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**REVOLUTIONARY NEW DRUG COURT REUNITING PARENTS WITH CHILDREN, AND SAVING CASH**

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Retiring magistrate Greg Levine poses for a photo with his wife Barbara in Melbourne. *Photo: Craig Sillitoe*

The magistrates chair is empty, as is the jurors panel and the witness box.

There are no lawyers here this Friday morning in court room six.

His Honour Greg Levine is the singular diminutive legal presence on the first floor of the Children's Court of Victoria on Little Lonsdale Street. And he looks quite un-judge-like, legs crossed and leaning back at a table surrounded by clinicians, case workers and program managers, chatting about the struggling parents they will help today in the latest weekly sitting of the revolutionary new Family Drug Treatment Court.



Retiring magistrate Greg Levine is setting up a new family drug court. *Photo: Craig Sillitoe*

The pilot program – the first of its kind in Australia and a passion project built on the sheer will of the distinguished magistrate – is one year old now and causing a stir in his fraternity for its informality, philosophy, and results.

"Let's get onto the list," Levine says, kicking off a multidisciplinary team discussion that will deal with family violence and custody orders, clean and dirty drug screens, failures and surprise successes.

The court delivers a holistic and accelerated approach to child protection cases where parental substance abuse is an issue, and is designed to have children reunified with their parents – or placed in permanent alternative care – within a brisk 12 months.

"The process is supportive but intensive, and it reaches a critical point for the parents," says Levine. "Am I going to swim or am I going to drown?"

A mixture of both will come before the court this morning.

The team talks first about Alex\*, an intelligent girl with a decent employment history, whose daughter is apparently staying with her grandma while Alex bunks with a drug dealer.

"So she goes off on a drug binge, but later comes back and has time with her daughter?" asks Levine. "That's a win-win for her. She almost has to hit rock bottom."

They talk about Peter and Jenny, a couple who came to court last week slurring, almost asleep. They have three toddlers, but have missed too many drug screens.

"They always have a range of excuses," says Levine. "They're timing their tests, so we need to tighten up. It's not acceptable."

But they also talk about the mixed bag cases who are making slow progress, including Tiffany, whose latest screen tested positive only for cannabis.

"At least there was no methamphetamines this time," says Levine. "So that's an improvement. She is a reasonable prospect."

There is Samantha, too, who recently found work, broke her drug habit and broke free of an abusive partner. She looks healthier and happier with each visit.

"There really are incremental benefits all the way along," Levine says later. "As they work with us and develop confidence, you can see that they are feeling terrific about themselves."

Of course for Levine, the reward is in some ways less about the parents. There is a plaque on the wall of his chambers that says as much: "The future will judge us by the way we treat our children."

He looks at it every day. This is his life's work.

He began as a magistrate in 1986, a time when the biggest perceived threat to children was "exposure to moral danger, or lapsing into a life of crime."

Drugs were barely mentioned, and never family violence – two issues that have since come to all but dominate the field.

"Most people think the Children's Court is where kids go when they get in trouble. They have no idea that there's this social crisis going on here every day."

When people ask him why he has stuck so long with such an emotionally stressful and cumulatively exhausting role, his answer is simple: "It's important work."

In April he reached the age of 70 – otherwise known as "judicial senility" – and stepped down to become a reserve magistrate only.

At his bench farewell, the speeches for "Divine Levine" ranged from toast to roast, paying tribute to his urbane and mild manner – at least until an unforced error at tennis prompts a torrent of expletives.

The Family Drug Treatment Court – colloquially known as "Greg's court" – was mentioned as both his legacy and an exemplar.

On a recent morning in Levine's South Melbourne home, filled with colourful floral paintings and delicate oriental furniture, he explains how it came to be so.

There were – and still are – observable flaws in the child protection process, which is based upon an adversarial system of law.

The courts hear evidence, lawyers argue, and judges make orders that might require temporary care for children, treatment for parents, and behaviour change programs.

The idea is to address the issues that are holding parents back from having their own children in their care. The problem is that parents are required to do this rehabilitation of their own volition, perhaps with assistance from an often overworked social worker.

"So it comes back to court a year later and the parents are in no different position," he says. "The reality is that they can't do it on their own. They need intensive support, but instead the cases drag on."

Barbara Kamler, Levine's wife and also a force behind this project, notes that magistrates often give parents "another chance and another chance" because reunification is so important.

"But the research indicates that children need a fast result – either reunification or a permanent placement," she says. "They need to understand their place in life quickly."

So when Levine won a 2011 Churchill Fellowship, he used it to study similar courts in the United States and Britain. And from that first day at Santa Clara Superior Court in California, he began picking up methods he could use here.

Kamler was initially going to come along to see a court or two and then go off to galleries and do some writing of her own, but the social sciences researcher and emeritus professor of education at Deakin University soon saw for herself how extraordinary the system was.

"I got very excited and committed – and I became a mass documenter of what we were seeing," she says. "Every night we would take notes and debrief, and figure out how it was different. What were the cornerstone things that made these courts work?"

The docket system – whereby each case is managed by the same judge throughout the process – was the first feature they decided to adopt. Levine carries each case through from start to finish, so parents don't have to deal with a new face every time they return to court.

"They get used to me. The parents come unrepresented. They would normally not feel comfortable in a court setting without a lawyer, but they do. It's very exciting, and a dramatic shift."

The team approach was the next crucial plank. Each court session has the same key group of case managers and clinicians there, coordinating the various treatments and tests to which the parents must submit.

The court has additionally built up partnerships to scaffold the rehabilitation process. Drug counselling through Anglicare, beds at Odyssey House, and outreach workers from the Youth Support and Advocacy Service. They can get employment assistance from TaskForce Community Agency, and new skills from child health programs like Tweddle, or new parenting programs such as My Kids and Me.

No potential resource or agency is overlooked, and the parents are reminded of what they need to do in order to succeed. The court might appear casual, but Levine is still an authority figure for the parents.

"They're embarrassed and upset if they haven't done what I asked them to do, and that's a good motivation," he says. "They're used to failure in their lives. But now they feel empowered to speak and act."

The Dade County Court in Florida was another standout. Set in a dangerous area of Miami, where most officials don't leave the building to eat lunch, Levine encountered an intense "tough love court".

The judge there had one method of shocking parents into action: Having them write a letter to their children, explaining why they were not able to get well enough to care for them. Levine remembers crying as one parent read her letter in open court.

"It was very emotional, then the judge said, 'Fold the letter up and put it in your purse – I need you to know what that's going to feel like, and I don't want that to happen. Every time you feel tempted, read it.' It was hard, intense, but fantastic."

Levine has adopted a similar but softer approach, asking parents to write a letter to their children explaining why they are going to succeed in the program. On the day *The Age* visits, Miranda reads hers aloud:

"To my one and only chubby bunny. I love you to bits and beyond and back again. You can always trust me, you can always rely on me. My goal for the future is to be living together, with a dog, a cat, a goldfish and a hamster too..."

When Levine returned from visiting Nebraska and New York, Puerto Rico and London, he began lobbying to establish the program and won a three-year pilot. Cases are drawn from the Preston region and submit on voluntary basis. The system is explained in simple terms, upfront:

"We're going to work intensively with you. And this is going to be your best and possibly last chance to reunite with your children," Levine explains to them. "If this doesn't work for you, you've got to understand that there's no reasonable basis upon which you're going to be ready to be reunited."

Results so far have been encouraging.

The overall annual cost of the Family Drug Treatment Court is just under one million dollars, meaning the cost of a single case in that time is around \$33,000. Contrast that with the cost of having a child in out of home care for a year at \$60,000.

Then there is the shortened timeline. Cases in the new court must be finalised within a year, whereas the average length of time for a finalised case in the family division of the Children's Court is five years.

Beyond those savings, Levine points out the long-term drain on the public purse of young people drifting through foster care, often becoming dysfunctional adults, relying on community benefits or turning to crime.

"All of the social research indicates that children who settle with their family will be more productive as adults," he says. "This is all geared to create a solid foundation for the lives of these children."

Deakin University has been contracted to do a formal evaluation, one that will hopefully reflect the anecdotal sense that the court is doing unique work.

The dream is to roll the program out into other regions, but Levine tempers this with pessimism, given that the very successful criminal drug court in Dandenong has helped people for 12 years and yet still not been expanded.

"I'm hoping to see it entrenched in the system, and it would nice to think it might even become part of the legislation, so that it can be unassailable," says Levine. "It's hard to see how a government could not continue to fund our court."

Rick would like to see that happen. He is the final person the court sees on the day we visit. He wears a blue hoodie and a huge grin, with good reason.

"Well, it's all happening," Levine says, smiling at the young Broadmeadows boy. "You're looking great. Next Wednesday is the big day. You get your daughter back."

Rick nods. He already knew that moment was coming, and has been excitedly preparing. "Things are going great. I even quit smoking," he says. "We've all got our problems, but you can't just run from your daughter."

Rick grew up in Fawkner, began hanging out with the wrong crowd early, and by 15 had left school and begun using ice daily. Going through the courts for charges relating to weapons, drugs, assault and burglary, he eventually lost his daughter. Her mother is currently in detox, and struggling, but the Family Drug Treatment Court has seemed unique in giving Rick a chance. He is now clean.

"Everyone there wants to help you instead of punish you," he says. "As soon as you walk in you get a welcome feeling."

He has juggled all the requirements, including behaviour management classes and community service.

He has had visitation rights throughout, and been completing a heavy machinery mechanics course by night.

He is "rapt" that things have gone his way, and so is Levine, who leads the entire court in a round of applause.

"It's very pleasing to see someone respond so well," says Levine, smiling and gesturing around the table to approving nods. "You should be very proud of yourself. We all are."

*\*The names of all parents and children in this story have been altered to prevent them being identified, as is required by law in active juvenile cases.*