

January 27, 2012

Fourteen Men Graduate from 2011 Fathering Court Program in D.C.



Updated at 3:42 p.m.

Darnell Morris said that when he started the District of Columbia Superior Court's Fathering Court program, his relationship with his 15-year-old daughter "wasn't too perfect." Morris, 42, had been in trouble with the law before for selling drugs, but said he had heard about the Fathering Court program on television and wanted a shot "to better myself."

On Friday morning, Morris and thirteen other men graduated from the 2011 class of Fathering Court, which aims to not only help fathers comply with child support orders, but also become better parents.

"I'm a better person, I'm a better father," said Morris, who was joined during the ceremony by his three-year-old son, Darnell Caesar Jr.

The Fathering Court program began in 2008, and has graduated more than 50 men re-entering the community from prison who have child support responsibilities. Participants are connected with employment services, counseling and other support over the course of a year.

Only two graduates have re-offended since the program began, according to a court spokesman.

Superior Court Judge Milton Lee, who presides over the program, said during the ceremony that while times may be tough in terms of finding a steady job or a home, “our gentlemen have not let that stop them.”

“You are better men than people will ever know,” Lee said, acknowledging that many of the men overcame health, relationship and a host of other problems to complete the program. Lee credited program manager Ron Scott, presiding Family Court Judge Zoe Bush and other staff for their role in making the program a success.

Troy Harrison said he’s committed to staying out of trouble. Harrison, 35, spent time in jail on an involuntary manslaughter charge, but now wants to reconnect with his three teenage daughters.

“It works if you’re working,” Harrison said, referring to the time he learned he needs to put in to his relationship with his kids.

The ceremony’s guest speaker was James Worthy, who runs the Responsible Fatherhood program at the Center for Urban Families in Baltimore. Worthy praised the graduates for “the decision you’ve made not to fight.”

In what seemed like a final lesson, he showed a clip from the television show “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” where the main character Will, played by Will Smith, expresses anger at his absentee father. Worthy encouraged the graduates to take heart from examples of strong fathers they see around them.

“You’ve made the decision to be a hero,” he said.



Fathering Court graduate Darnell Morris with son Darnell Caesar Jr. and Judge Milton Lee.



Judge Lee with 2011 Fathering Court graduates and court staff.

National Law Journal photos by Zoe Tillman.

A previous version of this article misstated the number of graduates who have been re-arrested.

