



## Adult Drug Court celebrates 10th anniversary and 200th graduate

By ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Tuesday, May 31, 2011 11:45 pm

They weren't from Harvard or Yale, but the diplomas 10 Lancaster County Adult Drug Court graduates received Tuesday night were the most important they will ever earn.

The diplomas came in two parts: graduation certificates signed by District Judge Karen Flowers and copies of a court order dismissing all felony charges.

"I can't describe the feeling I have right now, it's so overwhelming," Phillip Donovan said after receiving his documents.

Donovan, 25, faced four felony charges and substantial prison time before being accepted into the program, which started 10 years ago as an alternative to sending nonviolent offenders with substance-abuse issues to prison.

People accepted into the voluntary program go through judicially supervised treatment programs, frequent drug testing and intensive supervision for a minimum of 18 months. The average stay is two years.

Like most of the 10 graduates on Tuesday, Kyle Cockrell, 24, of Lincoln thanked Flowers and District Judge Paul Merritt Jr., as well as staff members, attorneys and counselors who helped him graduate.

"Thanks for saving me," he said. "Thanks for saving my life."

Over the past 10 years, 1,103 people have been screened for the program, 511 were accepted and 202 graduated.

"We take on people who but for drug court are looking at prison," guest speaker and County Attorney Joe Kelly told a crowd of more than 100 friends, relatives officials and program supporters gathered at the University of Nebraska College of Law.

Kelly described those who enter drug court as serious addicts and nonviolent offenders with long criminal histories -- the tough cases. He congratulated the 10 graduates for 18 months of continuous sobriety and moving in a positive direction.

"As you know, most seriously addicted folks never get to this point. Most people in drug court never get to this point," Kelly said.

Upon acceptance into drug court, a person pleads guilty to their felony charge or charges. Legal proceedings against them are put on hold, and, if they finish the program, all charges are dismissed and their record is wiped clean. Drop out or fail, and they're sentenced without trial.

"Almost always they are sentenced to a period of incarceration," said Drug Court Coordinator Jared Gavin.

Some say drug court is harder than prison. Altogether, the 10 graduates appeared in drug court 377 times, had 150 home visits and had to submit to 1,791 drug tests.

Lancaster County Adult Court is one of 19 drug courts in Nebraska and 2,500 across the nation, Gavin said. Five hundred forty-four people are participating in Nebraska, 85 of them in Lancaster County.

The Lancaster County Adult Drug Court team includes Flowers and Merritt and representatives from the county attorney and public defender offices, St. Monica's Behavioral Health Services for Women, local counselors and drug court staff.

Drug courts save the court system as much as \$13,000 for every person they serve, according to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, which celebrated National Drug Court Month in May.

Flowers was honored with a plaque for her 10 years with the program. She and District Judge John Colborn applied for and received the initial federal grant that kicked it off in Lancaster County.

On the plaque were a small gold shovel and Flower's favorite saying to drug court clients: "When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging."

In an interview, she said the 10th graduation ceremony was no different for her than the first.

"I feel great at every graduation," she said. "If it weren't for nights like this, it would be grim ... they are reclaiming their lives."