

Catalyst Profile
Kelly Holder

Since 2006, Kelly Holder, the alumna of 2014, has been making an impact through pulling high-risk offenders off the streets of Western North Carolina. As Chief Probation Officer in Jackson County, this former Catamount supervises up to 70 parolees at a time, ensuring the safety of the surrounding mountain communities.

Holder's progress in the correctional sector all comes back to her foundation in criminal justice. The North Carolina native joined WCU's undergraduate "CJ" program in 2004, grounding her studies in behavioral theory while simultaneously working in the field as a dispatcher for the WCU Police Department.

"I grew up wanting to go to school," said Holder, who had previously earned her Associate of Science from Southwestern Community College. "I had always admired people with an education."

During her two years as an undergrad, courses like Institutional Corrections and Theories of Crime, taught by Duane Davis, challenged Holder, molding her into a critical thinker.

After graduating in 2006, she took to the Division of Community Corrections, working as a probation officer in Macon and Swain Counties. There, she processed cases for the superior and district courts, addressed violations and conducted warrantless searches and arrests.

Despite her "blended caseload" of post-release, probation cases, and sex offenders, Holder fomented positive change in the lives of even the worst criminals.

"I have had many successes in rehabilitating people," said Holder. "I loved it because I could make an impact."

In 2012, in hopes of advancing her career, Holder returned to WCU as a graduate student in the Master of Public Affairs Program. She collaborated with various nonprofits, exploring North Carolina State Probation and Parole communication needs. Under the guidance of former MPA Director Roger Hartley, Holder even delivered a conference titled, "The Probation Strategic Communication Link."

"I credit the graduate program for helping me to be a professional," said Holder. "I have found new strength in my managerial skills."

Higher-ups within the community also seemed to notice her progress, as the alumna was promoted to her current position of Chief Probation Officer in 2013, a year before graduating with her master's degree.

“Listen to your professors and find a true passion,” said Holder, reflecting on her 14-year career. “Then apply your heart, mind, and soul to being a good student so that you can go forward into the future with optimism.”