



Family Treatment Court allows drug offenders to keep custody of children

By Autria Godfrey
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On the day of her arrest in 2004, Karen can recall one thing very vividly: her three-year-old daughter, Asia, crying as her mother was handcuffed and taken away on charges of multiple drug and gun offenses.

But even on her darkest days of heavy heroin and crack cocaine use, Karen claims she was still a great mother.

“I thought I was this great mom. I knew I was getting high, but Asia never went without anything. She was well-fed, clean, she was in a loving home,” Karen says.

Still, her arrest was an eye-opener when her daughter was taken away on charges of neglect. And eventually, the longtime drug user found hope in an unlikely place: the District Family Treatment Court.

The program that will celebrate its 10th anniversary on Friday allows Karen and other substance abusers just like her to seek treatment while keeping their children in their custody, even though they are still required to accept the neglect charge.

Judge Pamela Gray, who oversees the program, says the neglect cases are severe, but that keeping the parents with their children during treatment has had a tremendous impact. They don't have to constantly wonder how their children are doing in foster care or whether or not they are being treated well.

Karen, a 2005 graduate of the program, hopes that a photo of her taken during a trip to the White House one year ago will serve as incentive to stay away from drugs. She was invited by the drug czar to talk about her treatment, and Karen now vows never to let anyone take her daughter away from her again.

"I'm just not going to let anyone take her from me anymore – that's not an option for me. Hearing her scream in the street is not an option for me anymore," she says.

So far, more than 200 women have successfully completed the family court program and six more women will graduate at Friday's ceremony.