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Mothers dump drugs for children and better lives

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By Valencia Mohammed
AFRO Staff Writer

Nine mothers sat proudly in front of a crowd of family and friends as they began the next phase of a yearlong comprehensive substance abuse treatment program.

Little children jumped with glee, while family members snapped pictures. This was a graduation of sorts and a celebration of life. It represented, for the children present, going home to be nurtured properly by a mother who no longer used drugs.

"This is just as much a family celebration as it is an individual celebration," said humorist therapist Kris Smiles. "Years ago, there were no drug programs for women. They would detox in warehouses and crack houses."

For the last nine months, the women participated in the District's Family Treatment Court and Community Action Group (CAG) program. According to court officials, the rigorous course offered the women an opportunity to stay with their children while going through detoxification and complete withdrawal from substance abuse.

Although the stories were different, many elements remained the same, that is, heavy drug use and neglect of children. However, through the assistance and benevolence of the family court and CAG, one by one the women made the conscious decision to rid their lives of drugs and become productive and wholesome parents.

"For the last four years, all I could think about is the anguish and despair. Today, I can say my baby can take her dreams and soar," said Mary Turner, mother of Shawnole Turner.

"The Family Treatment Court Program has helped me find myself again. It has enhanced the lady and mother, I used to be and helped me to proceed well on my way to being a productive person in society," said Turner about her months of treatment.

"I dropped out of Eastern in my sophomore year," said 22-year-old Sheila Pitts, mother of three. "School was not the problem. I just wanted to use drugs." Pitts said she taught herself with the aid of tutors from George Washington the curriculum needed to obtain a high school diploma. Pitts



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plans to further her education and get a nice job.

"Treatment is a process where you choose to change by any means necessary....Treatment is establishing acts of being humble and using thinking mechanisms, which means thinking of all consequences before acting on the instant thoughts in any given situation," said Pitts.

"The magic of the program is when one of the ladies says she's got it or that she finally realizes what we are saying and doing. They don't have to lose. They ability to change is within them," said family court Presiding Judge Anita Josey-Herring.

CAG houses participants in a residential treatment facility in which the women reside along with up to four of their children who are under age 11.

The treatment facility provides on-site and community-based services, including substance abuse education and treatment, parenting skill workshops, counseling and childcare. If the participant successfully completes the residential phase, they participate in a formal graduation ceremony and proceed to the community-based aftercare phase.

According to Dr. Diane M. Brown, clinical director at CAG, on average, women in this program have a parent who has died before the age of 40 from drug addiction and related diseases.

"We are trying to transform lives to bring them back to be productive citizens," said Janice Gordon, co-founder of CAG.

As a result of this semester's program, 39 children were not removed from their mothers.

"In loving themselves, they can change their reality and change the universe," said Carol Wise, chief of performance improvement standards for addiction, prevention, recovery and administration

The women will continue their treatment through the D.C. Addiction Recovery and Prevention Administration.

"While we walk with you through the process, you teach us. Every class has been a wonderful learning experience," said Jo Ella J. Brooks, coordinator of the Family Treatment Court, to the graduates.

Carla Evans, graduate of 2003, spoke of how the program worked for her and gave advice to her "sisters" in the struggle to stay clean of drugs.

"Don't go around people who do drugs or alcohol. Don't flirt with addiction. Don't drink alcohol, don't smoke. Don't be involved with boyfriend who indulges," said Evans. "You have a void that needs to be filled. Stay rooted in your recovery. Fill it back with something positive. Try to recapture some of the good things you did as a child or missed while addicted."

According to program officials, the recidivism rate for drug treatment in the United States is 90 percent; fewer than 50 percent of the Family Treatment Court graduates have relapsed.

"This program is about service and hope," said Chief Judge Rufus King III, of the D.C. Superior Court.

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