

Judges highlight drug court successes

By JOSH CHAMPLIN

- Argus-Press Staff Writer

CORUNNA — The 35th Circuit Court in Corunna conducted a drug court graduation ceremony Wednesday, and even Michigan State Supreme Court Justice Elizabeth Clement was in attendance.

Judge Matthew Stewart began the proceedings by conducting sentencing for a defendant to drug court.

Typically, in drug court cases a defendant is facing a substantial jail or even prison term, but if the court finds that they are non-violent and not a threat to public safety, they may be sentenced through drug court. After sentencing, the individual Stewart sentenced remained in the court room and observed the proceedings.

“This is my favorite part of the job,” attorney Matthew McKone said. “We live in a community. We all live here, and want to see people be productive and have people around us who are productive, and that’s what this court does. You’re held accountable, you’re expected to be honest. We have a team that is so nosy, so adept at computers, telephones, computers, Facebook and Instagram, we will find out if there’s a problem. And it will be dealt with. But it’s for your good, it’s for the good of the community. This program hasn’t been around all that long, but it has such support from the community.”

Drug court officials asked that names of participants not be published. Participants believe doing so would ‘jinx’ them, and could cause them to relapse or otherwise violate the terms of the court.

Participants can have a status of “accolades,” meaning they are doing well in the program. They can be “sanctioned,” which means that a participant can be given a “course correction,” including community service, a jail term, or even terminated from the program.

Stewart ordered one participant to write a 500-word essay on the importance of being honest, after finding out she hadn’t been with a program administrator.

One woman who was in drug court for a heroin-related charge said she’d gone to the Shiawassee County Sheriff’s Office and compared photos of when she’d been arrested and now, when she’s clean. She was amazed at the difference in her own appearance, and thanked Stewart for letting her have a chance.

She also told the court she'd applied for a job with a drug counseling company, and had an upcoming interview for a position.

There also were two men who graduated from the Swift and Sure program. Swift and Sure is similar to drug court, but violations are punished with jail terms, which can vary. Stewart complimented both men, and remarked he could barely remember their names.

"That's a good thing, because they didn't get in trouble," Stewart said. One of the men who graduated from Swift and Sure, Stewart added, had paid off all his court fines and costs, and had started a new job and been promoted to a team lead position while in the program.

Clement, an advocate of alternative sentencing options, said she was excited to witness the program in action.

"When I travel to our problem-solving court graduations, I get asked why is a Supreme Court Justice coming to these," she said. "What I do on the court is a lot of research and a lot of writing. The best part of my job is the fact I serve as a liaison to all of our problem-solving courts. What that means is that I get to travel around the state, visit with our teams and come to events like this, and see how our courts are working.

"In Michigan, we have over 185 courts that deal with drug addiction, alcohol addiction, mental health issues. About 15 or so years ago, we had trial judges, like Judge Stewart, that said 'what we're doing, is not working.' We kept seeing the same people coming back because of addiction issues," said Clement, who is seeking re-election this year.

"We had very passionate, very dedicated judges that wanted to do something different. And they started what we now call our problem-solving courts. They are incredibly, incredibly successful. And the Michigan Supreme Court is very supportive of them. I'm very passionate. These programs save lives. We have the data that shows it, and you hear the stories from the participants. It's putting families back together."