

Tom Clements Murder

Prisons chief Tom Clements remembered: "The first time I had hope"

[By Jennifer Brown](#)

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Tom Clements often missed the days, long before he was director of Colorado prisons, when he sat across from a criminal struggling to rebuild a life and counseled him on how to succeed at work, family, sobriety.

So he found a way — even as chief administrator of 25 prisons and 17,000 inmates — to feel that kind of connection again. Clements roamed the corridors at Sterling and Limon and Colorado State Penitentiary. Up and down the rows of cells, he asked: How could I help you make it on the outside?

Some of those prisoners wrote to Clements' wife in the weeks following March 19, the [night now of nightmares when the executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections unknowingly opened his front door](#) to a parolee suspected of shooting him dead on his own doorstep. They were watching TV, and then he was dying in her arms.

Talking to Tom, prisoners wrote in condolences to Lisa Clements, it felt like our lives could change, things could get better. "It was the first time I had hope," wrote one inmate, Lisa recalled recently as grief clutched at her voice and tears flowed.

"He very much missed probation. The reality is, he got his one-on-one. The thing I want people to know about Tom, more than anything he accomplished, was that he believed in the ability of people to change. That's a fairly unique quality," she said.

The other thing about Tom Clements is that he walked the walk, and practiced what he preached, and all of those other clichés people say about good people who are passionate about their work at its core, down to the little guy.

Tom Clements didn't tell his wife at night about the conversations he'd had with prisoners. That wasn't his style; he kept talk of his job — a profession often filled with darkness — at work. But she could guess when he had spent the day visiting prisoners because he couldn't resist mentioning he had walked 7 miles. That kind of brag was his trademark, an extension of his belief that if something was worth doing, it was worth the effort. It didn't matter if it was a hike, a bike ride or the remake of the safety policy of prison guards.

Clements belonged to a group of progressive, academic-type corrections directors who sought science-based data to solve the key problems of high recidivism, solitary confinement and parolee supervision. He was a leader among those on the national corrections scene, the opposite of the "lock 'em up and throw away the key" warden of olden days who rattled cell bars with a baton.

He was not a former prosecutor or police officer, but had an associate's degree in criminal justice, a bachelor's in sociology and a master's in public administration. He started his career as a probation officer on Kingshighway in St. Louis, among the toughest of inner-city neighborhoods.

It was there he took hold of a lifelong belief that everyone has a choice. Simply put, he saw the good in people. Almost all of them. He also saw the "dark side" of his profession, Lisa said, within those who never embraced treatment and never made a decision to change.

"He really did believe in redemption," Lisa Clements said. But "he certainly recognized evil."

Tom and Lisa met at MidAmerica Nazarene University at the end of the 1970s in a class about juvenile delinquency. He sat in the front row; he was "cute," she remembers, and asked more advanced questions than many of the undergraduates.

People don't typically decide young that their life's aspiration is to run a prison system. For Clements, he knew as a teenager that his calling was to help rehabilitate criminals, help them make the choice to change. And he believed everyone had a choice.

Clements' uncle was imprisoned when Clements was an adolescent, and his mother sometimes took him with her when she visited her brother behind bars. "It shaped his life — the experience of his uncle but also the grief of his mother," Lisa said.

Tom did not expect to make change in a touchy-feely kind of way. He was a data guy, so much so that his staff jokes that if they told Clements it was hot outside, he would not take that at their word. "What's the data on that?" he would ask.

In his two years as head of Colorado prisons, Clements ordered a lot of data. Inmate-on-inmate assaults. Assault and harassment of female guards. Routinely, the rest of the governor's cabinet was blown away by his data at department-head meetings.

More than any other policy move, Colorado officials are likely to remember Clements' work on reducing the number of prisoners held in solitary confinement, or "administrative segregation." Upon his hiring, Clements immediately organized a reclassification study of inmates to determine whether they were held at the correct threat level. He wanted to make sure the decision to place prisoners in maximum security or solitary was reviewed often enough that they could "graduate" to a lower-security level and have the chance to assimilate before they were released from prison.

"It haunted him," said Rebecca Wallace, an ACLU attorney who corresponded with Clements for months about reducing usage of solitary confinement. Under Clements, the percentage of prisoners released directly from solitary to parole dropped from 47 percent to 23 percent.

Now, Clements' co-workers and friends shake their heads at the injustice of it all — that a parolee who left prison directly from solitary confinement is believed to have rung his doorbell and murdered him.

Authorities suspect that Evan Ebel, who had an extensive criminal record and was a member of a white-supremacist prison gang, shot Clements before fleeing to Texas, where he was killed in a shootout with law-enforcement officers. The investigation is ongoing.

Clements' legacy also includes a corrections mission statement, now elevated almost to sacred status — a document the governor's office expects new prisons director Rick Raemisch to use as his directions. It says the department should increase the number of prisoners who complete transition-to-society programs before they walk out of the gates and reduce the number of parolees whose parole is revoked.

Gov. John Hickenlooper's chief of staff, Roxane White, told the governor he should hire Clements minutes after she interviewed him. Clements had showed up at the interview asking about data, and wondered why the state hadn't done a threat-level classification study of its prisoners in a decade. He worried that prisoners stuck in solitary confinement for longer than necessary were "frozen in time," without even a chance of reform.

Shortly before he was killed, Clements [spoke in a video](#) in the hopes of drawing the public to corrections volunteer training. Nearly all — 97 percent — of prisoners are eventually released and become our neighbors, he said in the video. "Together, we can build a safer Colorado for today and tomorrow," Clements said.

He would die before the April conference ever happened.

"He had such a sense of the fact that we had a responsibility to help them be good neighbors, that the job of corrections was to get somebody ready to be a neighbor," White said. "He had a deep belief that people who wanted to change, given the resources, could change."

A key resource was job skills, and anyone who was around Clements was likely to get hit up for support of [Colorado Correctional Industries](#), a program that puts prisoners to work. The program trained the governor's dog, twice. White has boxes with her name carved in them, a key fob, a fishing rod — all made by prisoners. The governor's office contains inmate-crafted furniture, and state events serve Correctional Industries cider.

"I don't particularly like honey, and I bought honey that Correctional Industries harvested because Tom said it gave prisoners a work skill," White said. And quite often, Clements asked her, "Have you bought any tilapia lately?" because inmates harvest it and sell it to local grocery stores.

Many times since Clements' death, either inside the governor's office or talking to his widow, White has said the state cannot allow the compounding tragedy that would happen "if we didn't continue the work."

"He was a very smart guy, very progressive, one of the best directors of corrections I've ever run into," said James Austin, a consultant hired by Clements to look at Colorado's solitary confinement numbers. "He was just very thoughtful, really a tremendous loss for the field."

Clements and his wife, who is director of the Colorado Department of Human Services' Office of Behavioral Health, served together on a state team to turn former Fort Lyon prison into a homeless facility. They both believed in redemption, but came at it from different perspectives — hers in mental health and substance-abuse treatment and his in helping former prisoners find success through family and work connections.

Before they moved to Colorado, Lisa was president of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Missouri. It wasn't enough for Tom just to volunteer; he helped organize the corrections department's involvement in a branch organization for the children of current or former

prisoners, some of the most at-risk youth in America. It's called Amachi, a West African word that means "who knows but what God has brought us through this child."

Theirs was a relationship envied by others who watched them work in tune. "They were so focused on how you help people repair their lives," White said.

Much of that focus derived from their faith. Evangelical Christians, they volunteered to counsel young couples and ran programs for teenagers.

"In Tom's world, his belief in redemption included that there are men and women who go to prison for acts beyond our understanding," Lisa Clements said. "As long as I knew him, there was a kindness in him, a strongly held belief that we have been gifted in this life, and we have the responsibility to help others."

In these last three months, Lisa has thought about that often. And it helps her get out of bed. "The only thing that I know to do is wake up every day and to express gratitude for this life that I've been given and to put one foot in front of the other. If I allow sorrow or rage or anger to take over, then I've lost. That's not what I choose," she said.

Lisa Clements is as graceful as she is professional, put together down to the jewelry. She is strong for herself and their two daughters, Rachel, 28, and Sara, 23, who was married in June without her father to walk her down the aisle as planned.

Thinking about how much Tom loved Elvis and Johnny Cash makes Lisa laugh. It's thinking about his ability to see the good in people, to spend a lifetime focused on improving other people's lives, that cracks her strength.

Lisa Clements sees "no purpose" in talking publicly about the night that changed her life in an instant. "People try to understand the horror," she said. "They try to make some sense of why anyone would target someone who is working for good, who was trying to make an impact on their world."

Many friends have given her books on grief, and what she says she's learned is that everyone's grief is their own and not necessarily worse than anyone else's, no matter how horrific. The governor's office has surrounded her with a protective shell, guarding her from the public eye. Hickenlooper attended Sara's wedding last month, as a friend.

Lisa Clements still uses present tense half of the time when she talks about her husband. She tries not to be fearful, but it's hard; she would not name Tom's favorite hike, the one he tried to squeeze in most often and where she plans to return.

Even critics of Department of Corrections' policies liked Clements personally, including Greeley Police Chief Jerry Garner. The chief met with Clements a year and a half before he was murdered and told him the number of dangerous parolees on the streets of Greeley was increasing. Garner suspected corrections officials, in trying to cut down on prison costs, were telling parole officers not to return parolees to prison unless they committed a new crime — failed drug tests and other misbehavior were overlooked.

"It saves some money on beds, but how much does it cost the community?" Garner asked. "My gripe was that I felt that the state was putting their prisoners back on us, and early. Mr. Clements denied that was happening."

Inside the prisons, the complaints lodged by some guards and prisoners illustrate the complexities of running a huge prison system amid budget constraints and a national debate on how best to reduce recidivism.

Guards say the corrections department puts cost-cutting concerns above safety, arguing that fewer prisoners in solitary confinement means increased risk of assaults and that not filling positions quickly means guards are left alone with inmates. Since Clements' death, insiders report that security has become a higher priority and parole officers have become stricter about revocations.

They acknowledge the focus on saving money was there before Clements was in charge. "We've thrown inmates in the hole for fighting and had them out into general population in the next week," said one veteran Delta Correctional Center officer who didn't want his name published because he was worried he would lose his job. "I've seen a lot of guys get parole that I knew were going to come back."

A popular grievance among inmates speaks directly to Clements' principles. In November 2012, he issued an executive order banning pornography in prison to help foster an "environment free of hostility and sexual harassment." Recent parolees said that policy invoked more rage than any other, complaining it was so stringent they were denied even the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition.

Much of what Clements brought to Colorado regarding prison reform he learned in Missouri, where he worked for three decades and rose to the level of director of adult prisons. Missouri was among the leading states in reducing solitary confinement beds, converting a dormitory formerly used for segregation into general population.

"Tom was an evolving leader," said George Lombardi, director of the Missouri Department of Corrections. "I'm not going to tell you there was nobody like Tom, but Tom was, I think, a perfect fit for Colorado. There was no question in my mind that he was going to do well."

As couples sometimes do, Tom and Lisa Clements had talked casually about what his obituary might say. He told her it should say that he loved his family and tried his best to help others. It did say those things, in so many words, but also included a list of accomplishments longer than most people have the time or ambition.

"At the end of the day, we don't know how long we have on this earth. To have an impact on others, that's truly Tom's legacy," his wife said.

A longtime friend, John Whiteside, tried to capture Tom Clements in a poem he wrote after his death and read at his Missouri memorial service. "He rode his bike because he loved the wind," it said. "He answered the door because he wasn't afraid."

Jennifer Brown: 303-954-1593, jenbrown@denverpost.com or twitter.com/jbrownpost

Staff writer Kirk Mitchell contributed to this report.