

# Best in the Business

## Oklahoma Fleet Specialist Keeps His Garage a Well-Oiled Machine

By Kate Shaw

**W**hen he graduated high school, Oklahoma native Blake Roberts knew that he would be a mechanic. Prior to joining the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (OKDOC), Roberts worked as a mechanic for Jackson County, Okla., for five and a half years. In 1988, due to better pay and the need to provide for his family, Roberts took a job as a construction and management technician at the Oklahoma State Reformatory (OSR). "I was hired to manage the garage and maintain state vehicles, including tractors, farm and heavy equipment, vehicles and generators," he said. "This includes small engine repair, paint and body shop, welding and fabrication." During his 26 years at OSR, Roberts was promoted up the ranks to his current position of fleet specialist IV.

In his current role, Roberts oversees the continued maintenance of all vehicles; monitors vehicle reports; addresses any issues that occur; prepares and submits monthly and quarterly fleet reports; and maintains ACA audit documentation. A self-proclaimed perfectionist, Roberts has built a "well-organized garage and workshops that provide safe and efficient areas to accomplish [the OKDOC] mission." His thorough attention to detail has led to audit reports that show no discrepancies or deficiencies within the garage or tool room. While minimal budgets present a challenge to maintaining the garage and purchasing equipment, Roberts strives for excellence in the quality of the machines he oversees. "My self-imposed challenge is to create the best vehicle using the least amount of funds that will exceed all expectations

of mileage," he said. "This challenge extends to small engine machinery and equipment used to perform my job duties."

In the early 1990s, a need for vehicles at seven community work centers in southwest Oklahoma led to the creation of the Auto Reclamation Program through the teamwork of Roberts and other OKDOC employees. The most cost-effective solution was to rebuild or refurbish state surplus cars using inmate labor and used parts from other vehicles, Roberts said. Inmates are interviewed, and once hired, are overseen by Roberts and other OSR staff. The inmates are taught to maintain farm equipment, heavy equipment and construction equipment. "Seeing changes in inmates once they learn a skill encourages me to continue the program," Roberts said. "The most rewarding [thing] is to see an inmate proud of his work, and know I've had a hand in his future success when he is released."

Since its implementation, the program has saved OKDOC thousands of dollars in maintenance and refurbishing costs, and received the Certificate of Recognition from the Western Regional Innovation Award and a commendation by the governor. Roberts also received the Certificate of Merit for his "dedication and attendance to duty" in overseeing the program. In addition to his duties at OSR, Roberts helps maintain vehicles for other OKDOC facilities across the state. In 2013, he assisted five other facilities with various services pertaining to vehicle maintenance.

Community service is an extremely important part of Roberts' life. He has served as the mayor of Blair, Okla.,



**Blake Roberts**

for the past 25 years, and served as vice mayor for two years prior. "I have lived in this area all my life, and have enjoyed building and improving the community," he said. Additionally, Roberts serves on the Board of Trustees for the Southwest Oklahoma Development Authority (SWODA), headquartered in Burns Flat, Okla. SWODA was created in 1972 as a means for representatives from the Oklahoma municipalities, counties and conservation districts of Beckham, Custer, Greer, Harmon, Jackson, Kiowa, Roger Mills and Washita, to work together to improve community services and other problems that may arise, according to Roberts.

During his 16 years as an elected SWODA board member, Roberts has played an important role in the development of services for the counties. For example, the SWODA Agency for the Aging oversees programs such as the Caregiver Support Program, Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Program and the Nutrition Program. In his spare time, Roberts enjoys participating in other local events, sand sports, trail riding and photography. "[Roberts] is an excellent representative of the 'best in the business,'" said OSR Warden Tracy McCollum. "His knowledge and team spirit is only matched by his willingness to take on challenges. He has proved over and over that he will not be topped in his field. I am proud to know and work with [Roberts]."

---

*Kate Shaw is ACA's associate editor of periodicals.*