

How Mental Health Court Changed the Trajectory of Makenzie Scimeca's Life

“My life could have gone completely differently,” Makenzie Scimeca said, reflecting back on her experiences.

Facing a 15-year felony charge Makenzie had two options: jail or the Mental Health Court at the 57th District Court in Allegan. She chose the Mental Health Court and entered the program in November 2014.

“Prison was not where I needed to be,” Makenzie said. “I needed to get help and I needed a reason to get that help.”

In the program, she took advantage of the different resources offered. For example, she attended both individual and group counseling.

“When you try and talk to your friends about it they might not get it because they are not living it,” Makenzie explained. “When you’re in these groups talking to women who are in similar situations, it helps. It gives you motivation to keep going, and get through it because you want to make everyone around you proud.”

In addition to the support she received in group counseling, she also said the support Judge Joseph Skocelas and his team gave her made a big difference.

“They have a passion for it and that’s what drove me,” Makenzie said. “I didn’t want to go there and disappoint them; I didn’t want to fail.”

She added, “The love that Judge Skocelas and his team showed for me had a huge impact on my life. They truly cared, and you could see it in the way that they looked at you, in the way that they talked to you, and in the resources they informed you about. They really wanted people to succeed.”

Due to the support she received in the program, Makenzie said that she is looking to give back to the program and help others. If she could give advice to someone just starting in the program, she says this: “Think about it as getting a second chance that not everyone is offered.”

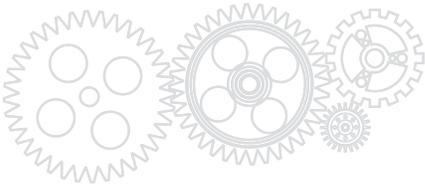


MHC Graduate Makenzie Scimeca and her family

Makenzie explained that is what she loves most about the program.

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Joseph Skocelas

“Not everyone is a criminal. Sometimes people are just going through something and have different circumstances,” she explained. “There are a lot of people in prisons who shouldn’t be there. If these programs were more talked about, it would be changing lives like the way it changed mine.”

Today, Makenzie’s life is very different. She and her fiancé recently moved into a house and have an eighth-month-old daughter named Paisley. Makenzie currently works at a local hotel, and after she completes esthetician school, she hopes to be placed in a salon or a plastic surgeon’s office.

“I have grown and changed throughout the years; I still have to laugh sometimes where I was just a few years ago. If you want the change, you can change. You just have to want it,” she said.

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— Judge Skocelas



MHC Judge Joseph Skocelas and another graduate

Judge Joseph Skocelas would not give up Mental Health Court for the world.

Founded in 2009, the Mental Health Court at 57th District Court in Allegan, which he presides over, helps treat underlying mental health issues of certain offenders in the system, as opposed to simply punishing someone for what they did.

“What we do in Mental Health Court is to help these people deal with their illness so they can do their best with the abilities they have,” Judge Skocelas explained. “Hopefully, we have given them some skills to make the best life possible for themselves.”

Judge Skocelas stressed that the Mental Health Court focuses on the individual and tailors resources that will best suit that person’s needs.

“I always ask participants, ‘What do you want to accomplish over the next year?’” Judge Skocelas said. “Then I tell them, ‘That means you’re going to leave this program better than when you came in. You tell me how you want to do that.’”

Overall, Judge Skocelas says that through exit interviews with graduates of the program, he knows that they are pleased with the experience.

“They tell us what they liked the most was how different court is in the Mental Health Court, as opposed to all other experiences with the criminal justice system,” Judge Skocelas explained.

“We are concerned for them as a person, and we are trying to help them as a person,” Judge Skocelas said.

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