



Drug Court graduates show pride

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Men and women once considered social rejects in the Caymanian society have worked hard through the Drug Rehabilitation Court to shed that negative connotation.

So far 64 people have graduated from the rehab programme; nine of them recently. The Drug Rehabilitation Court began in October 2007.

In March 2011, James Michael Ebanks was the first graduate who asked to be publicly identified. He said people knew him as a drug addict; he wanted other addicts to say, "But that's James Michael. If he could give it up, I can give it up." One year later he remains clean, sober and productive.

Some of the graduates at the 27 March graduation shared personal thoughts with an audience including drug court participants in earlier phases of the programme, family, friends, employers and the team of counsellors, probation officers, Crown counsel and their duty counsel, John Furniss.



March 2012 graduates join sponsors and the presiding officer of the Drug Rehabilitation Court for a celebratory photo. Taking part in the ceremony were, from right, Rotary Sunrise president Andrea Bryan, Digicel representative Rob Moorhead, Magistrate Valdis Foldats in the second row, and Rotary Club of Grand Cayman president Sebastien Guilbard at far left. – Photo: Carol Winker

Stunning

The first graduate who spoke stunned listeners from his opening sentence. "I started using drugs when I was nine – I'm 54 now."

He continued, "It took the Drug Rehabilitation Court for me to realise there is a better life. When a negative comes along, I can ride it out with a positive ... I want to have that positive manner each day of my life."

He thanked the treatment team, especially Magistrate Valdis Foldats, who kept telling him what good work he was doing. "That's what built me up," he said. But as much as the court team helped, it couldn't do anything until he looked within himself. "We have to stop and realise what we do to ourselves. We have to respect ourselves," he urged.

His closing was as powerful as his opening: "I can't read or write, but I have common sense and that's what makes me realise this is the better life." Another graduate's remarks were brief, but equally poignant. As a mother and as an adult, she wanted to take all the tools she had learned and use them with youth in the community.

One young man said the beginning of drug court was a road full of potholes, but the treatment team had helped make it smoother.

Mr. Foldats read previous comments from this graduate's folder, explaining that he wrote everything down "because we're not sure what is going to motivate you." This man had said that his time in drug court was the longest he had been sober since he was 12 years old. "I enjoy being a husband and a father and having the life I always wanted."

Another young man indicated that his problems started when he was grieving the loss of a loved one. Just having to show up at court on a regular basis helped him, as did one-on-one meetings with a counsellor. "Stay with it. Work through the programme, it helps," he assured participants in early phases.

An honour

Attorney Shaun McCann told the graduates their ceremony was his first visit to the drug court and he was honoured to be there. He noted that when they first entered the court they were known as social rejects. But they apologised to the community through their guilty pleas and worked through the programme. "Today you come and say, 'Count me in as a productive member of society'."

Mr. McCann said he saw a strong element of self-respect among the graduates. "You have proved your own self-worth ... Don't let anyone take that away from you. Your heads are held high and you are genuine role models."

During the presentation of certificates, trophies and gifts, Mr. Foldats paid tribute to one graduate's employer who was in the audience. "What you've done is absolutely tremendous. He describes it as his dream job," the magistrate said.

Another graduate was lauded for his perseverance. "You stuck with us and made it through," Mr. Foldats told him. The young man did not make a speech, but a good portion of the audience attested to his achievement, standing to applaud and chant his name.

Guest speaker was Richard Powery, a 2010 graduate who has also addressed service clubs on the work of the drug court. Mr. Powery, who now owns his own business, warned the graduates that it would take time to get back people's trust, but it would come. He urged them to stay in contact with their personal sponsors as well as the court treatment team.

"Each of you has within you what it takes to rise above whatever happens. It's about taking it one day at a time," he said. "Sometimes some of us take it five minutes at a time."

The GIS video, shown during the ceremony last week, began and ended with quotes from former Chief Magistrate Margaret Ramsay-Hale, who started holding a virtual drug court that preceded the court brought into being by legislation in 2006.

"The drug court has as its primary aim the restoration of the individual to himself, his family and his community as a valued, valuable contributing member of the community by reducing his addiction," she said. "Where an offender's behaviour is related to drug addiction, then if we stop the addiction, we stop the offending. It's a very simple equation."

She later emphasised that the programme is not a soft option, but a valuable tool in the criminal justice system. She observed that prison does not add value to offenders: "They go in and they come out the same man, unchanged, just a little older. Drug court makes phenomenal and lasting change."