

## **Drug court grads celebrate new lives**

Feb. 29--Charlottesville's 82nd drug court graduation drew a full courtroom Thursday to see two young men publicly put drug addiction and drug-related crimes behind them.

Jason W. Phipps, 29, and David Leland Wagner, 38, won praise and certificates from circuit Judge Edward L. Hogshire, loving congratulations from their mothers and stories from their counselors about how they have turned their lives around.

Wagner said he had tried three previous times to get clean prior to his past year in the court's intensive treatment program.

"I could never do it," he said at his graduation with 12 months of transformation behind him without any sanctions.

"I really praise drug court," he told the gathering filling Charlottesville Circuit Court.

"First of all I'd like to thank God, because without God none of this would have been possible," he began in a soft voice.

Merie Ragland, case manager for Wagner the past year, called him a spiritual young man who persevered and now "is giving back to the community. He wants to give back." She said Wagner has spoken to youth groups and others in counseling.

Hogshire told Phipps, who is leaving for a top culinary school in Arizona next month, that he expects to read about him in the New York Times as a world-class chef instead of in the papers as a drug defendant.

"It's hard to work in food services and stay clean," the judge said. He praised Phipps and Wagner for the hard work of turning their lives around and "representing what is good about our participants. These guys have been struggling with this stuff for a while."

"It feels great," Phipps said after he graduated and his drug charge was dropped. "Words don't even describe it."

Lon Tate, his case manager for the past year, called him charming and funny, which he said might have hindered him and allowed him to slip back until "he had the courage to look at that and step away."

Tate said Phipps credited "the structure that was placed on him by the program, and the accountability required for maintaining that structure. [He] was motivated by the support of his family and the goals that he had set for himself, those prior to the program that he had let slip away and those he set for himself while in the program."

Albemarle Sheriff J.E. "Chip" Harding attended the graduation ceremony and said he hopes the General Assembly rejects a House of Delegates budget amendment that would wipe out \$5.9 million in state funding for Virginia's drug courts. He thanked people for writing legislators in support of the programs.

Neal Goodloe, the region's chief probation and parole officer, said the state should embrace drug courts because they work.

"It's not soft on crime or hard on crime, it's smart on crime," Goodloe said.

"We've got too many low-risk people out there at that jail whose risk increases every day they are there" because they are not able to turn their lives around without the intensive treatment and motivation drug courts provide.

"The only thing that really works in changing behavior is internal motivational change," said Goodloe, the speaker at Thursday's drug court graduation.

Lawmakers said they do not know whether the House amendment to the state budget to take out the drug court funding will prevail in budget negotiations with the Senate over the next week.

Delegates who support the House position said the funding should be cut in current tight budget times.

Del. Bill Janis, R-Short Pump, said the budget is being crafted in "a tough year. There are a lot of austerity measures."

Janis said drug court could allow a drug abuser convicted of another felony to get a reduced sentence that he called "a Michael Vick discount" for going into drug treatment. He said Vick suddenly applied for drug treatment as a convicted dog-fighting felon once he discovered that completion of a treatment program could reduce his federal sentence.

Advocates of the drug courts said they cost about \$6,000 per year for each offender placed in intensive, monitored treatment, compared with \$22,000 per year for incarceration. They said the re-arrest rate for graduates is

17.7 percent, compared with 50 percent or more for incarcerated addicts.

Gordon Hickey, press secretary to Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, said Thursday that Kaine supports the \$5.9 million funding for drug courts in the budget he proposed and agrees with the Senate the money should stay in the budget.

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