

Courts

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Nashua Drug Court graduates shed the past, embrace a clean, sober future

- By Dean Shalhoup Union Leader Correspondent

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Becky Six, one of the four drug court graduates who spoke at Thursday's commencement, shares her story of recovery during the program.



NASHUA — A few years ago, Nathan Tassie was sitting in his cell at Valley Street jail preparing for what he thought was the inevitable: a state prison sentence that would send him to either Concord or Berlin for awhile.

“After about three months (in jail) I got a lawyer visit, he mentioned something about a drug court. I said, ‘What’s that?’” Tassie said, looking up from his notes to an audience that filled the jury assembly room at Hillsborough County Superior Court South.

“He told me about it ... I said, ‘yeah, sure ... let’s go.’”

A few minutes later, Rebecca “Becky” Six stood at the same lectern and recalled meeting a person who “would change my life ... introduce me to a world (in which) I never would have to feel pain again ... where all my worries would go away.

“It started with alcohol. Then marijuana. Then cocaine ... and methamphetamine. All my problems were answered.”

Or so she thought. Suddenly, Six found herself trapped in a downward spiral, which ushered in what she called “a life of crime” that eventually cost her custody of her children.

Tassie and Six are two of the eight newest graduates of Nashua Adult Drug Court, an experiment launched a decade ago by a small team of treatment, mental health, law enforcement and legal professionals headed by Hillsborough County Superior Court South Judge Jacalyn Colburn.

The team has since grown considerably, as have the number of participants and graduates. Colburn, who said this week’s graduation was the 17th in the program’s 10 years, also noted that the eight graduates — four of whom were present — pushed the number of total grads “past the 100 threshold.”

Greater Nashua Mental Health, the former Community Council of Nashua, has provided the treatment services for Drug Court participants since the beginning.

Individuals recommended for the program typically have lengthy criminal records and have served time in jail or prison, according to Colburn. In addition to battling addiction, many also struggle with mental health issues, compounding their attempts at recovery.

“Today represents an enormous milestone, not only for our graduates but also for our team,” Colburn said in introducing the four graduates in attendance.

She said Drug Court is known as “a now or never moment” — the “last stop before the (participants’) return to lengthy incarceration.”

Tassie, meanwhile, said he “pleaded into” Drug Court — meaning he reached a plea deal with prosecutors to enter the program rather than face incarceration — at the lawyer’s suggestion, but dropped out.

“I did 90 days, I didn’t graduate but I got the idea,” Tassie said. When he eventually reentered Drug Court, “I was told it wasn’t going to be easy,” he added.

He would find that the best part of his recovery “was building back the bridges I had burned ... after years of just throwing away the people I love. That’s what hurt the most,” Tassie added, his voice breaking with emotion.

Brandon Groves began with his observation that Drug Court “is the only thing I’ve been involved in that’s both voluntary and court-ordered,” drawing a round of laughter.

Groves used to consider himself a “fast learner,” he said, but Drug Court showed him there was much more to learn. Now, “the day I thought would never come is finally here.

“I want to thank Judge Colburn for running a tight ship ... I wouldn’t be where I’m at today if it wasn’t for this program,” Groves added, growing emotional as he thanked his family for standing by him.

Jessica Nyman told the audience she “was a mess when I got into Drug Court. I wanted to change, but I didn’t want it to happen while I was locked up, so I got my stuff together” and pleaded into the program.

Looking back, “I don’t think there’s a thing I would change,” Nyman said to applause.

A most compelling account of his life before, and after, Drug Court was delivered by 2017 graduate Ryan Haggerty, the keynote speaker.

“Today I’m a father, a fiance, a business owner, a homeowner ... none of these things would have been possible if not for this program,” Haggerty began, candidly adding, “if not for this program I’d probably be dead.”

The “party life” began in middle school and continued unabated into his 20s, Haggerty said. He worked with his father in construction, all the while selling drugs to support his habit.

One day he got a call that his father collapsed at work, but by the time he got to the hospital his father, at age 45, had died.

“I was 23, you couldn’t tell me anything ... the only escape I knew was drugs,” Haggerty said. He received a “fairly large inheritance,” but was out of a job. “Things went from bad to worse. I blew through the inheritance (money). I almost lost the house” that he also inherited.

“I took whatever money I had and invested it in pills.” To support his habit, “I was selling ridiculous amounts of opioids on the streets of Nashua,” he said. Not surprisingly, he was arrested more than once. When he got out after a four-month stint, “I was right back at it,” he said of selling drugs.

Finally, Haggerty was given a choice: “Either go to prison or plead into Drug Court.”

When the day came to enter his plea, “I was on the worst bender of my life. The concoction of drugs I took would have sent an elephant for a loop,” Haggerty said.

“Today, my life is something I never could imagine,” Haggerty said, adding that “most people who knew me back then said, ‘if he can do it, anyone can.’”

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