

# Tony Parker

## Finding His Calling

BY THE TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

**T**ony Parker had it all figured out. Fresh out of high school and working on his father's West Tennessee farm, Parker decided he would work at the Lake County (TN) Regional Correctional Facility until he could land his dream job with the highway patrol. But a knee injury and a surprising realization about college set him on a course that would change his plans forever. →

*The Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee.*

Image: istock/ehrlif





Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections

## Learning on the job

In the summer of 1983, the 19-year-old Parker began what he thought would be a short-lived career in corrections. “Back then we didn’t have a corrections academy. Your training was on the job every day. Policies were just being developed in Tennessee and you couldn’t pick which shift you wanted to work. They put you on a shift and that’s where you were. I ended up on third shift,” he remembered.

After three years of working third shift, Parker was promoted to corporal. But before he could rise further through the ranks, he would have to do the one thing he believed was insurmountable — go to college.

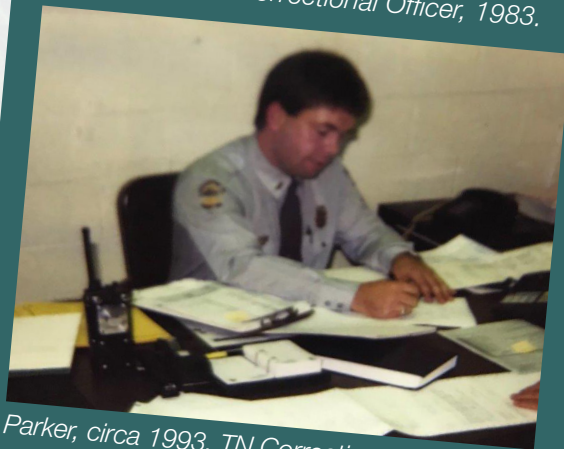
“I remember being so intimidated by the thought of going to college because nobody in my family ever went to college and nobody ever talked to me about going to college,” Parker said. He took a chance and enrolled at Dyersburg State Community College. “It didn’t take me long to figure out that I could do this. I was 27 at the time and the people in my classes were much different than me! Younger and not as focused,” Parker concluded.

Parker graduated with an associate’s degree in criminal justice and a 3.87 GPA. Soon after came an opportunity to attend the University of Tennessee-Martin on an academic scholarship to work on his bachelor’s degree. He attended class in the morning, worked at the prison on 2<sup>nd</sup> shift and graduated with a 3.95 GPA in two years.

“This was the moment I truly learned the value of education. I was old enough to understand how an education helps you with your career, with self-esteem and dealing with everyday struggles,” he said.



Tony Parker, TN Correctional Officer, 1983.



Parker, circa 1993, TN Correctional Lieutenant.



Photos courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections



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**“Working together, we can achieve these goals and build upon ACA’s one hundred and fifty-one-year legacy as a champion for corrections and correctional effectiveness.”**

**— Tony Parker**

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Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections

## Discovering his calling

Even with his new degrees and promotions, Parker still had his sights set on the highway patrol. “I remember praying about the job but my application kept getting declined time and time again until finally, I got the call. I was about to become a state trooper,” he said.

But, as luck would have it, three weeks before he was set to report to the training academy, Parker suffered a severe knee injury. His dream of a career with the highway patrol was dealt a devastating blow that left Parker disappointed. But, the disappointment wouldn’t last long. The following month, he was promoted to assistant warden at the West Tennessee State Penitentiary.

“I didn’t realize until after I had been promoted but I soon realized God’s will for me was to remain in Corrections. I was trying to go against what I was really supposed to be doing all along. I was eventually promoted to Warden and it was at this point, I knew my career would be working in the corrections field,” Parker said.

Two more promotions came for Parker. First, as correctional administrator then assistant commissioner. Just as he was settling into his newest position, Parker was approached about another educational opportunity. This time, a master’s degree at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California.

It wasn’t long until former Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam called, wanting to hear Parker’s thoughts on corrections and the mission of the Tennessee Department of Correction. “That conversation centered around the significant substance use and mental health issues that people face and how the mission of corrections, with the help of ACA, had shifted from a retribution model to a rehabilitation model because that is how you enhance public safety,” he stated. It was that conversation that led to Parker’s appointment as Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Correction and 3 years later, his reappointment by Governor Bill Lee.

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Photos courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections





Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections

## Sharing the wisdom of a lifetime

President Parker has laid out four key initiatives for his term as the 107<sup>th</sup> President of ACA. They center around strategies to enhance safety and educate the public about the complexity and the true nature of corrections:

- Helping others to see corrections as a place that offers opportunities for positive transformation through effective rehabilitation. It is his belief this is the true mission of corrections. Correctional staff provide a great example of true public servants and professionals. Finding innovative ways elevate the public's perception of corrections work and as stated in our goals, continue to lead and serve as the voice of the accrediting body of corrections both here in the United States and around the world is a critical policy goal.
- Working closely with higher educational institutions in expanding the training/ educational opportunities for correctional staff through the use of ACA's world class e-learning tools and extensive training programs.
- Expanding our focus on providing training for correctional staff in recognizing and responding to the signs and symptoms of mental illness. Most correctional populations have seen a significant increase in individuals with mental health diagnosis. The American Correctional Association has been very successful in providing Correctional Behavioral Health training to many agencies. This will make the correctional environment

a safer place to work and live. In addition, ACA will provide tools for staff to use in skilled de-escalation techniques that will reduce the need for physical intervention, through multi-disciplinary service teams.

- Expanding the use of technology to magnify rehabilitative initiatives and training, as well as expanding communication platforms such as social media and virtual platforms to ensure the American Correctional Association's message becomes a resounding voice to members, the public, and around the world.

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where I should be and where  
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**— Tony Parker**

About these goals, Parker said: “Working together, we can achieve these goals and build upon ACA's one hundred and fifty-one-year legacy as a champion for corrections and correctional effectiveness.”

Respect for the people who work in corrections is the cornerstone of Parker's presidency.



Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections



“The real work of corrections takes place among the people who work in our facilities and in our communities,” he said. “The issues we deal with at the administration level is all concept and strategy but executing the plan is dependent upon the people who wear the uniforms, conduct the programs, deliver the education and the treatment programs that address substance abuse and mental health issues. They are the people who really do the work of corrections and I am proud to have worked alongside them for the past 38 years.”

Parker summed up his experiences in corrections by saying “If I had to do it all over again, I would. When I started my career in correction, I thought it would be temporary until something else came along. I’m confident that I’m where I should be and where the Lord wants me. I have a wonderful life in Tennessee with my beautiful wife, Misty, our 24-year-old daughter and seven-year-old twins. I don’t know what is next ... we’ll have to wait and see,” he concluded. ♦



Photo courtesy Tennessee Department of Corrections

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