

# Drug Court graduation set for June 21

June 17, 2004

Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. will be the guest speaker Monday, June 21, at the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court District Drug Court graduation in Magnolia. Circuit Judge Keith Starrett will preside over the program, which is scheduled for 11:30 a.m. at the Pike County Courthouse.

Twenty-one people from Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties will be recognized for completing the program. They have spent between three and four years in Drug Court.

Monday's ceremony will bring the total to 56 people who have completed the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court program. Judge Starrett started the program in 1999.

Fifteen people are moving into the fourth and final phase, which is a year of non-reporting probation. Twenty-eight others will be recognized as they move into the third phase. Those 28 must complete a year of monthly reporting and drug testing, plus another year of non-reporting probation.

Fees partially pay for their participation in the program. Participants must have paid all fees, fines and restitution before they can move into the third phase. These 28 have paid \$61,149.50 in fines, restitution and court costs, plus \$21,350 in fees, for a total of \$82,499.50, according to Drug Court Coordinator Russanna Lindley.

About 150 people are now enrolled in some phase of the Drug Court program in the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court District. Eighty people are enrolled in the second phase, the most intensely supervised portion with weekly reporting to the judge and drug testing twice a week.

The Drug Court program is at capacity. Judge Starrett said he expects the spots opened with graduation to be filled within a month. "We are turning people away. There is a waiting list."

Law enforcement officers are making some of the referrals to the program. Judge Starrett said, "Law enforcement is recognizing the value of this."

Several of the people who are graduating from Drug Court have been to prison before, Judge Starrett said. They got back into trouble because of their addiction to drugs and alcohol.

By giving those people a second chance, Judge Starrett said, "we are not ignoring what they are doing. We are going to make them accountable. But we are going to do it differently than if they were in the penitentiary. This is about changing people's lives instead of just punishing them. This is the first time in their adult lives that they have been clean and sober for an extended period of time."

He said, "It costs taxpayers millions of dollars to lock them up. After they are released, we see them do the same thing again....We are modifying behavior in a way that the penitentiary has not been successful in doing. It becomes a way of life to be a responsible citizen."

Drug Court participants are required to complete drug treatment and are subjected to frequent drug

screening. They meet periodically with Judge Starrett and give an accounting of their progress. They must get and keep a job. Those who do not have a high school diploma must pursue a General Education Development degree. Some are required to do community service.

Drug Court does not accept anyone with felony convictions for or pending charges for crimes of violence; distribution, sale, possession with intent to distribute, production, manufacture or cultivation of controlled substances; burglary of an occupied dwelling; or driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs that resulted in a death.

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**Media Contact: Beverly Pettigrew Kraft, Administrative Office of Courts, 601-354-7452**