

Lee County Drug Court celebrates program's first graduation

By Joe Benedict/MVM News Network

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FORT MADISON – When the Lee County District Court started its drug court, officials knew it would save the state some money.

It costs a lot less for the rehabilitation program than it does to incarcerate someone. But after the first graduation ceremony on Thursday at the North Lee County Courthouse in Fort Madison, those same officials probably realize the court is going to save lives as well.

Stacy Rudd has the honor of being the first graduate of the program. She said it took 15 months to complete.

“It’s the best thing for anybody,” she said. “The support they give you is wonderful.”

The court has drug offenders attend on a weekly basis, which often changes depending on the phase the offender is on in the court, and talk to the judge and four others to report on their progress.

On the Thursday before the graduation, several offenders spoke to Judge Michael Schilling, Public Defenders Clinton Boddicker and Scott Schroeder, Probation Officer Dustin Briscoe and Sierra Garza, a treatment counselor from ADDS.

The offenders shared what they had been up to. One had recently started working at McDonalds, others talked about how long they had been sober and what community service they had been doing.

All those offenders told Rudd how proud they were of her for completing the program with many telling her what an inspiration she is to them. They all hope to be in her spot very soon.

Rudd told them they were really the inspiration. She said she would continue to be in contact with them and help out with the drug court in the future.

She said the program helped her realize that she wasn’t alone in the world with drug problems.

“It is a place I can go and have a conversation with a person who is actually interested in what I have to say,” she said.

Schilling said he remembered the first time he saw Rudd in a bright yellow jail suit and handcuffs.

“Now you’ve turned your life around,” he said. “You are bright, articulate, have potential as a leader and are compassionate and loving.”

He told everyone Rudd was in college with a grade point average of more than 3.5.

"It's 3.8," Rudd said.

The judge reminded everyone that a graduation isn't an end, but a beginning.

"This is just a jumping off point of where you need to go," Schilling said.

Some of the court officials also reminisced about Rudd's time in drug court. Boddicker asked if she remembered several weeks ago when Schilling showed a photo of Rudd at her presentence investigation.

"The person in that picture isn't there anymore," he said. "I think sometimes you might not know what an inspiration you are for each other and for the team."

Family members also were present for the graduation. Her mother, Sharon, said she is thankful for the court.

"We have the old Stacy, but a lot stronger," she said.

Linda Johnson, who was Rudd's mother-in-law when her son was living, said she had heard stories about the "old Stacy" before she got into trouble and was thankful to the court for bringing her back.

Rudd told the others in the program to keep working towards the exit door and she would be there to help.

"I don't want anyone to think they can't text or call," she said.

Dan Fell, director of the Department of Correctional Services for the Eighth District Court gave some numbers concerning the offenders in drug court.

He said the rate of reoffending for those coming out of drug court is 83 percent less than those who are simply sent to prison for their crimes.

It also costs about \$40,000 to house an inmate for a year and drug court costs about half that amount.

He noted that in Ottumwa there were 22 graduates from the program in the period covering 2009 and the first few months of 2010. None of those offenders had another arrest.