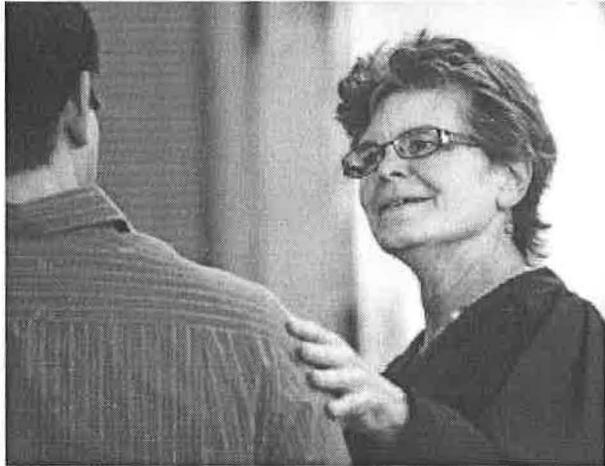


VETERAN

Veteran lauded for persevering in special Missoula court



AUGUST 20, 2012 9:30 PM • BY ROB CHANEY OF THE MISSOULIAN

A DUI court proceeding of a very different flavor took place Monday afternoon in the Missoula County Courthouse.

Missoula District Court Standing Master Brenda Desmond presided, but Montana Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger attended, as did District Judge John Larson, Missoula City Councilman Jon Wilkins, former Missoula County Commissioner Larry Anderson and numerous members of the city's active and retired military community.

They were there not for a sentencing, but for the graduation of a young veteran who just completed nearly a year's worth of Veterans Court requirements.

"I bet you didn't think you'd have a huge an audience at this graduation," Desmond said from the bench to the man in the bright blue shirt. But, she added, that's what comes to someone who filed consistent updates about his efforts to become a better person, appreciate good things that come and resist the temptation to run himself down while learning to redirect his life.

"They really make sure you check in and stay accountable," said the graduate, who was not identified in keeping with the Veterans Court confidentiality rules. "With this court, they really encourage you with incentives to keep appointments, to take care of yourself and make sure the rest of the community is taken care of as well."

Desmond helped start the Veterans Court program a year ago to help military service members with drug, substance or mental health problems connect with mentors who shared their background and experience. So far, it has graduated three participants and has 11 more enrolled.

The program targets veterans whose mental illness, traumatic brain injury or similar factors contributed to their criminal charges. Desmond said most of those come from either the Iraq or Afghanistan combat theaters. They must be facing at least a year in prison for their charges or probation violations, and not be a registered violent or sexual offender.

Speaking to the veteran, Bohlinger congratulated him for his efforts.

“And I also say congratulations to the community of Missoula that puts its arms around its citizens and does not let them fall through the cracks,” the Marine Corps veteran said. “About 10 percent of the University of Montana students are veterans. They know the pain of conflict. They have lots of issues to deal with. We can say to a person who has served, we can provide the care needed to integrate back into civilian life.”

Anderson, who mentors another veteran in the program, said Veterans Court depends somewhat on the veterans’ own experience of discipline and military life.

“They help each other out with housing, medical services, rehabilitation and things like that,” Anderson said. “Judge Desmond has spent an incredible amount of time putting together things like this graduation, and applying for money and grants to keep it going. But the community is key. I think that’s what makes it work in Missoula.”

Desmond said Veterans Court started in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2008 to help military members whose presence in the criminal justice system stemmed from service-related disorders. Yellowstone County also has a Veterans Court, and Great Falls is considering one, she said.

“We need to send out the call to more veterans,” Bohlinger said. “We have brothers in arms who have difficulties. This would be an opportunity for you to step up. You’ve got a wonderful model here that’s working.”

Reporter Rob Chaney can be reached at 523-5382 or at rchaney@missoulian.com.