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Drug court saving lives and families

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For Wesley Willoughby the Eighth Judicial Drug court was more than a way to avoid prison.

It was his last hope to get his life and son back.

On Thursday night, Willoughby was among three graduates who had recently completed the program.

Willoughby was also the one with the most seniority.

"He's an old timer," Judge Shayne Sexton announced as he introduced the unassuming 32-year-old. For most participants the program requires 18 to 24 months to complete.

Willoughby began in 2006, according to Sexton.

Willoughby is the first to admit his life had bottomed out before he began drug court.

He had lost his job, pawned everything he owned and was in jail.

For the last 13 years, he had abused opiates, commonly referred to as pain pills, on a daily basis.

"I started using them just to fit in," Willoughby said shaking his head. "I just

followed them (others) instead of being a leader. Now I know how to be a leader." But becoming a leader was not an easy position for the sandy haired young man to cultivate.

While Willoughby was in jail, Sexton approached him with the drug court opportunity.

Looking back, Willoughby says he was ready for the help-ready to get his life back.

Along the way, he had his share of tribulations. While in drug court, Willoughby became romantically involved with one of the other participants. This led to an engagement and a pregnancy.

This plausibly could have been his happy ending.

However, while the road to true love never runs smoothly, neither does the road to sobriety.

His fiancée ended up at a halfway house to help her fight her addictions. She was three months pregnant when Willoughby learned through mutual friends she was still abusing drugs. The betrayal he felt towards not only himself but also the couple's unborn child was



Wesley Willoughby and his son Conner share a moment at the park where they met for the first time. Willoughby said that without drug court, he would not have his son today.

Photo by Susan Sharp

unmanageable.

"I started using again," he said.

This time Willoughby said he was on a true bend-over abusing anything that crossed his path.

But one day as his drug induced haze slightly lifted, Willoughby thought of his unborn child.

"After four or five days in a really bad relapse, I had the guy I was in the car with just

stop, right there on Clinton Highway," he said. "I called drug court and turned myself in."

While Willoughby worked on getting sober, he also began looking for his fiancée

who had disappeared.

"I couldn't find her," he said.

As the months passed, the young man continued to stay sober and count the

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days until his child would be born.

But those days stretched into months and neither his child or ex-fiancée could be found.

When almost two years had passed, she was found in a jail.

The baby that Willoughby had expected and fought to become sober for had been placed for adoption, he said.

The Church of Latter Day Saints soon contacted him in an attempt to have him surrender parental rights.

For Willoughby that was out of the question.

As the court battle continued, the Mormons refused to give Willoughby's son, Conner, to him. Instead, when a court ordered they assist in obtaining a DNA sample from the child, they failed to comply, Willoughby said. For him the paternity test was a mere formality.

"I felt it in my heart he was mine," he said.

In time, Willoughby won custody of Conner and finally laid eyes on the child he had never seen but already loved.

"It was more than I ever expected," he said of the first meeting, which took place at Cove Lake State Park.

In retrospect, Willoughby says without drug

court, he could have never gotten his son back.

In fact, he is not sure where his life would be at all.

"He would probably be dead," his girlfriend, Cindy Guinn chimed in.

Drug Court Director Jonathan Finley knows the financial savings drug court brings to the Eighth Judicial District.

The three men who graduated paid \$6,586 in fines, fees and restitution instead of costing the district a total \$137,700 to incarcerate them.

However, for Finley, there is more to the program than dollars and cents.

The program is about helping families come back together. It is about helping people beat an addiction that has controlled their every move for years.

"No statistic can ever quantify what it means to have a family member who is living a clean and sober life," Finley said.

Drug court works because of its basic premise, he said. Treatment, intensive compliance monitoring and behavior modification are the keys.

"Nothing combines all the elements the way drug court does," said Finley, who has been in charge of the program for three years.

The 23 participants appear before Sexton on a routine basis to have their progress evaluated. In the meantime,

Finley and other drug court staff members are showing up at their homes for surprise compliance visits, which may involve a search of the residence.

Finley and his staff are also seeking out treatment options, providing moral support and drug screens for the participants.

In an effort to stay on top of the participants' sobriety, the latest drug screens are utilized.

Saliva, sweat and hair are tested to determine if any of the 23 are using any type of illegal substances, Finley said.

If there is a question regarding the test he performs, the sample is sent for further analysis.

"You can't predict how someone is going to perform once they are in drug court," Sexton said.

However, for these three, the outcome is well documented.

"I am grateful for what you have done for me," Corey Dyke of Union County told Sexton. "You have helped me out 100-percent."

David Asbury, of Fentress County, worked the program without a single relapse.

"He completed it in less than two years," the judge said.

"Make no mistake, drug court is here to stay," Finley said.