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Sebastian County Drug Court Celebrates, Honors Grads

By Wanda Freeman
Times Record •
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Celebration and gratitude were the theme of the day for Sebastian County Drug Court on Friday.

During ceremonies that drew several hundred people to Cavanaugh Free Will Baptist Church, the decade-old program honored 24 new graduates as well as a number of supporters and past clients while also marking its 10th anniversary.

Although not everyone took the microphone upon receiving their graduation certificates, those who did gave profuse thanks to God or a higher power, to Drug Court Coordinator Shirl Page, to the judges who oversee the program, to their sponsors, to their parole officers, and even to those who arrested them.

Patricia Taylor, a keynote speaker and one of five people who graduated from the first Drug Court class in 2003, said she joined the program in 2001 after 27 years of drug abuse.

“You get tired of being sick and tired,” Taylor said, recalling how she spent her last year before Drug Court not wanting to use methamphetamine anymore but using it anyway and then regretting it.

“I kept calling out to God, and he didn’t show up. And then God showed up as the 12th District Drug Task Force.”

After her arrest in July 2001, she was placed in the first-ever Drug Court class.

“Jan. 9, 2002 was the best day of my life,” Taylor said.

Drug Court is an alternative sentencing and rehabilitation program of the Sebastian County Circuit Court system. Clients go through a rigorous four-step recovery regimen that typically takes around two years, followed by an aftercare period.

Circuit Judge J. Michael Fitzhugh, who helped introduce the program and presides over the regular meetings, said very few clients complete the four steps in only a year, and some may take three or four years.

Nonetheless, Drug Court has a 96 percent success rate, and graduates have achieved 13,169 clean days so far.

“That amounts to 36 years,” he said.



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Lucy Smith offers a few words of thanks to Sebastian County Drug Court during a graduation ceremony Friday, Dec. 7, 2012, at Cavanaugh Free Will Baptist Church. Smith was one of 24 Drug Court clients to graduate from the program, which celebrated its 10th anniversary by honoring past graduates and supporters.

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Several graduates were acknowledged for their high clean-day counts: Shelby Hampton for 910 days, Andrea Depalmo for 729 days and Dana Griffin for 850 days. Others, including Joseph Jay Kradle, Christopher Carter, Trinity Yandell and Axel Alpirez, were acknowledged for having no sanctions, which are placed on clients who violate Drug Court rules.

Circuit Judge Stephen Tabor, who alternates Friday meetings with Fitzhugh, presented a new honor, the Outstanding Alumni Award, to past client Tabitha Fondren.

–When I first started working with Drug Court and I saw this person’s name, I said, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” I knew her,” said Tabor.

Fondren began drinking and using meth at 15, Tabor said. By age 20, she was an intravenous drug user, by 25 a heroin addict and by 27 she was in jail. She found recovery through Drug Court and Gateway House.

Six years later, she is clean and sober and works as the director of the Gateway House Specialized Women’s Services program.

Accepting her award, Fondren said, –Everything changes, and life is full of challenges. I know that I will be OK, and I don’t have to get high no matter what.”

Other honors included a Community Support recognition for Jason West of Subway stores for hiring Drug Court clients and accommodating their special scheduling needs; and a Community Service recognition for 2012 graduate Hillary Brown for going beyond Drug Court requirements in giving back to the community.

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