

Thankful and thriving: Georgia drug court grads flourish

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Posted: 12:00 a.m. Thursday, Nov. 26, 2015

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By **Carrie Teegardin** - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Charlotte Whitlock looked perfectly at home mingling with Atlanta's movers-and-shakers. She was a highlighted speaker this month at a white-tablecloth breakfast event held on the 49th floor of a Peachtree Street skyscraper.

As this polished woman confidently and warmly addressed the crowd, it was hard to imagine that for 15 years Whitlock was homeless, on drugs and had abandoned her children. In those days, she lived mainly under a highway bridge, not far from the private club where she spoke at a program celebrating the power of literacy

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and adult education.



Charlotte Whitlock, shown in her G.E.D prep class at Literary Action, graduated from drug court after years of drug use and ... [Read More](#)

“I enjoy you all accepting me to come here and speak today,” Whitlock said. “I just hope that my story touches my family and my family members to get on board, to do the right thing and not just waste their lives, especially my son. He

just embraced me back into his life, when I walked away from him. He’s such a wonderful child.”

Whitlock’s transformation is what a new style of justice looks like in Georgia. As a crack cocaine user, she said she was locked up 21 times over the years, mostly in local jails. But nothing ever changed until 2009, when a judge placed Whitlock in an alternative program called “drug court.”

That’s when she finally got off the street, got off drugs and reconnected with her sister and a son, who both welcomed her home. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution [profiled Whitlock almost four](#)



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years ago, as part of a [series of stories examining](#) a push by Gov. Nathan Deal to change the justice system to use “accountability courts” instead of prison for people like Whitlock, who have the potential to turn their lives around.



Dutch Nelson, an area director for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and a head football coach at a Christian high school, ... [Read More](#)

As Thanksgiving approached, the AJC got back in touch with Whitlock and three other drug court graduates that the newspaper profiled in early 2012. The AJC wanted to know: Were these drug court graduates still on the right track?

Whitlock’s case offers a compelling endorsement for the alternative to prison.

She’s been clean for nearly seven years, she survived breast

cancer and she's taking classes downtown at Literacy Action, the non-profit that asked her to speak at its event which also featured Atlanta's Episcopal Bishop Rob Wright. Whitlock lives with one of her two sons, who grew up primarily in foster care, and she is doing everything she can to make up for lost time. She has an extremely close relationship with her sister, who was in the audience this month for the breakfast where Whitlock spoke. Her other son is in prison, and she hopes that the changes she has made will inspire him, too.



Tammy Sanford graduated from drug court in 2012. She has since married and is now a grandmother. Photo courtesy of Courtney ... [Read More](#)

Today, Whitlock has the right clothes for a business breakfast, a gigantic smile and the ability to talk to almost anyone. She's got a smart phone, takes computer classes and she uses Facebook. She studies and thinks about the next steps in her journey and ways to help others along

too. But she hasn't come close to forgetting what it's like to sleep on a folded-down cardboard box and she fully credits drug court with offering her a pathway away from her pattern of "destructive

behaviors.”

“I wake up every morning thanking God that I can take a shower, put on clean clothes and brush my teeth,” she said.

Drug court is one of the accountability courts that are a centerpiece of Gov. Nathan Deal’s significant overhaul of the state’s criminal justice system. Georgia has 131 such courts statewide, including some that are preparing to open in early 2016. That’s up more than 50 percent since 2012. While drug courts are the most common, Georgia also has mental health courts, DUI courts, veterans courts and family dependency courts for parents with addiction issues.



Gordon Pirkle Jr., who is now drug free after beating a meth addiction, is in charge of his family’s NASCAR-themed restaurant ... [Read More](#)

Judges use the courts for defendants who are breaking the law because of an addiction or a mental health problem. Instead of locking people up, the judges order months of rigorous requirements to get up early, get drug tested, attend programs to address

underlying problems and go to work. While most people who graduate say it's the hardest thing they have ever done, alternative courts are less about punishment and more about teaching people how to live productive, law-abiding lives.

When alternative courts work, they save the system money:

Offenders work and pay taxes instead of living behind bars on the taxpayers' dime. The state has directed about \$10 million a year to expand and support these courts, with the idea that the investment will pay off because state prisons and local jails won't have to house so many people.

Research suggests that the approach works. A 2010 state audit found that just 7 percent of drug court graduates were arrested within two years of finishing the program, compared with a 29 percent recidivism rate for drug abusers who had been sentenced to state prison. That audit called for the state to pump up its accountability courts, advice that Deal took to heart.

The most recent numbers available from the state show that state funding for accountability courts increased from \$2 million in 2012 to \$15 million in the 2015 fiscal year. The number of people served by the courts more than doubled in the past two years. Last year, more than 8,000 people were enrolled in one of the courts, with about 3,500 joining the programs last year.

Not everybody is a fan of drug courts. Some say they cherry-pick drug offenders who are most likely to succeed. For others, it's philosophical. Some judges and prosecutors just don't think it's appropriate to turn a courtroom into a rehab program.

Floyd County Chief Superior Court Judge Walter Matthews said he supports sending some offenders to drug treatment programs outside of the court. But he isn't comfortable with a judge becoming a counselor for addicts.

"I do not think it's good for the court to be seen as a place where at 10 a.m. you're putting people in prison for the same thing that at 11 a.m. you're forgiving their conduct," Matthews said.

However, Matthews did support a new mental health court for his circuit, which is slated to open next year. Matthews said the closure of a state psychiatric hospital in Rome in 2011 resulted in local police and courts being overwhelmed with defendants with mental health issues who are repeat offenders. For those offenders, Matthews said, a different approach makes sense.

"We all have great hopes that it's going to provide some relief," he said.

Governor Deal, whose son is a drug court judge in Hall County, often points out that these courts are about more than saving

money. They're also about grace and redemption. At their best, they find souls lost to drug addiction and reunite them with family members who had often given up on their mother, sister or son ever living productive lives.

The three other drug court graduates profiled by the AJC in 2012 also told the newspaper recently they have continued to thrive after completing their programs.

Tammy Sanford said she "couldn't be happier." She's gotten married to a man she adores and has fully repaired her relationship with her daughters.

During the worst days of her addiction, she had no home, car or job. She searched trash cans for lottery tickets that might be worth something. She wasn't always there for her daughters, who are now the center of her life. She's become a doting grandmother who holds down a job and focuses on her family and God. Staying sober, she said, has not even been a struggle. When she thinks back about what her life used to be like, she says, it just breaks her heart. "I can't even imagine how that was me," she said. "My life is amazing now."

Gordon Pirkle, Jr., **who beat a meth addiction with the help of drug court**, is still thriving. Pirkle's father, who for years could not count on his son, has put him in charge of a family business he started

decades ago: a popular NASCAR-themed restaurant in Dawsonville called the Pool Room. Pirkle says he works seven days a week and is too busy to even think about using drugs.

His kids work with him and he says he's closer than ever with his children and his grandkids. "I owe it all to drug court," he said. "It has gave me back my life." Pirkle said he goes out of his way to give jobs to people who are in drug court or who have recently graduated from the program. "I'm trying to give back," he said.

Dutch Nelson says life could hardly be better. He's remarried, living in Douglas County where he grew up and focused on his faith and inspiring others. He's an area director for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and a head football coach at a Christian high school. He does prison ministry and teaches, too, constantly sharing his story of overcoming his addiction through faith.

These days, he says, drugs hold no appeal and **he credits Fulton County's drug court** as the change agent in his life. He says it placed him in a controlled environment with high demands, high expectations and consequences, along with strong support and inspiration. "I've been blessed," he said, "there's no doubt about it."

Every time there's a graduation at Fulton County's drug court, Whitlock likes to be there. She will never forget that getting into the program was the bridge that helped her become the person she is

today, a person that she says is still a work in progress. She goes to the graduations to take stock of where she is in her journey and also to inspire those following in her footsteps.

“It’s one day at a time,” she tells the graduates, “and you can do it.”

Georgia’s Accountability Courts

Adult Drug Courts: 48

Veterans Courts: 14

Adult Mental Health Courts: 25

DUI Courts: 21

Family Dependency Treatment Courts: 10

Juvenile Drug Courts: 10

Juvenile Mental Health Courts: 3

Source: Georgia Council of Accountability Court Judges

In the 2015 fiscal year, Georgia’s accountability courts admitted 3,474 new participants. Here’s a look at the how many offenders

were admitted by program.

Court type, Participants admitted in FY 2015

Adult Felony Drug Court, 1,500

DUI Court, 1,002

Adult Mental Health Court, 459

Juvenile Drug Court, 179

Family Dependency Treatment Court, 138

Veterans Court, 76

Misdemeanor Drug Court, 47

Juvenile Mental Health Court, 30

Hybrid Felony Drug/Mental Health Court, 30

Hybrid Felony Drug/DUI Court, 13

Source: Georgia Council of Accountability Court Judges

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