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Tribal drug court works on early intervention for youths

by Maggie O'Neill, Staff Writer

Editor's Note: It's a tough time to be a teenager anywhere. There are plenty of temptations. The Washoe tribe is fighting the problem where it starts -- with the teenager. Those caught drinking or abusing drugs go through a system, called drug court, and answer to a team of adults who help them see the value of making a life for themselves.

It takes commitment to create change -- the commitment of a judge, a social services worker, a chief of police, a defense advocate, a tribal prosecutor, a drug evaluator, a court coordinator, an education director, a court clerk, a parent or parents, and, of course the commitment of the teenagers who attend the Washoe Tribe Juvenile Healing to Wellness Drug Court.

The juveniles attending the Washoe tribal juvenile drug court are all under the age of 18.

They are just kids really, kids who have been cited or arrested for succumbing to the temptations parents worry about, temptations that lead to use that lead to addiction that lead to a dead-end.

Drugs and alcohol.

"The dimension of the drug problem is hard to define, but it's significant," said Juvenile Healing to Wellness Drug Court Judge Ron Cauley. "It's meth, marijuana, alcohol.

"It's like adult court, where without the meth, the marijuana, the alcohol, there'd hardly be anyone in court."

In the middle of 2002, the Washoe tribe received funding to fight juvenile substance abuse. A federal grant provided the money for training staff and establishing a drug court program.

When it began operations earlier this year, a structured program to modify juvenile behavior and educate teenagers began.

"Early intervention," Cauley said. "Drugs and alcohol are a big problem in the Native American population. In the Washoe population, (the juvenile drug court) is a concerted effort by the tribe to deal with the young people to try to divert them from this path."

Nearly every Monday afternoon, the team of committed adults meet in a pre-drug court meeting to discuss each teenager's progress.

This particular day, the team gathers as usual in the courtroom and the announcement is made that two juveniles will be promoted to the second phase of the program.

"Maybe this will rub off on the other kids," someone says.

The juvenile drug court program is broken into four segments, which vary in intensity.

Requirements include drug testing, counseling and punctual attendance at school. Each positive step teenagers make toward improving their own lives gains them program points and a step toward program completion.

"Nine points in counseling is big," said one team member about a juvenile's attendance at more than the required sessions. "That's terrific."

Sanctions are the result of bad decisions. The drug court team does not hesitate to use them to drive home the point that it's easier to do tasks right the first time around. Four hours of community service becomes eight; a 125-word essay becomes 200.

"If they successfully complete drug court, their charges are dismissed and their records sealed," Cauley said. "And that's a real incentive so you don't have anything on your record."

About half a dozen teenagers are currently participating in the program. Many come to the court through the legal system, but others are referred by drug court staff, concerned adults, and even parents.

"A lot of times the parents will turn their kids in for an infraction to get them into drug court because they see where they're headed and they want some help policing them to get them away from drugs," Cauley said. "The whole concept of drug court is accountability. The scrutiny is tight. We keep a close eye on the (teenagers). We (drug) test them often. We see them often. At the same time, there's a loose and relaxed atmosphere and we give them a lot of incentives."

The team has ended their session. The juveniles have been drug-tested and it is time for all the teenagers, their families, the drug court staff, the court clerk and the Judge to gather in the court room.

One by one, the students come before the judge and answer his questions -- Why have they been late for school? How is counseling? What's going on?

And to hear encouragement too: Good job. Keep up the good work. You're well on your way. The program is not a sprint, it's a marathon.

Before long, Cauley recognize the two juveniles to be promoted for their hard work in the program. The incentives to keep working hard include a dinner for two to the JT Basque Bar and Dining Room, two Subway sandwiches and Douglas County swim passes.

"I'm pleased with your attitude," the Judge said. "You've progressed as rapidly as you could have done. Your attitudes are better now than when you (first) came in here."

The teenagers smile.

Their eyes shine.

"All right," they say.

The other juveniles look on.

Cauley places the medals around their necks. The awards are engraved with their names and the date and the words 'Promoted to Phase II.'

"It looks like a wrestling medal," Cauley said. "Congratulations."

Nearly everyone in the room glows, including drug court coordinator Wendy Russell.

"The best part is seeing them bloom," she said. "Before, they wouldn't look the judge in the eye. Then they get clean and their attitude changes. What I really like about this program is these kids know where they are going."

Russell, who spends much of her Monday preparing updates on the teenagers' progress for the drug court team, said she has bonded closely "with the kids," even making a Jambalaya recipe from her native Louisiana for them.

"I cry when students fail," she said. "It's like my own child. The ones that have failed have not been parent-supported. I can't tell you how important parents are. Kids look at what you're doing not at what you're saying."

"Drug court gives them a support team," Cauley said. "And some kids, depending on what family they're in, some kids get good parental support and some don't, so it really does give them some parental-adult modeling that's really helpful and I think beneficial."

- Maggie O'Neill can be reached at mo'neill@recordcourier.com or (775) 782-5121, ext. 214.