Florida, where she worked as the assistant principal. “It was a new program,” she said. “I had to activate it and hire teachers for an educational program that included adult basic education, GED, vocational trades, and a four-year contracted college program. It was a lot of work.” Recently married, she also gave birth to her son, Garrick, in Florida.

Adams would make one last move as a prison teacher, relocating to FCI–Three Rivers (Texas) in 1991 as principal. Again, it was a new prison and she built the teaching program from the ground up.” Adams described her 14 months in Texas as “fun, but difficult,” and noted that there were no other African Americans living in the area. She and her husband had separated, and the stress of trying to be a “corrections officer first” as well as “a full-time Mom” had begun to overwhelm her. “Prison had gotten too much for me,” she said. “I needed family support with my son, and there wasn’t any in Texas.” Consequently, she moved back to Washington, D.C., and took a job as executive assistant to the regional director of prisons for the Mid-Atlantic region.

Becoming a warden

Adams’ career took yet another turn when she returned to Washington, D.C. looks a lot like life stepping in once again to lead her where she was meant to go. “My strengths were in administration versus correctional techniques,” she said. “I could write and type well, so I used those skills as my ticket on work groups that would provide me with the expertise necessary to manage the corrections side of prison. Once on the group and not being a quiet type, I soon earned the respect of the experts for often doing more than my job description. I also earned the respect of the agency’s executive staff that would soon open doors for someone with my background.”

Among the issues that Adams participated in were the downsizing of management at prisons, futuristic strategies that would result in “a calling.”

“"It was a new experience for me. Looking at a person struggling with death makes you see past a convicted felon. I often tried to help them in their struggles by just spending time talking."
For three years Adams worked in Washington, D.C., in the audit division at the Central Office for the Bureau of Prisons; but office work couldn’t hold her attention, and she decided that she wanted to return "to the field." Thanks to her considera-
able administrative experience and writing, she now assumed the position of associate warden at FCC-Butner. There, she moved over as associate warden of the medical center and worked in the oncology unit. The work was difficult.

"My assignment included managing the departments responsible for the oncology treatment of inmates identified at federal prisons throughout the United States," Adams said. "We had 48 prisoners die my first year. For Adams, her work there was to assist in any way possible. Faced with death, many inmates questioned their religion and their position of associate warden was to assist those who have gone astray and become productive to the fabric of society. The wardens must go home one day and become our neighbors."

In 2003 Adams was promoted to warden and took over the management of the Federal Prison Camp (FPC)–Alderson, a minimum security prison for women in West Virginia. (Martha Stewart was incarcerated there, though after Adams had moved to another prison.) This was the first time I had man-
aged women inmates,” Adams said. The experi-
cence was “different,” and she found herself "identifying too much with them."

What made the job particularly diffi-
cult was the fact that children were often involved. Adams cited one case where an inmate with a ten-year-old daughter suffered from cancer and had both legs removed. "The woman’s brother was blind, and her mother had died, so there was no one to take care of the child. As a Mom, that really gets to you," Adams said.

Adams also spoke about the need for better programs for women when they leave prison, pointing out that 65 percent of the women at Alderson had been sexually abused. "Most usually end up in the same bad home environment when they are released," she said.

Adams said that she would be leaving FCC–Petersburg and field work at the end of May to accept a position with the Federal Bureau of Prisons Headquarters Office in Washington, D.C. "We had a special relationship with the inmates and the staff,” she said emphatically. "And you need to do the punishment. But her compas-
tionate side is always readily apparent.

For Adams, her rounds are an oppor-
tunity to remind staff members that “we’re in this work for the inmates.” For her, providing an environment where rehabilitation can take place is an important goal of prison — along with making certain that staff and inmates are safe. She is proud of her work with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the professionalism of her staff — although she also knows that the public often has a different perception of the prison system. "Integrity and high standards are important to us," she said, while noting that federal money for rehabilitation is being cut. "It’s important to have an environment conducive to rehabilitation," she said. "Just warehousing inmates is counter pro-
ductive to the fabric of society. The reality is, the inmates will go home one day and become our neighbors."

From her rounds, Adams also feels that she knows her staff well. "I believe we are a family, so it’s important to take the time to get to know them," she said. "I know about their kids’ progress in school, any deaths in the families, or problems they may have that management can be of assistance. I want them to know, too, that I’m a person, not just a warden.” She and her staff also pick up information on health care, including complaints about food or medical care, talk of intimidation by an inmate or gang members, requests or concerns regarding inmates, and anything else valuable in managing a large prison and trying to help prisoners make changes in their lives while keeping society safe.

I spoke with Adams in March, and she said that she would be leaving FCC–Petersburg. "The woman’s brother was blind, and her mother had died, so there was no one to take care of the child. As a Mom, that really gets to you,” Adams said. "I am on a criss-cross pattern of sidewalks leading to various buildings and numerous tall, slender poles that provide lighting and serve as obstacles for anyone trying to lose a click much like I might hear when my normal bolt lock automatically clicks into place."

Enter, no watch towers or armed guards. In fact, no guards at all, armed or unarmed — at least not visible. "We are a family," Adams said. "It’s important to have a family atmosphere."

As for the food, which — Adams said — inmates often complain about: "The day I walked into a barren courtyard, almost surreal in appearance. No vegetation, just a cross-criss-cross pattern of sidewalks leading to various buildings and numerous tall, slender poles that provide lighting and serve as obstacles for anyone trying to lose a click much like I might hear when my normal bolt lock automatically clicks into place."

The medium prison at Petersburg is surrounded by fence and raft of razor (or barb-like) wire. Inside I found the same basic structures with narrow — instead of barred — windows that are the housing quarters for inmates. Privacy is completely absent. Prisoners share a large, open community hall, where they can watch television, play games, or socialize. Two floors of small cells surround the exterior of the hall — cramped spaces with double and triple bunks, an open toilet, a few chairs.

Opposite the housing facilities is a lower building with a series of rooms and spaces to provide for a variety of needs — a training area for computers, a large workshop, a worship space used for 23 separate religions, a library, medical and psychiatric facilities. What struck me most on the tour was the exceptional cleanliness no matter what part of the prison as well as the professional and caring attitude of the staff. In particular, I was impressed by the three staff in psychiatry, who spoke of their need to deal with the range of inmates’ needs: depression, schizophrenia, and other personality disorders that undoubtedly are intertwined in the criminal background of many of the inmates.

There’s also the Special Housing Unit, or “SHU” (“shoe”), which incarcerates those inmates often complain about: The day I was there it tasted much like other food served at similar luncheon counters.

It’s important to have an environ-
ment conducive to rehabilitation. Just warehousing inmates is counter pro-
ductive to the fabric of society. The reality is, the inmates will go home one day and become our neighbors.

In Petersburg and tomorrow

In 2004 Adams was transferred to FCC-Petersburg, where she is now the warden of a prison complex with three levels of security — low, medium, and high. A warden with no force authorized manage-
ment to implement a program where all terminally ill inmates were assigned inmate companions to ensure death was not faced alone," she said.

In a sense, Adams’ retirement promises to be similar to what she does now — letting life lead her forward in whatever way seems best for her to assist those who have gone astray and are looking for a means to turn their lives around.

Some of the most moving stories I heard were those from inmates who had been abandoned on the day of their birth. "The woman’s brother was blind, and her mother had died, so there was no one to take care of the child. As a Mom, that really gets to you," Adams said.

As for the food, which — Adams said — inmates often complain about: The day I was there it tasted much like other food served at similar luncheon counters.

I spoke with Adams in March, and she said that she would be leaving FCC–Petersburg. "The woman’s brother was blind, and her mother had died, so there was no one to take care of the child. As a Mom, that really gets to you," Adams said. "I am on a criss-cross pattern of sidewalks leading to various buildings and numerous tall, slender poles that provide lighting and serve as obstacles for anyone trying to lose a click much like I might hear when my normal bolt lock automatically clicks into place."

Inside, no watch towers or armed guards. In fact, no guards at all, armed or unarmed — at least not visible. "We are a family," Adams said. "It’s important to have a family atmosphere."

As for the food, which — Adams said — inmates often complain about: The day I was there it tasted much like other food served at similar luncheon counters.

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so

Adams learned about Gettysburg College from a friend, professors James Slaybaugh and Bruce Packard in education. "I had so