

Beyond the Stigma: Five drug court graduates lauded for their changed lives

NEW HAMPSHIRE
UNION LEADER

<http://www.unionleader.com/Beyond-the-Stigma-Five-drug-court-graduates-lauded-for-their-changed-lives-06272018&source=RSS>

[Home](#) | [Beyond the Stigma](#)



By SHAWNE K. WICKHAM
New Hampshire Union Leader

[June 27, 2018 10:35AM](#)



Drug Court graduate Shane Crawford, left, gets a hug from his buddy, Justin Provencher during a ceremony at Hillsborough County Superior Court in Manchester on Tuesday. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)

BEYOND THE STIGMA

*Exploring solutions to NH's
mental health and addiction crises*

MANCHESTER -- Poised, articulate and meticulously dressed, Jessica Caron was the picture of success.

But just 18 months ago, “I was addicted to heroin, living in my car.”

Caron is one of five people who graduated Tuesday from drug court at Hillsborough County (North) Superior Court. City leaders, providers, relatives and friends packed a courtroom to hear their stories and hail their achievements.

Mayor Joyce Craig and her predecessor, Ted Gatsas, were on hand; so was Fire Chief Dan Goonan, police and probation officers, and other members of the drug court advisory team.

Craig praised the team for “dedicating time and resources to allow this last best chance for these adults to get back into the community and be a positive influence on so many of us.”

Turning to the graduates, Craig said she knows how hard they worked to get here. “For many of you, graduating from this rigorous program may have been the most difficult thing you’ve ever done,” she said. “You showed great courage and dedication, and you are an inspiration to all of us.”

Caron, 34, said she had a drug habit for 20 years, getting progressively worse until she hit bottom and got arrested. Thanks to drug court, she now has a good job, a new life.

Pointing out the colored balloons near the judge’s bench, she said for her, it was a symbol of celebrating life. “With the help of all of you, I have been able to stand on my own two feet and function properly as the beautiful and prosperous human being that I am,” she said.

In 2016, New Hampshire lawmakers approved a bill to establish a statewide drug court system, a supervised program that provides treatment and recovery alternatives for offenders who would otherwise be facing jail. Eligible participants plead guilty to the offense, then are placed on probation while they attempt to complete the program.

Judge Kenneth Brown, who guided the drug court participants through setbacks and progress over the past year, told the graduates he's proud of them. "I know that if you can do it, everyone else in the program can do likewise," he said.



Drug Court graduate Kimberly Frost of Manchester sits with her daughters, Natalyah, 1, and Olivia, 8, and her grandmother, Pat, and mother, Candy, during Tuesday's graduation ceremony at Hillsborough County Superior Court in Manchester. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)

'I just didn't care'

Kimberly Frost, 29, a mother of two, was one of the first invited to participate in the new drug court last year. She had started out using oxycontin and ended up addicted to heroin. When she got arrested for drug possession and went to jail in 2016, she was pregnant with her younger daughter.

Frost said she agreed to try drug court just to stay out of jail. But when her daughter was born 13 months ago, she said, "I changed my life around."

Frost said she's not the same person she was a year ago. Back then, she was "someone that would just lie and steal from people," she said. "I was homeless and I just didn't care."

Now she has an apartment and a job. "I've never had a real job before," she said.

Two rows of the courtroom were filled with executives and providers from Elliot Health System, which took over the case management for drug court that was originally provided by now-

defunct Serenity Place.

Rebecca Rully, executive director and care coordinator for EHS, said working with drug court fits with Elliot's overall mission.

"It has helped us really better understand where the gaps in services are and then channel our resources and our funding in a way that's going to have the biggest impact on the substance-use population," she said.

Martha Leighton, chief nursing officer for EHS, said 80 to 90 percent of drug court participants are Elliot patients, who would typically be seen during a crisis, either in the emergency department or ICU. "So it's so great to partner with community resources to ... bring services to them in the community instead of waiting till they're in crisis," she said.



Drug Court graduate Jessica Caron of Manchester speaks during graduation ceremony at Hillsborough County Superior Court in Manchester on Tuesday. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)

'Another way of life'

"Never in a million years did I think I'd be standing up here almost 17 months clean," graduate Shane Crawford told those gathered Tuesday. "Thank you for showing me another way of life. Helping me to save my own."

Crawford, 35, is tanned and healthy; he runs a crew for a landscaping company and likes to fish

in his free time. His young daughter lives up north; he wants to be a part of her life. And he has a girlfriend with two young children of her own.

“That’s my life,” he said proudly. “I work and I’m a family man.”

And it’s more than material gains, he said. “My mind is no longer being hijacked,” he said. “I take it one day at a time... I have no idea what tomorrow will bring, but for the first time in years, I don’t dread it.”

When he was using drugs — opiates and cocaine — he was self-centered, Crawford said. “I’d see my family crying that they were losing their son, their brother, but I’d still want to do what I (was) doing,” he said. “It’s very selfish.”

He’s different now, he said, more open-hearted, more giving. “I’m just a grateful person,” he said.

Dan Canniff is the coordinator of the drug court program for Elliot. Before the ceremony, he advised the graduates that they have a new role now: “People are going to look up to you.”

Crawford said that’s already happened to him; a friend recently congratulated him on what he’s doing. “It gives us hope,” his friend told him.



Drug Court graduates Jessica Caron (left) and Shane Crawford (in plaid) join in the applause for their fellow graduates during Tuesday’s ceremony. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)

“It’s an unbelievable thing to hear,” Crawford said.

Judge Brown had encouraged other drug court participants to attend the graduation, and about 20

did so. Canniff said that provides a powerful example.

“Maybe they’re struggling today and this is the difference between them graduating or relapsing and going back to their old behaviors,” he said.

Brown said he’d like to expand the program from 70 to 120 participants. “This community ... needs a drug court that is effective and active and producing graduates like we did today,” he said.

Then he led a sustained standing ovation for the graduates. “You can go home now,” he told them.

Beyond the Stigma, sponsored by the New Hampshire Solutions Journalism Lab at the Nackey S. Loeb School of Communications, is funded by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, NAMI New Hampshire, and private individuals.