

Pike County Juvenile Drug Court Graduation is December 11

December 9, 2008

The Pike County Juvenile Drug Court will hold a graduation at 5 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, at Southwest Regional Medical Center in McComb. The ceremony will be in the C.O. Haskins Community Room on the sixth floor.

Six participants are expected to graduate from the program.

Ashanti Witherspoon, a former inmate at the maximum security Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, will be the guest speaker for the graduation.

Witherspoon also will speak to student assemblies at North Pike High School at 8 a.m., McComb Junior High at 10 a.m., McComb High School at 11 a.m., and South Pike High School and Junior High at 1:30 p.m.

Witherspoon was paroled from Angola in 1999 after serving 27 years for armed robbery and aggravated assault. He frequently is called upon to speak to youth groups about his experiences behind bars and the mistakes he made which landed him in prison.

Pike County and Youth Court Judge John Price, who oversees the Juvenile Drug Court, said teens who have started down the wrong path can benefit from hearing the former inmate's story. "I think it's important for them to understand where someone else has been so they won't follow along in those same footsteps. He has been to the very bottom....His whole purpose of speaking is to help them understand that there is a better way of doing things."

Members of the news media are invited to attend the graduation. Reporters, photographers and editors are reminded that participants are juveniles enrolled in a Youth Court program. **Because of the confidentiality required by law in Mississippi Youth Court matters, members of the media are asked to refrain from publishing or broadcasting information or photographs which would identify any individual juvenile participant or family member.**

Pike County formed the Juvenile Drug Court in October 2007. Approximately 25 participants will remain enrolled after the graduation. This is the program's second graduation. Three people graduated earlier this year.

The Pike County Juvenile Drug Court accepts participants ages 12 through 17 who have been adjudicated delinquent by the Youth Court for commission of nonviolent acts. The program takes a minimum of six months to complete. Some participants remain in the program longer. Judge Price noted that some who were enrolled at the program's start are still under supervision.

The Drug Court program includes counseling, drug testing, probation supervision and enforced curfews. Participants progress through three phases, earning more privileges and less supervision as they meet program requirements.

Mississippi currently has 28 drug courts – eight juvenile programs and 20 adult programs. Statewide, 1,983 people, including 278 juveniles, were enrolled in drug court programs in October, the latest period for which complete statistics were available, according to the Administrative Office of Courts.

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