

The Telegraph

Drug court graduates have varied backgrounds, one common foe

By Dean Shalhoup - Senior Staff Writer | Oct 22, 2022



(Telegraph photo by DEAN SHALHOUP) U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, was the guest speaker at the recent graduation celebration for 11 members of the Hillsborough County South Adult Drug Court.

NASHUA – It wasn't all that long ago that Mike Differ burned all his bridges, found himself couch-surfing, and found that nobody trusted a word he said. His future? "Another failed statistic" in the world of addiction.

Kurt, age 49, spent almost half of those years in State Prison. In between, he was in and out of jail and courtrooms. At 14 he was using cannabis, soon alcohol, then cocaine. He couldn't stop using substances, but treatment wasn't for him.

Beth Belanger – now Beth Emerson – was born to drug-addicted parents, spent her first 6 months in a NICU, then went home to a dysfunctional family. She grew up to become a "troubled, angry teenager," coming and going from school, doing what she pleased, collecting a handful of arrests and running from her probation officers.

Priscilla Matos was barely in her teens when she became addicted to substances. She amassed a significant record of arrests for possessing and selling drugs. She was programmed to distrust authority, especially police. She was certain she would never amount to anything.

But one day something happened. "It was like a light switch was suddenly flipped," Matos said last week, her words commanding the attention of a roomful of people ranging from police and addiction counselors to members of the Nashua Drug Court Treatment Program team and previous program graduates and numerous family members.



(Telegraph photo by DEAN SHALHOUP) Priscilla Matos, who graduated from the Hillsborough County South Adult Drug Court in 2019 after battling addiction since her early teens, and is now a member of the drug court team and a recovery coach at a local agency, delivers the keynote address at the recent drug court graduation. At left are three of the 11 graduates, Robert Ryan, Gary Guertin and Beth Belanger.

Last week's event was the 16th graduation ceremony for drug court participants who have successfully met the requirements of each of the five phases needed to graduate, which includes a minimum of 400 hours of treatment.

The number of graduates honored varies widely from ceremony to ceremony, ranging from as few as 3 or 4 up to a dozen or more. This most recent ceremony featured 11 grads, two of whom were unable to attend.

Mike Differ, Beth Emerson and Kurt – who preferred his last name not be used – were among the nine grads who spoke briefly at last week's ceremony.

Matos, however, was not among them, having accomplished that milestone three years ago this month. Rather, she was the keynote speaker for the ceremony, during which she grew emotional at times as she recounted the shaky, first steps of a once-improbable break from the downward spiral of addiction up to the day she confidently told Judge Jacalyn Colburn, a founder and presiding judge of the Drug Court Treatment Program, that “someday I'm going to be on your team.”

Colburn remembers Matos's vow well. “I said, OK, maybe ...,” Colburn said to laughs. “But true to her word, she made that goal – and exceeded it.”



(Telegraph photo by DEAN SHALHOUP) Elizabeth Belanger, one of the 11 Hillsborough County South Adult Drug Court graduates honored at a speaking program and ceremony Thursday, receives her certificate from Drug Court Steering Committee members Peg Gilmour and Jim Tollner as some of the other graduates applaud. A full story and more photos will appear in next weekend's edition of The Sunday Telegraph.

The program, founded in partnership with Greater Nashua Mental Health in 2014 as Nashua Adult Drug Court, has also been referred to as Hillsborough County South Drug Court, and more recently, Hillsborough County Adult Recovery Court.

Colburn and GNMH representatives laid the groundwork for the program, which is affiliated with the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. The project stemmed from Colburn's weekly lunchtime meetings with a young woman battling addiction and run-ins with law enforcement who would eventually become the program's first participant.

Since then, upwards of 200 men and women ages 16 and up were given the opportunity to enroll in the program, a process participants refer to as "plead into" the program.

Choosing "treatment instead of incarceration" is an option some defendants embrace and others view skeptically, and not everyone succeeds, at least at first.

Last week's 11 graduates bring to 89 the number of participants who have successfully completed the program and received certificates of graduation.



(Telegraph photo by DEAN SHALHOUP) Zachary Sweeney, one of 11 Hillsborough County South Adult Drug Court participants who graduated from the program recently, receives a congratulatory hug from Superior Court Judge Jacalyn Colburn, the program's presiding judge.

As for Matos, being one of the 2019 grads instilled a newfound sense of confidence, which led to her selection as an AmeriCorps volunteer at Revive Recovery, a program that provides therapy to people struggling with substance use disorder, alcoholism and addiction.

The volunteer gig soon became a paid position, Matos said, and it was around then that she began eyeing a seat on the Drug Court team.

It wasn't long before the woman who "never believed I would have a career, or that I would amount to anything" was sitting on the other side of the proverbial table as a peer specialist on the Drug Court team.

“I can say I’ve walked in your shoes, but I’ve also seen behind the curtain,” Matos said, referring to Drug Court grads and participants present last week. Each time she attends a graduation, she added, “brings me right back to all the hard work that goes into getting through the recovery court program.

“It gives me an opportunity to celebrate the wins that sometimes get lost in the day to day of recovery work,” Matos said.



(Telegraph photo by DEAN SHALHOUP) Beth Belanger, one of the 11 Hillsborough County South Adult Drug Court graduates honored at a speaking program and ceremony Thursday, receives her certificate from Drug Court Steering Committee members Peg Gilmour and Jim Tollner as some of the other graduates applaud. In the background are two of the 11 graduates, Michael Differ and Misty Brown.

Also addressing the graduates and guests was U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire.

“The substance use disorder crisis isn’t just a crisis – it’s a public health emergency,” Shaheen said, pointing out that the pandemic “forced many Granite Staters who were already vulnerable and struggling to confront feelings of fear and isolation.”

Turing to the graduates, Shaheen cited their achievements, which “reaffirm the importance of treatment-based methods like drug courts” and serve as a reminder “that we cannot jail our way out of this crisis.”

Shaheen said she’s “optimistic” that focusing on treatment, recovery and rehabilitation is “an approach that will help end the substance use disorder crisis, and move our communities toward a brighter, safer and healthier future”

Meanwhile, Tim McNamara, a former GNMH case manager who is now an administrator, had five of the graduates on his case load.

Differ, the one-time “couch surfer” who burned all his bridges, completed the program quicker than most participants do, McNamara said.

Differ overcame “absconding” issues and settled into IOP treatments, and is currently working in the recovery field, McNamara added.

“It pushed me to change my life,” Differ said of the program. “I got my family back in my life.”

Kurt “probably challenged me more than anyone,” McNamara said, adding that “he made me a better case manager.” Kurt, he said, “is a great example that it’s never too late to start a new life chapter.”

Kurt said he was still in jail when he decided to “make a mental checklist of what I wanted to accomplish, and what I need to do and not do to accomplish my goals.”

The program “held me accountable ... made me stay focused. The support and structure helped me a lot.

“I give this advice to you,” Kurt said, addressing Drug Court participants. “If I can do it, you can do it. I’ll tell you that.”

Zachary Sweeney had been using heroin since age 17 when reality hit.

“I have two daughters ... I need to try to get my life on track,” he said last week. Sweeney was 90 days into the program when his father passed. “However, he got to see me healthy before he passed.”

His daughters mean the world to him, McNamara said. “Now, I have my kids in my life every day,” Sweeney said.

To the participants: “You can do it ... you will become healthier. It takes time.”

David Roy’s addiction brought him “close to death many times,” McNamara said.

“I am a two-time Drug Court graduate,” Roy began, to applause. “I’ve accomplished a lot this time,” including patching up his relationship with his family and maintaining his sober-house apartment and holding the same job “for well over a year.”

Roy urged current program participants “to follow their recommendations ... even though you won’t like them all,” he said to laughs. “Today, I love everything I have.”

When Rob Redman entered the program – 1,331 days ago – it was the “first time since I was a kid that I was actually free of the justice system. It’s been a very long road,” Redman added. “I did have slips and bumps along the way, but I learned there’s always a better way to live your life.”

Belanger – now Emerson – recalled having a hard time “taking this program seriously. I lived my life my way for so long it was very difficult to give up control,” she said. “Nothing was my fault.”

One day in a rehab program she decided to give it a shot. “I finally began listening to the Drug Court team. Today I express my gratitude for not giving up on me.

“Being able to stand up here a clean and sober woman is an unbelievable feeling.”

Misty Brown was brief: “The most important thing I learned was I needed to deal with myself on the inside, in order to change myself on the outside.”

Stepping behind the podium addressing a roomful of people “is definitely somewhere I didn’t think I’d be for a long, long time,” Gary Guertin told his audience.

When he entered Drug Court “I had no intention of sticking around. But the team kept trying to get me to come back.”

It was a comment by a therapist that would change that outlook.

“One night when I was breaking down, she said, ‘you deserve more than this life.’ That’s when things started changing for me ... and I started to change as well,” Guertin said.

“This program saved my life more than once, to be honest.”

Like Guertin, Rob Ryan “never thought I’d be standing up here,” he said.

A year ago “something pretty serious happened in my life,” he said, without elaborating. “It could have gone either way. But with the support of my team, I stand here today graduating.”

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