

Journal Profile

Jailer stayed when others doubted

In the 11 years before Larry Powers became director of the Spartanburg County Jail, the jail had gone through seven wardens.

"When I took the job, everybody was betting on how long I'd stay," Powers recalled.

That was 24 years ago.

Powers has seen the county jail through all sorts of changes in that time: A growing county population, the introduction of drugs like crack cocaine and, later, meth into the county, and the escalating drug war,

and construction of the county's new facility on California Ave.

He's recently noticed rising gang behavior.

"Spartanburg has a number of gangs, and as they come into jail on drug arrests or drive-by shootings, we're having to go through and separate them. It wasn't such a big issue five or six years ago, but it is now," he said.

Gangs are among a number of challenges to running an orderly jail. Powers said staff is battling overcrowding.

When the jail was built in the 1990s, capacity was set at 436, he said. The county has had nearly twice that many prisoners during peak times. Early this week, there were 756 inmates.

Powers added that his staff is running about 25 positions under the level considered ideal.

"Normally in this state, it's one officer for every 56 inmates, he said. Now most are running one to 130 inmates."

All this puts a premium on efficiency and order – and that means well designed and tightly enforced rules.

"I try to treat people the way I'd want to be treated," Powers said. "Sometimes, I have to be tough... Just because someone has been arrested doesn't mean that they suddenly are going to behave. There has to be consequences for actions."

Because the Spartanburg County Jail is a holding facility where inmates await trial – not a correctional institution where convicted criminal serve out terms – there is a constant flow of traffic. Some prisoners are in and out of the jail in less than 24 hours, while others await trial there for more than a year.

And Powers' staff must be prepared to deal with all kinds, from those charged with non-violent crimes like check forgeries to suspected rapists and murderers.

Prisoners charged with violent crimes and those who have been in the jail before and are known to be dangerous must be separated from the general population. Prisoners with mental illness or drug addictions must be treated according to their needs.

"If we have someone in and we know there's a behavioral problem, if we leave them with other people they could be harmful to, then I've



Michelle Moggi/Staff

CHANGES: Larry Powers says the crimes of those jailed in the county have grown worse through the years.

been negligent. So you have to separate them out," Powers explained.

For this reason, cramming more prisoners into the same amount of space is risky.

"It's a managerial nightmare," Powers said, crediting his staff with keeping fights and other incidents to a minimum.

Powers grew up in Spartanburg, graduating from Dorman High School. He's held a variety of job in the field of law enforcement. He started with a job on the city of Spartanburg auxiliary police staff, moved on to work as a state constable, and within a few years worked his way

up to an officer's position with the Sheriff's office.

"I've known Larry for 30 years," said County Councilman Rock Adams. "He's straight as six o'clock. He's strictly business. I think he's the most qualified warden of any county in South Carolina."

Powers said there are days when he leaves the jail – usually not until after 7 p.m. – and thinks he's had enough. But Powers says relationships with his staff, along with the challenge of running a safe and orderly jail, are rewarding.

"I know when coming in everyday, I'm going to learn things," he said

10 questions with LARRY POWERS

What is your favorite book? Besides the Bible, "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw and Bill O'Reilly's "Who's Looking Out for You?"

What is your favorite pastime? Besides family, jogging (actually at my age slogging)

What is your favorite film? "The Quiet Man" and "High Noon."

What was your first car? 1964 Ford Custom straight drive with 6-cylinder engine. I paid \$550 for it.

What is the best advice you have received? No matter what your do in life – always do your best.

What is your most important belief? God and family.

What has surprised you about life? When I was younger I took things for granted because there was always tomorrow. However, I have come to the realization that today is all we have and you have to do the best you can in hope of a better tomorrow.

Who has been most influential in your life? Besides my parents, my wife, Phyllis, who has supported me in whatever I have done and who is my voice of conscience.

With whom would you most like to have a conversation? My father, just to tell him that I love him. I never personally said it aloud.

What is something you still hope to do? See my daughters grow up and become successful and productive citizens.