

Articles

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By Denise Barnes
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8 Graduate from Drugs

Family members, friends and well-wishers packed into a historic chapel on the grounds of St. Elizabeths Hospital in Southeast yesterday to attend a graduation ceremony for a group of women who made monumental changes in their lives and lifestyles.

Eight women, all participants of the Women's Residential Family Treatment Court Pilot Program, marched to Sir Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" before more than 100 guests. Adorned with caps, gowns and colorful cloth draped around their necks, the graduates seemed gratified by their accomplishment.

"I feel fantastic - truly blessed and I'm so glad that I came through this program," said graduate Cherie Young, 33. "It was divine intervention that got me here, and I plan to stay on the path I'm on."

Before she entered the program, Ms. Young said she had no direction in her life - no hopes, no dreams and nothing to which to aspire.

"I have all of that today, and that includes my children," said the mother of four.

The six-month comprehensive drug-treatment program that started a year ago, led by Melody Jackson, the program's clinical director, allows drug-dependent mothers - who otherwise would have their children placed in foster care while they received treatment - to remain with them in a residential setting in Southeast.

Ms. Jackson served as mistress of ceremonies yesterday and beamed as each graduate accepted her certificate. Women who participate in the program deal with their addictions but also have been called before the court for child neglect.

"I believe the biggest challenge [for the women] is the psychological adjustment," Ms. Jackson said. "The program is structured. They have to be responsible, focused and work on one's character defects, and that takes some digging.

"Remember, we are rebuilding a life, and when you are doing that, you are trying to put back together a broken vessel so they can be a good parent, a solvent individual and family member."

The graduation ceremony brought out a host of lawyers, administrators and judges. Lee F. Satterfield, the presiding judge of the Family Court of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, commended the women for their courage and determination.

"This is our second graduation, and it's just a wonderful day," he said. "You have taken a tremendous step in taking your lives back. We congratulate all of you and your families."

The keynote speaker, Anita Josey-Herring, deputy presiding judge of the Family Court of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, had similar advice but warned graduates that their challenge was far from over.

"This journey to free yourselves from drug addiction is unquestionably among the hardest challenges, not only facing you but so many others throughout this world," she said. "Against all odds, you have gracefully conquered this phase in the battle toward sobriety. And, for this great accomplishment, we celebrate you today."

"In the midst of celebrating, I am keenly aware that your challenge is not over - for remaining drug free is a lifelong battle. However, your success in getting to this point is very significant. Your success is significant not only for you, but for your children, because you now have a chance to be active, nurturing and loving parents, and your children also have the promise of living happy and healthy lives," she said.

That's exactly what graduate Kim Boyd, 30, hopes for her 9-month old daughter, Taija. Ms. Boyd said she welcomed the opportunity to participate in the program. Today, she has a full-time job at the D.C. Department of Employment Services and a two-bedroom apartment where she and Taija's father raise the child together.

"I wanted to be in this program," she said. "I gave birth when I was addicted, and because I didn't have a home for her [Taija], I left her at Howard University Hospital so she could get proper care. I used crack for nine years. Then, I was incarcerated. ... I knew I needed a program."

"I was in this program for two weeks, and my daughter was removed from foster care and returned to me," she said with a smile.

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