

The Messenger

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Drug offenders praised, scorned

By JOHN BRANNON

Friday, during drug court, the presiding judge unleashed both praise and scorn on the 30-plus offenders enrolled in the ambitious rehabilitation program.

On the bench for the weekly drug court session held at Obion County Law Enforcement Complex was Weakley County General Sessions Judge Tommy Moore of Dresden.

At last count, the 27th Judicial District Drug Court program had a total of 37 participants from Obion and Weakley counties. While in the program, participants are on probation pending satisfactory completion of the 12-step program which takes 12 to 18 months.

Weekly attendance at drug court sessions is one of the program requirements.

Friday, one by one, names were called from among the participants who crowded several pews in the small courtroom.

One by one, each stood and advanced to a podium to answer queries from the presiding judge. Each was there for a public review of their performance and conduct since the last court session. Program coordinator Sue Moore was available with a file on each participant.

Throughout the proceedings, Moore had words of praise and words of scorn. He applied each with the hand of one long practiced in the art of studying human behavior.

To Robert Reavis of Hornbeak, he said, "It's time to focus." Reavis had just gotten out of jail, having been sanctioned for violating one of the rules.

"Twelve days clean and sober," Moore announced.

To Bryan Pollock of Obion, he said, "You're in really good standing. You're in Step 12, working at Tyson." Moore said of Pollock, "He lays (concrete) blocks on the side. Pretty good at it, too." A pause. Moore then announced that Pollock is 367 days clean and sober. "We've decided to graduate you," he told Pollock, then led the courtroom crowd in a round of applause.

To Harold Clapp of Union City, Moore said, "You're in Phase 3. (You've been) 299 days clean and sober."

With each such pronouncement, Moore led the courtroom in applause.

To Joseph Totty of Union City, Moore said, "You're doing great. (You're in) Step 12. What are your personal goals?"

Totty replied his goals are to keep a job, stay clean and pay all his bills.

“You’re close to graduating, 341 days clean and sober,” Moore said. He then led a round of applause for Totty.

But there was no applause for those whose sins had come home to haunt them — in this context, “sin” means a violation of drug court rules and regulations.

A “sanction,” or punishment, ranges from a jail sentence of three to 30 days or outright dismissal from the program. Dismissal means an immediate trip to prison to begin serving hard time. All those in the program have been convicted in state court of at least non-violent misdemeanor crimes.

One of the requirements to stay in the program is compliance with curfew stipulations. “Knock and talk,” an unscheduled visit by law enforcement to the participant’s home, is the court’s way of checking on its wards.

It was knock and talk that got Josh Hairston of Martin in trouble and netted him 30 days in jail. “You know how important these knock and talks are,” Moore told him. “You’re in Phase 3 of this program. You’ve been in (it) since December 2007.”

“I’m in Step 7,” Hairston said.

“I’m looking at a person who might graduate from this thing, and that really wears us out, that you’re out there (breaking curfew), and ... Is your girlfriend here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Does she not understand that these rules are important?”

“She doesn’t quite comprehend.”

“You need to comprehend, she needs to comprehend,” Moore continued. “Y’all need to comprehend it. We’re going to give you 30 days (in jail) for that. It’s unbelievable that you’re out goofing around like that when you’re this close to graduation.”

Then to the group at large, Moore addressed these comments. “We are not kidding about knock and talks. We’re not kidding about the curfews. We’re not kidding about the rules. I’m telling you, we’re going to pull some stuff on y’all. You better be prepared for it. Get serious. We had a couple of negative screens this week.”

Hairston was directed to stand against a courtroom wall to await deputies.

“Do you see how important it is to make knock and talk?” Moore asked the crowd. “You’ve got jobs riding on it, you’ve got a position in this program riding on it. ... Start being responsible people.”

Moore later explained about Hairston. He said Hairston missed a knock and talk because he was at Walmart shopping with his girlfriend. “But here’s a person who is close to graduation, is in Phase 3 of the program and knows all the rules,” he said. “We think the whole group is getting a little lax on knock and talks. They’re playing the schedule. If (an officer) comes by, does a knock and talk on Monday, they think they’re good until the next week. So they’re fudging. We think he’s one of the fudgers. So we’re trying to make a point.”

Gary Moore of Union City fared a little better in his interview with the judge. During court, Moore wore a prison-stripe uniform, indicating he's an inmate at the jail. Moore entered the program March 16 and has been sanctioned three times, serving sentences of four days, 30 days and seven days. He has been booked into the jail 15 times since November 2005.

"We talked about you quite a bit yesterday," Judge Moore told him. "We know you're an addict. We know you've got problems. We know you live in a family that's addicted. We know your father passed away (recently). But none of that is an excuse for using (drugs)..."

"You're just going to have to figure a way to get through this (program) without using (drugs). You did 30 days before. I guess we could continue giving you 30 days. You're either going to be in the program or you're not. We're going to sanction you for the relapse. But if it happens again, you're out. Think about it. This is it. You can call it an ultimatum, however you want to look at it.

"You're going to have to figure out a way to not use (drugs). You can't be in this program and use drugs."

Later, Judge Moore explained that inmate Moore had failed a drug screen. Moore hasn't been in the program very long, he added, and hasn't had the opportunity to get a lot of counseling. "So it's going to be difficult, unless we get his attention, for him to make it," he said.

Much of what Obion County Circuit Court Judge Bill Acree and Moore tell their wards in the drug court program seemingly echo the character guidance classes prevalent in the brown-boot Army of the 1950s and '60s.

Moore said that if the people in drug court ever knew right from wrong, "They've forgotten it." The treatment program used by drug court is what is known as **MRT — moral reconation therapy**, or inmate rehabilitation program. It was developed by Memphis psychologists Dr. Greg Little and Dr. Kenneth Robinson and is now used in 47 states and eight countries.

"Twenty percent of the program focuses on addiction, 80 percent on criminality," Moore said. "We have found out, in listening to the experts and professionals, that every drug addict is a criminal in their thinking. I'd say 99 percent of them have criminal minds. Their mindset is criminal.

"We think that until the people in the program begin to think like a normal, ordinary, responsible person, they can't get through the program. But once they turn the corner of criminal thinking, they're in a position to deal with their addiction.

"The very first step is truthfulness and honesty. But in **MRT**, a criminal is just not used to telling the truth. They're just used to lying, and used to lying when the truth would serve them better. They are just so accustomed to lying, that's the first thing they try."