

## **Richmond drug court celebrates 15 years - Richmond Times-Dispatch: Virginia News**

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**BY FRANK GREEN Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Saturday, December 14, 2013 12:00 am**

Sixteen years ago Donald W. Lemons was a relatively new Richmond Circuit Court judge when he pushed for a new kind of court and served as its first judge.

The Richmond Adult Drug Treatment Court celebrated its 15th official year Friday with a graduation ceremony attended by Lemons, now a Virginia Supreme Court justice, who told some success stories from the court's early days.

Lemons, however, also knows that addiction can strike anywhere and not every drug abuser can be saved. "Two weeks ago, I learned that on the day after Thanksgiving my cousin died from an overdose of heroin," he said.

Addressing the crowd of roughly 200 court staff, graduates and dignitaries, Lemons said, "She was the daughter of my first cousin. I was 14 when she was born and I remember what a beautiful young girl she was. She died at age 50 in a distant city."

He said she had been estranged from her family, including her two adult daughters. "Her eldest daughter, upon learning the news said, 'I always knew that someday I would get this call,' " Lemons said.

"You know addiction is no respecter of persons. Addiction affects all races, men and women, educated and unschooled, the rich and the poor and even surfaces in a judge's family," Lemons said.

In 1997 Lemons' court was one of three pilot programs in Virginia. Today there are 36 drug courts in Virginia — 22 adult courts, eight juvenile courts, two regional courts and four family courts — and more than 2,700 such courts across the country.

"Do we have setbacks and disappointments in the drug court program? You bet we do," Lemons said. "But there is plenty of evidence that it makes a difference in the lives of many participants and is a cost-effective alternative to traditional incarceration."

The aim of the program is to get addicts off drugs and out of the criminal justice system. Not all who start it finish. But more than 300 people, including Friday's 14 graduates, have made it through to graduation.

A 2008 study by the Joint Legislative Audit Review Commission showed that the re-arrest rate for drug court completers in Richmond and Chesterfield County was 14 percent compared with 38 percent for similar non-drug court offenders.

A study last year of 12 of Virginia's drug courts by the National Center for State Courts concluded that the drug courts save \$19,234 per person as compared with "business as usual" handling for the same group of offenders.

The Richmond program provides substance-abuse treatment, probation supervision, mental-health counseling and other services to addicted felons with non-violent records.

There are usually about 60 participants in the Richmond program, almost all of them probation violators. The judge wields a carrot — freedom — and a stick — a suspended sentence hanging over the heads of the participants.

The court was officially founded in 1998 and had its first formal graduation in 1999, presided over by Lemons — then a judge on the Virginia Court of Appeals — and Richmond Circuit Judge Margaret Spencer, who took over for Lemons.

Lemons said getting the drug court started was not easy. There was no money, he said. "Most of all, we needed to have a new attitude toward the problem of addiction."

There was resistance in the General Assembly and from some judges who did not believe it was the sort of work courts ought to be doing. Lemons — who joined the Supreme Court a few years later — was even warned it could be "a career-ender move."

"You can imagine how thankful I am for Judge Spencer, who took responsibility for the drug court after I left and has been dedicated to it ever since," Lemons said.

In the beginning, he said needed help came from a wide variety of sources including counselors, probation officers, teachers and public health professionals.

The court also got support from then-Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney David Hicks and his successor, Michael Herring, both of whom were present Friday, as well as from the police, Richmond Sheriff C.T. Woody and the Department of Corrections.

Public safety, said Lemons, is a primary consideration of the program and no one can participate without the agreement of the commonwealth's attorney.

Lemons said that long after he left drug court he still ran into participants. He recalled one encounter at Virginia Center Commons when a familiar voice hollered, "Yo, Judge Lemons."

"I knew who that was before I even looked up," Lemons said. The young man approached him. "I said, 'Anthony, how are you?'"

Lemons said the young man smiled and told him: "Look, thank you for putting me in jail for a few months. . . . Before you put me into drug court, I needed to be off the streets. I needed to be clean. I needed to be away from the people I was hanging with."

He said he had paid all his fines and court costs, his child support was current and for the first time in his adult life he had an address and a driver's license.

Each of Friday's 14 graduates was introduced, their families recognized and a bit of their substance abuse history recounted before they were given certificates of completion and could make remarks of their own.

The last of them, Antonio Wilkins, a former crack addict, thanked the police for arresting him and thanked his family, the drug court staff, the judges and his fellow graduates and others for their help.

"I thought I was going to die with a crack pipe in my mouth," said Wilkins, his voice breaking. "I just want to thank you all for just putting up with me. Thank you all for loving me," he said. "Thank you all for giving my life back."