

Rankin County Family Drug Court celebrates graduation

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There he sat, on a hard jail bunk. It was his second arrest on a drug possession charge. His phone call to his father, a state trooper, had been short. His father said “good luck” and hung up on him.

Recounting his early difficulties to five Rankin County Family Drug Court graduates and their families in Pelahatchie on March 24, Mark Stovall clearly understood their struggles. That had been his life until his 2002 arrest. “It had been 15 years since I had been *not* high,” he said.

Stovall also knows a lot about change and second chances. He is a living example. As Director of Treatment Services in the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Services of the Department of Mental Health, he is in charge of the state’s public system of alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment. The man who spent his early years using drugs has made a career of directing drug treatment and recovery.

Stovall challenged the Family Drug Court graduates to be examples for others who struggle, and to extend a helping hand. The changes they have made in their own lives affect their families. Stovall urged them to reach farther.

“It’s just an amazing opportunity to change people’s lives,” he said. “I hope you change the community. What you do – it’s about helping people to live again.”

He recounted the day of his sentencing hearing, when he watched the man ahead of him get sentenced to prison. Both were charged with possession of methamphetamine. He expected that prison was where he was headed too. When it was his turn for sentencing, the Coahoma County Circuit Court judge asked if he had anything to say. By then, Stovall had been drug-free for a year. He had been talking to high school students about drug addiction. He was trying to change. To his surprise, he got probation, and a second chance.

The Rankin County Family Drug Court program had supervised and supported these parents for up to 18 months. They had pieced their families back together after losing custody of children due to problems rooted in alcohol and drug abuse.

“I believe in treatment. I believe in drug courts....I’m almost envious,” Stovall said of the drug court program.

There was no drug court in Coahoma County in 2002. Stovall’s chance at success depended on a mean probation officer who nicknamed him “Snowball.” She once threatened to shoot him when he tried to hug her. They kept each other busy for two and a half years of probation. She hugged him when he got his conviction expunged.

It wasn’t an easy transition. Before his arrest, he sold real estate. After he got out of jail, his work was more down to earth. He planted flowers on a landscaping crew.

His marriage failed. “I’d have left me if I had been in her shoes,” he said.

Tough breaks, family stress and the struggles of everyday life make it easy to slip back into drug use, and the availability of drugs is a temptation. He recalled finding a stash long forgotten in his own home. He called a drug treatment sponsor who was a mentor. He was vulnerable and scared.

Staying clean and sober is a choice. “I choose. Nobody makes me stay clean but me,” Stovall said.

During the graduation ceremony, Family Drug Court team members recognized the five

graduates present, and two who were unable to attend the ceremony. Heather Pitts, director of Region Eight Alcohol and Drug Services, singled out one graduate for dedication and determination. "You are the reason I come to work every day," Pitts said.

One graduate received accolades for his absence. He had received a promotion at work. He was off to training out of state.

Not everybody sailed through. It took some 18 months to master the requirements of the Family Drug Court program. "You have starts and stops, slips and falls. That's how recovery works," said Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome, who supervises the Family Drug Court and a separate Juvenile Drug Court.

Judge Broome expects the struggles. "We are taking some of the most difficult cases. Those are high risk," he said. "Usually the parents come in because the children have been removed from the home due to issues surrounding drugs and alcohol....These are people who have hit the wall and know they have only one direction to go to save their families."

Family drug courts address drug and alcohol problems that are the underlying causes of abuse and neglect, delinquency, domestic strife, crime and a host of other problems. The family drug courts deal with juveniles, parents and their extended families in efforts to address substance abuse without separating children from their families.

The March 24 graduates included a husband a wife. Another graduate's spouse is still working through the program. The seven graduates are parents of 11 children ranging from 14 months to age 17, said Drug Court Counselor Donna Smith.

Sixteen adults remain in the program. They are parents of 28 children. Eleven more people are currently being assessed through Region Eight Mental Health.

Rankin County Family Drug Court began in 2010 as part a pilot program. The other pilot program is in Adams County. Family Drug Court is a collaborative effort of the courts, Department of Human Services, Department of Mental Health, Boards of Supervisors, local law enforcement and schools.

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Photos are attached.

Caption information is:

At left, Heather Pitts, Director of Region 8 Alcohol and Drug Services, visits with a mother and child who participated in Rankin County Family Drug Court.

Mark Stovall, Director of Treatment Services in the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Services of the Department of Mental Health, talks to Rankin County Family Drug Court graduates.

