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# *Larry Meachum, Prison Reformer Who Led Prisons, Dies at 79*

By **Sam Roberts**

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When Larry R. Meachum was a boy, his family was so poor that they often moved when the rent was due. His home life was unhappy, and he did what many kids do — he ran away. A lot.

In fact, some thought Larry might have been on a path to prison. Instead, he grew up to run them as a respected reformer. Mr. Meachum, who was 79, died on July 13 in Palmetto, Fla.

His son, Darrell, said that the cause was pneumonia and that Mr. Meachum had had bile duct cancer.

Mr. Meachum oversaw the prison systems in three states — Oklahoma, Massachusetts and Connecticut — and directed federal corrections programs in the Office of Justice Programs at the Justice Department in the 1990s.

At the time, the criminal justice system was struggling to cope with record crime, mandatory sentences and so-called broken windows neighborhood policing, all of which led to a rising number of arrests and what critics of the system saw as mass incarceration.

Mr. Meachum first encountered the challenges prisons faced by chance: He was on a college field trip to a minimum-security prison for juveniles in North Carolina. After graduation, he was hired as an unarmed guard there and worked his way up to warden.

While he was later criticized for coddling inmates, he initiated one of the first prison boot camps — a version of shock therapy that he later disavowed — and his name was affixed to a lawsuit concerning prisoners' rights, *Meachum v. Fano*, that reached the United States Supreme Court.

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In the lawsuit, the court ruled, 6 to 3, in 1976 that Mr. Meachum had not violated an inmate's right to due process when, as warden of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk, he transferred the man to a more inhospitable prison without a hearing.

But those were considered anomalies in a career in which he strove to improve drug treatment and other medical services for inmates, curb gang violence, reduce recidivism by offering education and occupational training, provide facilities for recreation to reduce idle time, and initiate supervised release programs.

Mr. Meachum joined the Massachusetts Department of Correction in 1973 and was serving as commissioner in 1979 when he was hired as director of Oklahoma's correction department.

There, he established a program that gave crime victims a role in deciding what programs and privileges would be available to an offender. He began Marine-style boot camps aimed at altering the violent behavior of youths in prison in 1983, but he later said such programs became brutal and racist and brought out the worst in both guards and inmates.

In 1987, he was recruited to be commissioner of the Connecticut prison department by the administration of Gov. William A. O'Neill, a Democrat. He was reappointed by Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr., a lapsed Republican who was elected as an independent in 1990.

While Mr. Meachum doubled the number of cells, he also had to cope with riots, escapes, assaults on guards and federal court orders to release inmates when the prisons were regularly overcapacity in a state that led the nation in the growth rate of its prison population. The cell policy pleased only the prisoners.

"I don't like it, the police don't like it," Mr. Meachum said at the time. "Nobody likes what we're having to do. But we have to comply with federal court orders, and we have to follow the laws."

Mike Lawlor, the state's under secretary for criminal justice policy and planning, described Mr. Meachum as a man who surrounded himself with "people who understood the concept of redemption and who appreciated the basic humanity of prisoners."

In 1994, the Republican candidate John G. Rowland's successful law-and-order gubernatorial campaign in Connecticut singled out Mr. Meachum, accusing him of catering to criminals in "Club Med"-style jails. (Despite the criticism, Governor Rowland, who later wound up in jail himself for corruption, appointed one of Mr. Meachum's top deputies to succeed him as commissioner.)

As director of correction programs in the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs beginning in 1987, Mr. Meachum developed and oversaw drug abuse testing and treatment and post-prison programs for inmates. He retired in 2003.

Larry Ray Meachum was born on Sept. 11, 1938, in Durham, N.C., to Leaton Meachum, a mechanic in a tobacco plant, and Mary Louise (Herdon) Meachum, a homemaker.

Crippled by a calcium deficiency as an infant, as a young boy he wore leg braces, which had been donated by the local Rotary Club. He began running away from home as a teenager, often by hitchhiking.

“Without the kindness and generosity of others, without someone seeing something in our dad, without mentoring,” Darrell Meachum said in his eulogy, “our dad might have ended up in prison as an inmate — instead of as an administrator.”

When he was barely 18, Mr. Meachum married Evelyn Turner, who also survives him, along with their two daughters, Cheryl Heidebrecht and Lori Woolard; two grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. Another son, Larry, died in 2010.

In 1963, Mr. Meachum graduated with a bachelor’s degree in religious education from Piedmont Bible College (now Piedmont International University) in Winston-Salem, N.C., where he worked at night as a janitor. He also earned a bachelor of science degree in psychology from Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C., while working as a rehabilitation counselor at the Umstead Youth Center, a minimum-security prison.

Darrell Meachum described his father as “a warden with a degree from a Bible college,” a disciplinarian who was also a deacon in his church.

He recalled that after taking a tour of a maximum-security prison with his wife, he told his father that the guard who was escorting them kept loudly identifying him as the commissioner’s son.

“Dad’s face changed color and he turned serious,” Darrell Meachum recalled. “He told us in no uncertain terms that if we had been kidnapped, he would have recused himself from the situation to ensure he could do absolutely nothing to negotiate our release.

“I was not offended by that warning — instead I was struck at the level of stark professionalism, principles, and sense of duty and purpose it conveyed.”

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