

Drug court's teen grads earn praise

By Leslie Wolf Branscomb
STAFF WRITER

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Two dozen teenagers graduated from the county's Juvenile Drug Court yesterday, the largest graduating class since the program began seven years ago.

But before they collected their certificates, gift bags and hugs from the assembled county officials, they heard from one of the best-known victims of the border-area drug wars.

Deputy District Attorney Enrique Camarena, the son of slain Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, thanked them for completing the strenuous intervention program.

In 1985, when Camarena was 11, his father was kidnapped in broad daylight in Mexico, where he was working under cover. He was tortured for two days, then killed.

"The impact this had on the way America views drugs was huge," Camarena said. "I think for the first time the American public really got angry, and said we have to do something about this."

"What you're doing is so important," Camarena told the graduates. "In stopping your addiction, you are reducing the demand for drugs here in the United States."

Juvenile Drug Court started in the county in 1998, the year after adult drug courts began. It was part of a larger movement toward directing drug offenders out of jail and into strict rehabilitation programs. There are now more than 1,600 drug courts nationwide.

The Juvenile Drug Court is an intensive, nine-month program for teens who are on probation and having trouble staying clean and sober. It includes frequent court appearances, random drug testing and group and family counseling.

The program offers rewards, such as gift certificates, for good behavior, for staying clean and attending school. Failure has consequences, and some participants end up jailed in Juvenile Hall.

About 130 teens a year go through the program, and the completion rate is close to 60 percent, according to the county office of Alcohol and Drug Services.

The program involves the Juvenile Court, District Attorney's Office, Probation Department, Public Defender's Office, Health and Human Services Agency and police.

Kansas Cafferty, a counselor, said after the ceremony that the young people who go through Juvenile Drug Court do well compared with their peers who are not in such a highly structured rehab program. "It's the added accountability, and it's the constant supervision," he said.

One of the graduates, Jeffrey J. – who used only the initial of his last name, as is done in Juvenile Court –

recalled his journey through the drug court system.

"When I first started out with drug court I saw no point. I kept going back to my old ways," he said.

He kept getting locked up. But he said he finally realized, "I'm not getting anywhere with my life."

"It meant a lot to me when I got off probation," Jeffrey said. "I felt like a free person again."

"You get this feeling like, 'Damn, I'm free, look at this world. It's a beautiful country,' " he said. "It's worth it."

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