



## Family Treatment Court offers a second chance

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As a self-described party girl, Michelle racked up several charges of driving under the influence. One of those convictions separated her from her toddler while she served two years in prison.

Alcohol came between mother and daughter again last year when she was charged with driving under the influence with her child in her car. Michelle, which is not her real name, said she wasn't allowed to be around her child alone for six months.

That is why Michelle entered the Charlottesville Albemarle Family Treatment Court. The court, which is held weekly in the local juvenile and domestic relations court, helps up to 15 parents at a time battle their addictions to regain or retain custody of their children.

"This is a court that serves the child by serving the parent," said Jana Glenn, the court's coordinator. "It's a court where the judge's interactions with the parents are key to making a difference."

Family Treatment Court began in 2002 as an unfunded program. The court is a joint effort between the juvenile court, the Charlottesville and Albemarle departments of social services, Piedmont CASA and Region Ten Community Services Board.

*The court had grant funding between 2004 and 2007 from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.* Glenn said she is applying for a new grant to add services to the currently unfunded court.

Unlike the Charlottesville/Albemarle Adult Drug Treatment Court, participants in the Family Treatment Court aren't entering the court after receiving criminal charges. Glenn said parents can enter the court after being referred from their local department of social services or if a judge orders it. However, entering the Family Treatment Court is voluntary.

Each participant has a team made up of representatives from the local agencies and Judge Edward DeJ. Berry. Glenn said participants agree to have the service providers share information about their case and to follow their team's recommendations. They agree to random drug screening and to wear an alcohol monitoring bracelet for at least 60 days.

At first, Michelle said, she didn't have a high opinion of the program. However, the binge drinker's opinion changed as she began to take the court seriously.

"I didn't realize how my life was out of control until I listened to my team," she said.

Glenn said participants' teams update her weekly about how the participants are doing. The participants then meet with the judge, who talks to them about their progress and doles out sanctions and rewards as appropriate. Glenn said sanctions can include more frequent meetings or writing an essay, while rewards can include less frequent meetings or praise from the judge.

Berry joined the court shortly after it began. At first, he said, he was concerned that it was going to take a lot of time and wouldn't be successful.

While the juvenile court judges do have to juggle their dockets so Berry can sit on the bench for Family Treatment Court, the court has had its successes. Glenn said of the 103 participants, 28 have graduated so far. Only two of those 28 have been referred back to the court.

Unlike his other courts, Berry said, Family Treatment Court is less formal. Glenn said the participants place a high value on praise from the judge. However, the judge said with a laugh that he was told by a graduate that "you're better when you're meaner."

During May's graduation, four people, including Michelle, officially completed the program. Each participant was called up and listened to team members and others talk about their progress. The judge posed for a photograph with each of them, shaking their hands and giving them their completion certificates while grinning at the camera.

When it was Michelle's turn to stand before the court and graduate, a team member proudly returned Michelle's paperwork from the 90 Alcoholics Anonymous meetings she attended. Mother and daughter exchanged warm looks throughout the ceremony.

"She didn't like to see me drink," Michelle said. "Alcohol isn't part of our lives anymore."

During Michelle's time in Family Treatment Court, she did more than stop binge drinking. She said she has opened her own business and is set to move into a new house next spring. Michelle said she continues to attend AA meetings and keeps in touch with her sponsor.

"We have a much better life now," she said.

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