

## Troup County Drug Court Gives Participants a New Lease on Life

*Continued from front page.*

Donald Wright has been the coordinator for the Troup County D.U.I./Drug Court Treatment Program since its inception in 2004. He understands that to the general layperson, the program probably has a few misconceptions and the first and foremost is that the D.U.I./Drug Court program is all about punishment. The exact opposite is true.

It can be an earned pathway back into picking up the pieces and moving on in life, but, the participants must desire to live a life free from alcohol and drugs. The program is not easy. It is not meant to be easy. But it is not impossible for participants to graduate, look themselves in the mirror, get a new outlook and break the grip alcohol and drugs have on their lives.

It is that hope that drives Wright to be the point man for individuals trying to turn their life around. "I have seen cases that at first I thought would be a lost cause and would not be able to go through the program. Maybe it was just attitude, or maybe they were in so deep that a change for the better would be a miracle, but it is so rewarding when you do see a person turn it around, kick the dependency and a life is changed. That is a very good thing."

State Court Judge Jeannette Little said the local program, which she was instrumental in getting off the ground, is designed primarily for multiple D.U.I. offenders. There have been a total of 285 participants take part in the alcohol and drug cleansing program and 136 have graduated. The court is held every other Thursday from 5:30 until about 7PM.

"In the early days, we took in all sorts of offenders, Drug offenses, D.U.I.'s you name it. But we had to streamline it and the focus has become for second and third D.U.I. offenders. This is not a mandatory program either. You can choose to go through this 20-20-12 program, or you can remain in jail. And...we have a few that opt to stay in jail"

The first 20 week phase includes a minimum of 55 to 65 hours of group and individual work. The aim is to help those establish a base for self-diagnosis, treatment approaches, and both early and intermediate relapse prevention.

The next 20 weeks is a more in depth examination of topics related to

substance use disorders and advanced relapse prevention strategies. The last 12 weeks is described as an 'aftercare' approach, where the treatment becomes less intensive and allows the participant more flexibility. The bottom line here is participants learn to be responsible and independent.

"The last thing I want is for the people involved to spend the rest of their lives in DUI Court. I desperately want them to get out on their own. Get good jobs. Get their lives in working order and be productive and happy. That is my goal and the goal of the whole team," declared Little.

Wright not only talked about some of the self-help aspects of the program being so beneficial, like improving one's health and rebuilding relationships, but a forgotten and huge benefit is it helps offenders get their drivers licenses reinstated.

"It's one thing to have this problem. It's another thing to have this problem and losing your driver's license. When you can't make it to work because you don't have a license...in this economy?... that's not a scenario they want to be in. The folks in this program can get their licenses reissued as soon as possible."

During this interview, a participant came in to meet with Wright and part of their conversations had to do with a delay in regaining his license. The client told Wright that if he couldn't get his license soon that he would be out of a job. Wright immediately assured the man that he would see to it that the matter got in front of Judge Little quickly.

"See, that is just an example of what I can do for people once we build a trust and a relationship. I'm not dictatorial with them and they aren't dictatorial with me. We work together. I let them know the rules but it is all about helping," stated Wright.

At court the next day, the man discussed his license situation with Judge Little and she made it a point to make sure the snafu got addressed, even going so far as to saying; "I can make a phone call if we need to and get this cleared up."

The first rule to abide by in the 20-20-12 week program is for participants to remain alcohol and drug free. Any viola-

tion and the individual may not move to the next phase for 60 days. This is in addition to any sanction imposed, which can include incarceration. Participants can also count on attending group and individual counseling sessions each week, plus attend two Alcoholics Anonymous meetings each week.

Participants in the first 90 days of the program wear a highly sensitive device around their ankles called a 'SCRAM'. The lightweight 'SCRAM' can detect alcohol consumption and that information is checked by Wright twice weekly.

"We warn our wearers about having alcohol of any kind and it goes further than that. The SCRAM can also detect alcohol content in colognes, mouthwashes, hand sanitizers, and lotions. Ivory soap is about the safest thing for them to use," noted Wright.

SCRAM is for real. Judge Little kidded with a participant last week about how her SCRAM unit detected a problem just because of using 'Pure!' hand sanitizer.

"That was a scare wasn't it?" asked Judge Little. The woman gave sort of a fainting posture and said "Judge Little you just don't know!"

D.U.I. offenses can potentially have a huge financial impact on individuals. For a person just scraping by, living day-to-day, or week-to-week, the sting can be hard. First, there will be a guarantee of losing driving privileges. First offenders can usually get their license back after

120 days, but for the multiple offenders; the license can be lost for a year for a two time offenders, and five years for third time offenses.

There's more. Typically in Troup County, first time D.U.I.'s almost always come with a \$1,000.00 fine. Second offenses can bring not only a \$1,000 fine, but an additional mandatory 240 hours of community service. Third time offenders could be fined as much as \$5,000.00 and a loss of license for five years. Even with the issuance of a limited permit after two years, the offender can expect stringent restraints on their driving privileges.

"A D.U.I. just does horrendous things to insurance rates, to jobs, to even prospects of getting a job. Those fines, and other inconveniences are part of the 'stick' of the criminal justice system and the court program is the other side. The side where we get to know the people involved and try to help them. I'm sold on the program. It can work if people get in it and stay in it," Little stated.

Judge Little opened court this week with the announcement that 22 people from last year's court will be graduating on Oct. 7. The current group consists of 31 participants.

"I am so proud of all of them for being diligent. I am concerned about them and I am always so pleased when I see proof that they are doing well. You can tell it when you see it."

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*Phillip A. Clark*



Pictured is the D.U.I./Drug Court "Team" L-R: Kelly Veal (Counselor), Akia Maddox (Graduate Student Intern), Sharon Woodruff (Probation Officer), Judge Little, Shannon Dunlap (Director of Counseling Services of LaGrange), Deena Smith (Director of Project Development), and Donald Wright (Programs Coordinator D.U.I. Court). See article on page 28.