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Dec. 9, 2003

'Things Are Looking Up,' Drug-Court Graduate Says Innovation Program Gives Participants An Opportunity to Rebuild Their Lives

By Sarah Garvey
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LOS ANGELES - Friday was a momentous day for Jose G. Medina.

The 26-year old caught his first DUI at age 18, got shot in the head a few years later and spent much of the past 10 years drunk, high and involved with gangs.

But after 17 months in a rigorous accountability and recovery program triggered by an arrest for possession of crack cocaine, a clean, sober and very proud Medina donned a white ceremonial scarf and joined the ranks of the 2,500 other Los Angeles-area residents who have graduated from one of the county's 12 drug courts.

Medina works as a cook and is looking forward to completing welding certification classes at El Camino College.

He's also looking forward to joining the 75 percent of county drug-court graduates who remain crime-free. (Of the 25 percent who commit new crimes, according to the Countywide Criminal Justice Coordination Committee, some are for driving offenses such as driving with a suspended license and cases that are later dismissed, said Judge Stephen A. Marcus, Los Angeles' first drug court judge.)

Medina's resolve to change strengthened over the life of the program. He failed two drug tests early on, but once he realized he was "headed on a dead-end street [going] 150 mph," he let neither logistics nor peer pressure thwart his recovery efforts, he said.

When transit workers went on strike in October, he rode a bicycle 81/2 miles from his home in Lennox to his treatment center in Crenshaw to make his 7:30 a.m. twice-weekly drug tests.

He also took that bike five days a week to his job "flipping hot dogs" at a local Crenshaw grill.

When the guys in the neighborhood asked him if he wanted to "get fucked up," he invited them to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting as an alternative.

"Things are looking up," he told an Inglewood courtroom packed with family, friends and drug court alumni who had come to hear Los Angeles Superior Court Commissioner Richard G. Novak dismiss the charges pending against the 12 graduates.

First instituted in the country in 1989 in Dade County, Fla., and in Los Angeles in 1994, drug courts use intensive treatment and close judicial supervision instead of prison

to address drug-related criminal behavior of nonviolent felony offenses.

The programs generally last 18 months and involve the coordinated efforts of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers and treatment professionals.

Inglewood's drug court program targets longtime addicts and includes group and individual counseling, acupuncture, monthly court appearances and drug testing that steps down from six days a week to two as a participant progresses.

If need be, participants can be punished with jail time.

"It's total life rehabilitation," said Superior Court Judge Deborah L. Christian.

Unlike less specialized "Proposition 36" courts, drug courts are tailored to the substance-abuse issues of each participant, as well as to their other underlying problems such as homelessness or lack of education, Christian added.

Drug courts give men and women like Medina the chance to rebuild their lives, but they also reduce recidivism and save money, according to recent reports.

A study of 100 of the nation's approximately 1,000 drug courts found a lower recidivism rate for drug-court graduates as compared with imprisoned drug offenders, according to a report by the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Drug-court graduates showed significantly lower recidivism rates than individuals who were imprisoned. After one year, drug-court graduates committed new crimes 16.4 percent of the time compared with 43.5 percent for those who were imprisoned. After two years, 27.5 percent of drug-court graduates re-offended, as compared with 58.6 percent of those who were imprisoned.

According to a 2002 multicounty study prepared by the state Judicial Council and the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, arrest rates for drug-court graduates dropped 85 percent in the two years following their admission to a drug court program.

The study also found that, with respect to 2,892 participants, the state's drug courts averted 425,014 jail days, for a savings of \$26.4 million, and 227,894 prison days, saving \$16 million. The drug courts also contributed \$1 million in fines and fees to the state coffers.

To fully appreciate the economic upside of drug court, Marcus said, "you have to telescope."

"If [someone] is clean today," he said, "over 20 years [he's] paying a certain amount of taxes, of child support."

"My No. 1 focus is responsibility," 16-year addict Gina T. Boothe said the Monday before her graduation.

"Like today is payday," Boothe said, "and I'm going to take care of my family."

Boothe works as a counselor for mentally challenged teenagers and hopes to pursue a degree in psychology or child development.

Thomas A. Lipton, who never failed a drug test since entering the program 18 months ago, also has chosen a career that involves helping others.

Lipton has taken nursing-assistant classes and will care for two elderly men. One has diabetes and the other is recovering from a stroke.

Gerald Young's initial motivation for drug court was to get out of jail, he said, but that eventually gave way to a desire "to get back what I lost."

"I have to play the tape all the way through," said Young, 34, who started abusing alcohol when he was 13, "and look at how far I've come. ... I was in jail. I nearly lost my wife and kids. I almost lost my job."

Young draws strength from talking with other participants and from watching their behavior.

"I see [Medina] ride his bike [here]," he said. "I know he's going to school. If he can do this, [I think to myself], I can do this."

"If they don't stay connected," said drug court counselor Marlise Herron about the graduates' long-term prognosis for sobriety, "then they'll have a problem."

Young's recovery-meeting "trudging buddy," Xavier Stripling, plans to stay connected after graduation and stay busy by trading in his hairstylist job for a career counseling youths about the dangers of drugs.

Stripling suffered esteem issues growing up as a gay man in his South Central neighborhood, he said, and turned to drugs and alcohol for social acceptance.

"The more dope I had," he said, "the more people were going to like me."

His drug and alcohol use almost got him killed three times, he said, and left him with two years in the state penitentiary and 38 stitches from a machete attack.

Most of all, it prevented him from ever looking "inside" and liking what he saw there, he said.

"I'm more comfortable in my skin than I've ever been," he said. "I don't hold no punches about who I am or what I am."

"I hope ... I never use again," said Stripling from the graduation podium, alluding to the hard days that lay ahead.

He fought back tears and held a letter from a drug-court counselor.

"But if I do, I have memories," he said of the self-acceptance he found through recovery. "I have something to hold on to.

"Can't nobody take this away from me."

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