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VIEW SECTIONS

'It Gave Me My Life Back'

DUI Program Helps Habitual Offenders End the Cycle



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Amil Wilder displays his graduation certificate and the book *Keep Going: The Art of Perseverance* given to him by Judge Theresa DiMauro after his completion of the Windsor County DUI Treatment Docket in Windsor Superior Court Friday, February 25, 2016. The program is offered as an alternative sentence for those convicted of multiple DUI offenses. Wilder was one of three graduating the program Friday. (Valley News - James M. Patterson)

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By Nora Doyle-Burr Valley News Staff Writer

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White River Junction — Smiling, Amil Wilder waved a certificate above his head after receiving it from Windsor Superior Court Judge Theresa DiMauro for completing the county's DUI treatment program on Friday.

"Hey, success," he said.

The 18- to 24-month program offers habitual DUI offenders an opportunity to work off some of their jail time by participating in treatment programs, becoming and remaining sober, working, sorting out transportation issues — some earn their licenses back; others do not — and giving back to the community.

"It gave me my life back because I had a serious problem," said Wilder, a Chester resident, during the court's proceedings. "I have the tools and resources I need now to be very, very successful."

Wilder was one of three men who celebrated their graduation from the program at the Windsor County courthouse in White River Junction on Friday. This was the third group to graduate from the program since it began in late 2013. Repeat offenders who qualify for the program may choose to enter it during sentencing.

The DUI court is a pilot program funded through the Governor's Highway Safety Program through a grant from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The 2016 highway safety plan includes \$250,000 for DUI treatment court. Its ostensible aim is to reduce recidivism. Its higher aim, at least judging from Friday's proceedings, is to reclaim lives.

As part of the ceremony, Wilder's probation officer Nick Merrill described Wilder's growth through the course of the program. In their first meeting, Merrill said, Wilder was angry and frequently interrupted Merrill. The day afterward, however, Wilder called to apologize.

"I wanted to let you know that I was very impressed by this," Merrill said.

Wilder had his ups and downs during the four-phase program, Merrill said, but "nothing substance related."

Merrill also celebrated the graduation of Harold Buker, another Chester resident.

He said that Buker had withstood some difficult moments such as when he was approached by a very intoxicated man, looking for a fight. Buker extracted himself from the situation without incident, Merrill said.

"Oftentimes I'm asked if my job is rewarding," Merrill said. "Oftentimes it's not. It's days like today it is."

At the end of the program, participants are required to complete community service projects. Wilder made improvements at a food shelf in Bellows Falls, and Buker built a sliding barn door for the restorative justice center in Springfield, Vt.

The day's third graduate, David Ziegler of Norwich, collected clothing and canned goods for the Haven.

"This was the reason I was supposed to get sober was to help other people," Ziegler said.

He credited the program with saving lives, his own as well as other people on the roads.

As Windsor County state's attorney, David Cahill said when he gets a call that someone in the county has died he wonders if the deceased is "one of you who rode the hamster wheel of the criminal justice system with us and didn't make it."

He said the odds are that 50 percent of the people who are convicted of three DUIs will be back again.

"What we don't want to see is to see you coming back here time and time again," he said.

Instead, he said the state would rather see people receive needed treatment for addiction and underlying mental health issues.

The program's graduates have a less than 10 percent chance of returning for a repeat offense, Cahill said.

"You have gone a long way towards not only ensuring you are hopping off that hamster wheel, but you're going a long way to making the rest of the community safer," he said.

Case manager Aimee Tucker praised the graduates for making it through the program and staying sober.

"It's pretty remarkable just to see the changes," Tucker said in an interview during a reception following the hearing. "The more sober time they have under their belts, the clearer they're thinking."

Prior to the graduation, Judge DiMauro called up about 17 people — one at a time — who are still working through the program. She asked each participant how they were doing with their sobriety, treatment, work, family and other responsibilities.

Some were rewarded with coins for remaining sober for the three weeks that had passed since their last check-in, while others read letters and essays as punishment for transgressions.

Miranda Sprang earned three coins for remaining sober for the previous three weeks. One of the participants who has earned her license back, Sprang has been giving rides to those who do not have theirs.

"Nobody picks up hitchhikers anymore," Sprang said.

For her generosity to others, DiMauro gave her a glitter pencil.

Colby Goodrich, a participant just returning to the program after being away at a treatment program, read a letter to the court. In it, he apologized for lying to officials for three to four months. Though he had initially been committed to the program and to his sobriety, Goodrich said pain in his foot led him to take opiates late last year.

His struggle with addiction stems from emotional trauma he experienced as a child, he said.

"I am a scared, selfish little boy at heart filled with anxiety and fear," he said.

After Goodrich read his letter, the other participants and members of the audience clapped.

DiMauro asked Goodrich to return to the next hearing prepared with a list of things he would like to get out of the program. She also asked him to come up to the bench and shake her hand.

"We will not give up on you," she said.

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