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Offenders get choice through DUI/drug court

by By Becky Holland Lifestyle editor

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Lee Mock is a middle-aged man who grew up in the South. He likes the outdoors and enjoys hanging out with his family and friends after work.

But the LaGrange native is not typical. In a few weeks, Mock will be graduating from the court-mandated drug and alcohol program. It is a program that he entered after getting another DUI ticket on his record.



“It was either jail or enter the program,” Mock said. “And I really didn’t have a choice. Who wants to go to jail?”

Mock has undergone meetings, counseling sessions, drug tests and completed service hours after going through the processes involved of the program.

Mock’s voice cracked as he said, “This program really saved my life.”

The DUI/drug court program in Troup County was initiated by Jeannette L. Little, judge of state court. She said the local program, one of the first in Georgia, involves “giving those who are impacted by addictions - drinking and drugs - another avenue besides jail.”

The intensive program involves “a number of restrictions that they have to follow and rules they have to comply for,” she said.

Such programs save taxpayers money by freeing up bed space in prisons and jails, says the Judicial Council of Georgia. In 2002, the state provided grants to the council to establish specialized courts to manage cases of chronic multiple offenders convicted of DUI, who cause death and injuries on the state’s highways, and who are not deterred by traditional DUI sanctions.

Troup County has a 12-month post-adjudication program that handles nonviolent misdemeanor substance abuse cases through intensive supervision, drug treatment and rehabilitation. It is described as a rigorous program that holds its participants fully accountable for their own acts. Participants must attend frequent meetings, court appointments, and routine alcohol and drug testing.

“I was like most of my friends,” Mock said. “I worked and then I went home, and lived for the weekend when I could go hang out and drink beers with my friends.”

He recounted the night he got stopped for the DUI that landed him in front of Little, who gave him the opportunity to enter the program or go to jail.

“I was pretty much out of it, I guess. I was driving my truck and headed home. They said I was weaving pretty bad in the road,” he recalled. “All I could think was ‘not again’ when they pulled me over. I knew I was gone.”

That’s where the DUI/drug court offered him a chance. Mock believes that the people involved in the program were sent to help him.

“At first, I was not gung-ho about the stuff we had to do, but as time went on and I completed each step, I knew that everything was going to be fine,” he said.

Donald Wright, Troup County’s drug court program coordinator, said, “That is the whole point of this program - getting these people to see the errors of their ways and applying the steps of recovery to their lives so that those mistakes don’t happen again.

“We offer them a choice if they have met certain requirements, like if they have received three DUIs or get two in five years.”

Along with treatment, “They do have to wear the monitors, take random drug and alcohol tests, meet with probation officers, me, and other conditions,” Wright said.

The average DUI/drug court participant in Georgia is a 35-year-old white male, with at least three lifetime DUIs, state figures show. In most instances, he started drinking by age 18 and has a severe, untreated substance abuse problem. The majority of all DUI/drug court participants are high school graduates, and 95 percent are physically addicted to alcohol or other substances when they begin the program.

Overcoming those issues is often a tough task.

Little said, “For the program to work, the participant has to be willing to do their part.”

Troup County’s program has seen more than 280 participants since its implementation. Of those, 134 have graduated.

“Some of them have turned back to drinking, drugs and partying, but some have not. We have several who are still active and helping out in the program,” Little said.

State figures show that at 12 months after graduation, DUI/drug court participants are almost three times less likely to have a new DUI arrest. At 24 months after graduation, they are four times less likely to have a new DUI arrest. And participants are 20 percent less likely to be arrested for a new felony, records show.

Another program participant, Howard Allen, is the father of three, a divorcee and an industrial contracting engineer.

"I knew that I was in trouble when the last situation happened. I had had so many in my lifetime already. When I came before Judge Little, I knew what I had to do," he said.

"My grandmother raised me. My parents were not around, and I came from a family full of alcoholics. I drank with many of them, even when I was little. I got married out of high school, and just kept doing what I was doing - working and then drinking after work. I could quit, but I never really did quit."

He got his first DUI when he was 15.

It was when he had knee surgery that the LaGrange resident became addicted to pain killers.

"I got them through prescription and pretty soon got hooked on them too," he said. "I lost everything. I lost my money. I lost work. I lost my family."

Allen said the drugs and his alcohol use were his ways of coping with stress.

"I drank with my dad because I wanted him to accept me. He had not been around. I did all of this stuff because I wanted to be liked," he said.

"But I didn't like myself."

Om DUI/drug court, Allen started "working the steps of the program little by little" and now, he is ready to graduate. He said he knows that "I am going to have to stay surrounded and in the middle of the help that has been given me to make it."

"I was going so fast through life, that having to do things through the drug court program, I have had to slow down. I pay attention to things more. I see how selfish I was when I was doing the drugs and drinking. I took time away from my kids," he said.

"Since I have been in the program, I have seen a guy who graduated turn back to the life he was living before - the one who got him trouble and I have seen people go out to the car while on the grounds and get a drink."

Shaking his head, Allen said, "That is not for me anymore."

— http://www.trouppcountyga.org/dui_drug_court.html

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