

Drug court changes lives

Family, friends, alumni fill courtroom with boisterous support; graduation highlights need for and effectiveness of treatments courts

By Jerry Knaak The Daily World • January 21, 2025



The most recent drug court graduates, Danielle Blanchard, Michael Dufour and Wayne Giberson, pose for a photo. Danielle Blanchard, Michael Dufour and Wayne Giberson graduated from Therapeutic Court Friday at the Grays Harbor County Courthouse in Montesano.

Their graduation speeches, testimonies from friends, family, program alumni and administrators, and officers of the court were met with thunderous applause and cheers that echoed throughout Superior Court Judge Katherine L. Svoboda's courtroom.

Each graduate was afforded the opportunity to speak to the gallery and in turn listen to effusive praise and congratulations from those who wished to offer such. Svoboda then presented Blanchard, Dufour and Giberson with a medal and a certificate and posed for a photo with each individual whose charges were dismissed "with prejudice."

Aberdeen-native Danielle Blanchard said it was either prison or Therapeutic Court.

"My life depended on it, it was either do this program or be incarcerated and be away from my family. That wasn't an option. I was not making good choices, and I wound up in Superior Court." Blanchard said. "My future ... I'm going to go and get my real estate license. Maybe I'll go work for The Daily World, are you guys hiring?"

Tacoma-native Michael Dufour said the program has helped him become a better father.

“This will enable me to set goals, and be the father I am today. It allowed me to get enriched in my community and meet friends I consider family, it allowed me to be sober and give me the proper time to heal, and do it with accountability,” Dufour said. “I plan to buy a house, I’m going to be the owner/operator of a truck here in the next five years. I got my CDL (Commercial Driver’s License) while I was in the program.”

Grays Harbor County-native Wayne Giberson said the program enabled him to break a two-decade-long cycle.

“Selling drugs, using drugs, running around on the streets, been out there doing it for 20-plus years,” Giberson said. “(The program) allowed me to finally not have the want to go back to it. I never cared that much about my own life or myself, and now building relationships with people who I consider family, and move forward and build on that, having healthy relationships, that’s something I didn’t have growing up, it’s nice to be able to have people that can depend on me and vice versa.”

Founded in 2018, “The Mission of the Grays Harbor Therapeutic Court is to increase community safety, reduce recidivism, hold offenders accountable, address addiction and the cycle of crime that follows while promoting recovery for individuals and their families. This is accomplished by incorporating evidence-based substance use treatment and recovery support with intensive court supervised services to help participants achieve the necessary skills to become sober, stable and productive members of our community.”

According to Svoboda, the Therapeutic Court’s benefits and impact are critical and measurable.

“On a scale of one to 10, (the program’s importance) is a 25. It gives the court the option to offer something besides punishment. What we know is locking people up and letting them out, usually all that happens is they come out just as ill and criminal minded as before,” Svoboda said. “This program started when I was the elected prosecutor and I was on the steering committee, it just seemed like an important pathway for those who really have that good path back to being a part of the community. What we see with the drug court participants is they hold full-time jobs, they parent their children, they get their children out of foster care.”

According to Therapeutic Court Director Jamie Wintrip, there are specific steps participants must take and milestones they must reach in order to graduate.

“The three pillars of our program are ‘show up, be honest and try.’ All of our programs are phase-based,” Wintrip said. “The goal is that (participants) are productive members of society, they have long-term financial plans, they’re self-sufficient, able to support

themselves and their families, they have to establish what we consider long-term recovery, actually building a support system. We require them to be doing things in the community for sober support, create sober support plans. We make sure we feel like all of those plans are solid plans, things they've been demonstrating for a period of time, before we say they're ready to graduate from the program."

Wintrip, a former probation officer with the Grays Harbor County district court, was originally tasked with creating a diversion program.

"In 2003 we went through some budget issues and my position was cut, at the same time, the treatment sales tax funding was being initiated, so they offered me the position of helping start a diversion program, which is what we ran before we had the support to build a therapeutic court," Wintrip said, "I saw the probation side, and since 2012 the diversion program and then helping open (therapeutic) court in 2018, I've been doing this since then."

Wintrip and her team recently received conditional approval from the Grays Harbor County Board of Commissioners for funding for a group to attend the Rise 25 conference in Orlando, Florida, in May, which bills itself as "the only national conference for treatment court professionals." She said that the Grays Harbor County Therapeutic Court does not operate in a vacuum and that it's important for the Court's team to continually engage in professional development.

"This isn't just us in Grays Harbor County coming up with our own thing that we're doing here, we have best practices we run all of our programs by, we make sure we stay up to date on the training. It is super important, when things continue to change, especially in addiction and the drugs that they're using, that we're up to date on everything current. If we aren't able to stay up to date on what's currently happening, I don't think we can serve the participants appropriately," Wintrip said. "The way therapeutic courts are set up, it takes multiple roles to make it work. When we go to these conferences, the national conference especially, they're role-specific. We're not all there sitting in the same classes getting the same information. Therapeutic Court is a team and collaboration from several different offices, so if we are not all on the same page, it makes it really difficult to run efficiently."

Svoboda, who has been a judge for four years, echoed Wintrip's sentiments regarding best practices and the established foundation upon which therapeutic courts are built.

"I don't think people understand there is 30 years of research that it's all based on, this isn't just 'we feel like this works, we'll give it a try,' it is nationally organized and all the programs are evidence based. We run our program according to best practice standards and the results kinda speak for themselves," Svoboda said. "(The staff are) superstars, they are the best, I know that is a reductive statement. The training they go through, we have a state conference every year, we have a national training, so to keep

up on best practices and what the evidence shows us works, and as much as there is that science piece, it is also an art, figuring out when it needs to be a punishment response to behavior or a therapeutic response, and never forgetting that these folks come to us through the criminal system.”

According to Wintrip, the Grays Harbor County Therapeutic Court graduates have created and become part of something with long-lasting impact.

“I can’t think of another program that is creating something like what we’re seeing with Therapeutic Court,” Wintrip said. “We as professionals just provide the opportunity, the participants, they’re creating a community within themselves, we’re the stepping stone to them being able to create something that will live long after they’re done with our program.”

According to Svoboda, the program is personally rewarding for her and she finds Therapeutic Court to be more effective than other diversionary programs.

“It is the best work I’ve done as a prosecutor and as a judge as far as being very personally rewarding. This, where we actually see people recover, is very heartening,” Svoboda said. “If you don’t address all the pieces of the person, most of these folks have gone to treatment, they’ve gotten clean and sober for some period of time, but if you bring them back and put them back in the same living situation, same friend group, they’re still unemployed, they still have no education, they go back to use pretty quickly. We’re trying to holistically address all the things that cause use and relapse, so they are building that life they can sustain when they leave the program.”

To date, 63 participants have graduated from Drug Court, with 55 people currently enrolled across three programs — Felony Drug Court Program, Family Recovery Court and the Diversion program.