

Women guards find challenging career

By JULIE BALL
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Despite eight years on the job, Marie Thomas says her mother still worries.

The 35-year-old Thomas is a lieutenant with the N.C. Department of Corrections.

In her job, she helps supervise the more than 650 male inmates at Western Youth Institution.

That includes the medium and close security inmates as well as the minimum security inmates.

Thomas and fellow lieutenant, Vicki Justice, are two of the 16 women working as corrections officers at Western Youth Institution.

Although the prison employs a number of other women in other areas such as counseling, teaching and nursing, male corrections officers outnumber women officers 12 to 1 at Western Youth Institution.

Prison officials are hoping to change that with a recruiting seminar Wednesday at Western Piedmont Community College called "Female Staff in the Male Correctional Setting."

Thomas and Justice are scheduled to take part in a panel discussion during the seminar.

Both Thomas and 42-year-old Justice have made a career with the

department of corrections.

Justice attended Gardner-Webb College as well as Western Piedmont Community College and Wilkes Community College. She went to work with the Hickory Police Department and later was accepted into the Raleigh Police Academy.

After a brief period with the Raleigh Police Department, Justice went to work as a corrections officer at the women's prison in Raleigh.

After 11 years, she worked her way up from an officer to sergeant to lieutenant. "After 11 years, I've definitely found my career," Justice says.

Thomas served four years in the Army and attended Rowan-Cabarrus Community College before getting her first job with the Department of Correction.

She started as a corrections officer at the Piedmont Correctional Institution, a close security prison for adult males in Salisbury.

She was the first woman hired directly from the community to work with the male prisoners in a custody situation at Piedmont.

Thomas was promoted to sergeant and moved to the Black



Marie Thomas, left, and Vicki Justice on the job at Western Youth Institute.

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Mountain Correctional Institution for Women. After her promotion to lieutenant, she came to work at Western Youth Institution.

Thomas works third shift supervising 40 employees. She is one of two people who are in charge of the prison during the night.

A typical night begins around 10 p.m. Thomas works on the duty roster deciding who will work in which area. She checks various areas for security and helps make sure all the inmates are where they should be.

Her job is generally to "make sure everything is running smoothly."

Justice's job is generally the same. She works second-shift and her job deals with more new admissions to the prison.

"I'm responsible for checking the paperwork and making sure the inmates are delivered to the right place," she says.

She also investigates any use of force by an officer on an inmate.

"If the officer on the floor has a use of force situation, we have to make sure everything is carried out, investigation wise, and see if the inmate needs medical care," Justice says.

"Use of force" can mean taking an inmate by the arm or using Mace

to subdue an inmate.

Justice says there may be two or three "use of force" situations a night, but most are not serious. "We have to fill out paperwork if we even touch an inmate," she says.

Male and female corrections officers are trained to deal with violent or problem behavior in the same way.

"We're all trained in self-defense. We're taught not to be heroes," Thomas says. "You keep just enough fear to be able to do the job."

Both women say working in a prison is not like the image many people have from television and the movies.

"I think that's really just a myth. That was my vision of prison before I got started working here," Thomas said.

Asked if prison is a rough place to work, Thomas answered, "I would not call it rough. I would call it challenging."

Although Thomas may say her

prison job isn't rough, she says her mother still worries.

"I come home and I talk about it and try to dispel some of that," Thomas says.

Her 11-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter are curious about the job. "They ask me a lot of questions about the prison," she says.

Thomas says her husband, a former employee with the Department of Correction, understands the job and supports her.

Justice says her family also lends support. "My husband is very supportive of my work," she says.

Although the job may not be as rough as it seems on TV, it does come with a fair amount of stress, according to the women.

The inmates can be intimidating and they can be manipulative, according to Thomas.

The corrections officers support each other, according to Thomas.

"That's been an important tool for me. We have to constantly talk to each other and support each other," Thomas said.

Justice added, "A lot of the female officers like to come to you and just talk."

To succeed in the job requires strong capable leaders, according to Leon Morrow, superintendent at Western Youth Institution.

"I think you have to have a lot of belief in yourself and keep a positive attitude," Thomas said. "You have to be able to get along with all different types of people."

(The Law Enforcement Training Center at Western Piedmont Community College and Western Youth Institution will hold the recruiting seminar Wednesday in the Moore Auditorium at Western Piedmont. Registration will begin at 8:45 a.m. In addition to officials from Western Youth Institution, officials from the new South Mountains Correctional Institution will be recruiting not only corrections officers, but nurses, librarians, secretaries, food service employees and others.)