

Fredericksburg judge reflects on tenure with juvenile drug court

BY AMY FLOWERS UMBLE/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Saturday, December 20, 2014 12:00 am



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Rappahannock Regional Juvenile Drug Court Judge David Peterson laughs with co-workers including Dorothy Stewart (at left) after receiving sparkly shoes to mark his retirement. Court clerks bought them after hearing him compliment a young visitor on a similar pair.

Samantha entered the drug treatment program addicted to heroin and weighing 78 pounds.

When she started the Rappahannock Regional Juvenile Drug Court, she wouldn't look Judge David Peterson in the eye.

When she finished drug court, Peterson remembers, she was glowing with health and holding a job at GEICO.

Samantha was the regional program's very first graduate.

As he reflects on his career as a Fredericksburg Juvenile and Domestic Relations judge, Peterson considers Samantha and the program's other graduates as the highest achievements.

Drug court offers nonviolent, juvenile offenders intense substance-abuse treatment and the opportunity to have criminal charges against them dismissed if they complete the program successfully.

Peterson retires at the end of this year. And Thursday, he presided over his last juvenile drug court graduation as a sitting judge.

Those graduates were the 98th and 99th teens to complete the regional program since it began in 1998.

At 70, Peterson has hit the mandatory retirement age for judges in Virginia, but he won't be hanging up his robes for good. He hopes to return to the bench as a substitute judge for drug court in the future.

"I'd at least like to see the 100th graduate," Peterson said. "It's a nice, round number."

Meanwhile, his retirement plans include a trip to Greece and Turkey with his wife, Dianne.

The late Judge John W. Scott Jr. first brought the idea of drug court to the Fredericksburg area in 1997. In October 1998, the area opened both adult and juvenile drug courts. There were a handful of adult drug courts in Virginia at the time, but this was the first juvenile drug court in the state.

It was also rare because it was a regional drug court—Fredericksburg and the counties of King George, Stafford and Spotsylvania participate in the program.

Peterson joined the program in 1999.

At the time, the program administrator Steve Austin worried about having a new judge. Drug courts were rare, and many judges and prosecutors saw them as too lenient on criminals. But Austin said Peterson "really warmed up quickly to this program."

Peterson couldn't see a downside to offering intensive treatment, counseling and probation instead of jail to teenagers with drug problems.

"For me, it made ultimate sense," Peterson said. "It's the way juvenile court should be."

Drug court offers an alternative to juvenile detention, so participants often think of it as a easy solution. But the program's latest graduate said he quickly learned that drug court isn't indulgent.

Program participants check in with therapists, a probation officer, prosecutors, the judge and a public defender.

They must attend group counseling sessions several times each week, follow a curfew and submit to frequent drug tests. They must also either attend school, hold a job or do regular community service.

Simuel Johnson, the drug court probation officer, monitors the teens practically around the clock.

“I’m on call 24 hours a day,” Johnson said. “I get calls at one or two in the morning.”

He randomly shows up at participants’ homes, schools and places of employment. Each participant gets tested for drugs three times a week in the first phase of the program.

Johnson also checks to make sure the teens are complying with the program’s mandatory curfews.

And he checks participants’ social media accounts. Johnson keeps up with the latest lingo through an app. The lingo is important, because teens sometimes use hashtags and acronyms to sell or promote drugs.

Because of the intensity of the program, many participants don’t complete drug court. The program has a 38 percent graduation rate, said drug court administrator Kelly Hale.

It’s painful to see teens leave the program, Peterson said. But he believes the program helps every participant, even those who don’t graduate.

“If you can keep them involved for six months, you see positive effects—even more if you can keep them for a year,” he said.

For those who do graduate, the benefits are tangible. Peterson hands each graduate a certificate—and official papers clearing them of their original criminal charges.

He also lets graduates know that they can get in touch to share good news and bad. And many take him up on the offer, calling for college recommendation letters, advice or just to pass on some good news.

Their parents often write thank you notes to the judge, many ending with the sentiment, “Thank you for giving us back our child.”

Peterson takes those to heart and remembers each graduate—many bring tears to his eyes.

The other members of the drug court team say that Peterson’s personal commitment to the teenagers makes a huge difference to the program.

“He takes an interest in who they really are. He is an incredible man and the epitome of what a drug court judge should be,” Hale said. “There is no way possible that anyone can fill this man’s shoes.”

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