

## 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court celebrates graduation

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When the 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit District Drug Court was in the early stage of development, law enforcement and the court couldn't locate a Greenwood woman who had been recommended for participation in the program. So Circuit Judge Betty W. Sanders of Greenwood took to the streets to find her.

As she drove around in her car, men standing on the corners leaned in the window, then backed off in a hurry as they recognized the judge. "I was out there so much that law enforcement told me to be careful," Judge Sanders said.

On Thursday, Shinner Ellis, 42, of Greenwood stood before a packed courtroom in the Washington County Courthouse in Greenville and thanked Judge Sanders for her efforts.

Ellis was among seven recovering drug addicts who graduated from the 4<sup>th</sup> District Drug Court. Three are from Washington County and four are from Leflore County. Seven others were recognized for their progression through earlier stages in the program.

"I just want to shout Hallelujah!" Ellis exclaimed as she approached the podium. "Judge Sanders was the one who put a ray of hope in my life."

Ellis, a former nurse who battled crack cocaine addiction, also thanked her mother. "I've been in treatment four times. My mother never gave up. Thank you, Mom, for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself."

Ellis admitted she didn't go willingly into Drug Court. She was already facing a charge of check forgery. When she heard the judge was looking for her, she was wary. And when a bailiff came to her mother's home looking for her, she thought she must be in more trouble so she stayed out of sight.

"I was a night creeper," Ellis explained, looking nothing of the part Thursday in an embroidered white suit.

Ellis's mother convinced her to meet with Judge Sanders. Mother and daughter showed up at the judge's home on a Saturday during a holiday weekend. Treatment centers were closed until the following Tuesday. Ellis was out of jail on bond. Judge Sanders recalled her fear that Ellis would disappear again. But she came back and took the regimen of treatment followed by intense monitoring, counseling and drug testing.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice James E. Graves Jr., keynote speaker for the graduation, told the participants to make the most of their second chance, because there's usually no such thing as a third. He urged them to change their lifestyles and find spirituality within themselves. He challenged them to give back to the community.

"You need to avoid at all costs hanging out in the same old places with the same old people who have the same old habits," Justice Graves said. But he told them they can't blame somebody else if they fail.

"I want to encourage you to take responsibility for your own actions," Justice Graves said. "You ought to get up each day and expect that the world owes you nothing, and you are going to be delighted with every smile and helping hand that you get."

Encouragement and support in Drug Court come from the judges and staff, and from participants themselves.

Graduate Kim Goodson, 35, of Greenville, said Judge Margaret Carey-McCray sometimes visits her at work. The judge has called her home to check up on her.

Goodson said she wasn't eager to join the program. She recalled coming to her first court appearance high on drugs.

"I'm proof it works," Goodson said of Drug Court. "I used every day for 15 years. I have not used one day since I came into this program."

Judge Carey-McCray said Drug Court works to cure the drug addiction that drives people to commit crimes. Judges and staff also work to help participants cope with personal difficulties.

Judge Carey-McCray said, "Instead of the court punishing, the court has decided to be therapeutic, to take the opportunity to work with those who want to work with their own lives to go into a treatment program....Ultimately the goal of Drug Court is to assist in the recovery these people who we are honoring here today will have for the rest of their lives."

Treatment is followed by counseling, intensive supervision and drug testing. Participants must work, and if they don't have a high school education or equivalency degree, they must work toward obtaining a General Education Development (GED) degree.

Each graduate has spent at least 18 months in the program. The program can last as long as three years. Those who graduated will continue to be monitored for the next year and must submit to random drug testing. They are also asked to remain involved in the program by assisting other participants.

Drug Court's requirements are so tough that some people recommended for the program refuse to participate, Judge Carey-McCray said. Those who stick with it have to have determination. She pointed out graduate Danny Huggins, who works as an electrical apprentice. After Huggins had to have teeth pulled, he refused to take pain medicine for fear that he would lapse back into addiction.

"People are recognizing that this is not a cake walk, but if you are willing to take on the hard work of changing your own life, the Drug Court is here to assist you," Judge Carey-McCray said.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit District program started in August 2001. Circuit Judge Ashley Hines of Greenville said that in its first months of operation, there were only a few participants. The numbers have grown to about 50 among the three counties.

Drug Court Coordinator Tony Jones said, "I'm glad to be a part of this team. We've come a long way in a short period of time, and we plan on going further."

Justice Graves praised the efforts of the local judges, prosecutors, law enforcement, county supervisors and others who worked to create the Drug Court. The 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court District Drug Court, which includes Washington, Leflore and Sunflower counties, is among 11 drug court programs in the state.

Justice Graves said, "I want to congratulate those who are responsible....Washington County is still at the forefront of having a drug court program in Mississippi."

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

(Note to editors: Spelling of Shinner Ellis's name is correct.)