

# Peters Emphasizes Resilience, Patience on National Scale

Colette S. Peters strives to enact the values of community, empathy and resilience that she developed growing up in Milbank throughout her work as director for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

One of seven children, Peters felt supported far beyond her immediate family. “I was raised by two amazing human beings who were very well-respected in Milbank, and with that came a lot of love from a lot of families. I felt like I had many parents,” said Peters. “Both of my parents have since passed, and I still feel like I have parents back in Milbank – and I mean that in the most heartfelt, affectionate way.”

In her childhood and young adult years, Peters actively explored various pursuits in the community. “I think that’s the great thing about being raised in a small community. Nowadays, kids have to focus on one sport and become the expert and all of that. We got to do everything,” Peters reflected. Her school activities included basketball, swimming and one-act plays. She also worked at Hardee’s, Gas-N-Grub and Bill’s SuperValu, which she credits with imparting formative lessons in customer service.

One of the most impactful experiences from Peters’ youth was her time working at the Angela Hall. “Working with the sisters taught me life lessons that I’ll never forget around kindness and how you treat people,” said Peters. “The kindness the nuns gave to those amazing women who had so much wisdom and insight catapulted me even further into working with and helping people along my career path.”

Peters knew she wanted to go into what she describes as a “helping field.” After graduating from Milbank High School in 1989, she received a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, MN.

Peters briefly worked at a youth correctional facility in Johnston, IA. Her work as a youth counselor exposed her to being on the front lines of assisting people who had been involved in the criminal justice system. “They were kids who looked like the kids I grew up with in Milbank – same sort of problems, same sort of struggles, but somehow they ended up on the other side of the law and were in their maximum security prison,” Peters said.

Peters’ work in Iowa cemented her interest in pursuing a career in criminal justice. She earned a master’s degree in criminal justice from

the University of Colorado and built a career in agencies like the Denver Police Department, the Oregon Department of Corrections and the Oregon Youth Authority.

In August 2022, Peters became the director for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. As director, Peters oversees an eight billion dollar budget, nearly 40,000 employees and almost 160,000 individuals in prisons, home confinements and residential re-entry centers. Because the agency’s scope is large and scrutinized, Peters is committed to staying grounded in facts and patience.

“When I’m before Congress or in front of the press, getting asked really hard questions, I welcome those questions because this is the largest component of the Department of Justice,” said Peters. “People have the right to hold our feet to the fire and ask those tough questions. My job is to stay calm in the moment and provide a clear detailed description of what’s going on. What I really think when those questions are coming my way is that, at the core, they want us to succeed. They’re asking the hard questions so that we can get to where we need to go.”

Peters has worked to develop re-envisioned statements of mission, vision and core values for the bureau, a process that she readily acknowledges takes time. “The team really got to a place where they saw a strong desire to use words like *normalcy*, *humanity* and *compassion*. Those are big words for corrections, and we don’t take them lightly,” said Peters. “We are committed to making long, impactful change, rather than that quick ‘it looks good; it feels good’ sort of change. We want change that will last here for generations to come.”

Peters’ early years in Milbank continually influence her perception of and empathy for the individuals within federal care and custody. “We tell them all the time, ‘You are not defined by your one moment in time.’ Imagine if, when we were growing up in Milbank, we were defined by one moment in time,” Peters said. “We got to make mistakes in a safe community, where you knew that you were still going to be loved and cared for even if you did make those mistakes – and not just cared for by your family, but by others in the community.”

Peters believes in the importance of members of the public understanding that individuals who commit felonies require community support and relationships. “We need to recognize that they’re



**Colette S. Peters**

not identified by that one moment in time. We have to welcome them back. I would love to break that barrier down for people. I think that’s incredibly important, and Milbank taught me that,” said Peters.

Personally, Peters finds family to be key in buoying and bolstering her ability to be resilient. She and her husband, Lynn Snyder, have been together for 32 years, after meeting on the Greek island of Santorini during an honors program that gave them the opportunity to study in Greece, Turkey and Italy. They have three daughters, their oldest studies at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD, and twins in their senior years at St. Mary’s Academy in Portland, OR. “Boomeranging between coasts has not been easy, but staying focused on the family has been at the tip of the spear for me in terms of working and keeping that resiliency,” said Peters.

Peters’ own support network in Milbank is extensive and active. From exchanging Christmas cards to checking in after big professional events like Congressional hearings and *60 Minutes* interviews, Peters today feels the same support that shaped her as a young child today. “We always knew that my mother had some prayer chain going, be it before a basketball game or a swim meet or a play, and those prayers continued when I was in college, when I started my career and well into being the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons,” said Peters. “I’m a true believer in small miracles and guardian angels. I can’t do without that support and those prayers.”

– *Emelia Enquist*  
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