

For ex-addict, kids come first

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Janice Carroll, left, returns to her seat after causing most of her fellow graduates of the Women's Residential Family Treatment Court Program to start crying after talking about the importance of her children in her life, during their graduation ceremony Friday at the Moultrie Courthouse in Washington. Greg Whitesell/Examiner

When an addiction to crack cocaine landed Janice Carroll in court last year to face allegations of child neglect, she wasn't looking for help.

Consumed by her addiction, Carroll said she had lost sight of what really mattered and was in jeopardy of losing her eight children forever.

More than six months later, Carroll was back in the same courtroom in Washington's Superior Court, but this time she was there to celebrate a life free from drugs and devoted to her children.

Carroll and five other women graduated Friday from a court-sponsored drug treatment program for mothers. The voluntary program includes six months of inpatient treatment, followed by six months of outpatient counseling.

"I was tired of using so I had to make a choice," said Carroll. "When they took my children, [treatment] was my only option."

The women, dressed in caps and gowns - some for the first time - marched into the courtroom decorated with streamers and packed with family and friends. Some clutched tissues to wipe their tears and all of them beamed with pride.

"I have watched you struggle to regain your sense of humanity ... today you are clean and sober and we all applaud you for that," said Judge Anita Josey-Herring, who oversees family treatment court. "Your children need you," she added, "and you have answered the call by becoming drug-free."

The inpatient services are provided by Community Action Group, a treatment facility that allows its clients to bring up to four of their children to live with them during the program.

Upon successful completion of this phase, transitional housing is found for the women and their families and outpatient counseling continues. The women also are encouraged to continue their education and find work.

'It's just a miracle'

Carroll, who is just starting the outpatient phase along with the five other graduates, is enrolled in a program to obtain her GED. After that, she's unsure about a career.

The 30-year-old mother, who gave birth to her ninth child while in drug treatment, said her first priority is her family.

After the graduation certificates were handed out, there was one more honor left to give - most improved. That honor went to Carroll.

When Carroll first appeared in court last year, Judge Josey-Herring said she had a scowl on her face and no interest in getting straight.

"I think it's just a miracle to have Ms. Carroll standing here," the judge said Friday, adding that "you have no idea who is going to be successful."

Carroll accepted the award and as she thanked the judge, a rush of tears muffled her words. Immediately, her fellow graduates jumped up with tissues, prompting a frenzy of laughter among them.

Until a few years ago there were no treatment programs like this, Jessie Winston, Child and Family Services, said during the graduation.

Now, more than 46 women have been through the family court drug treatment and more than 122 children have been reunited with their mothers because of it.

This keeps families together, Winston said, adding, "To send a handful of children home to their loving mothers is priceless."

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