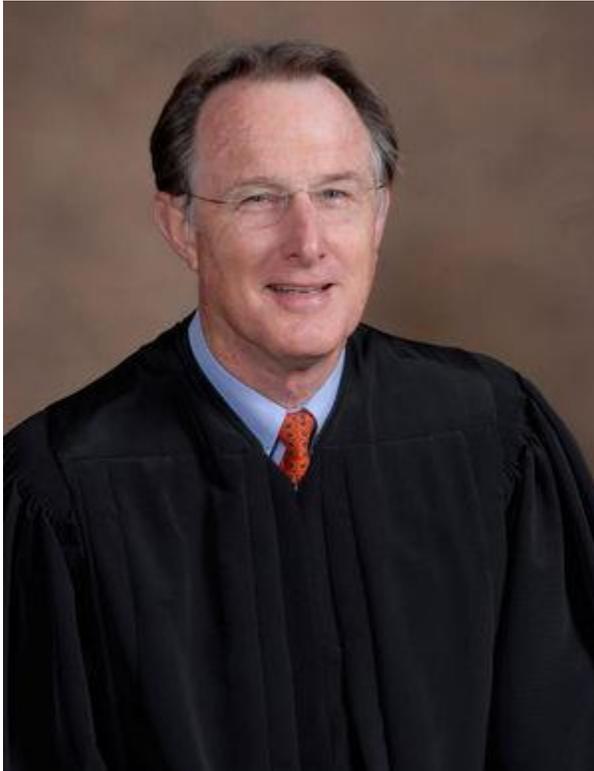


Drug court turning lives around

Participants give candid accounts of how new program is helping them get clean



State Court Judge W. O'Neal Dettmering Jr. oversees Douglas County's Misdemeanor Drug Court, which started in April of 2014. Participants in the accountability court say it has changed their lives and helped them get clean.



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by [Amanda Thomas](#)

Looking at Crystal George today, its hard to imagine that she has spent the last eight years battling a meth addiction.

George walked into the break room of the old courthouse in downtown Douglasville with confidence, eager to share her story. She didn't look like those people on the posters showing the devastating effects meth can have on a person's appearance. With long blonde hair and well-manicured nails, she looked more put together than the meth addicts depicted in the media with rotting teeth and scarred faces.

But looks can be deceiving and George didn't shy away from talking about her struggle over the years. She got hooked on meth when she was 19 years old.

"I had a bad breakup with a boyfriend I had been with for five years, my best friend ended up pregnant by him and I think I was just torn over that," George said.

At that point, she had never touched a drug in her life, but she had a friend whose sister did meth.

"I called him and I said I want some of that stuff that your sister does and he's like no," George said.

But she was persistent and he ended up providing her with meth.

"It was just ongoing from there," George said. "I tried many times to get off it, but couldn't. The longest I think I had ever stayed clean out of that eight years is maybe a month."

While in her late 20s, she was arrested for shoplifting and spent three days in the Paulding County Jail. When she got out of jail, she began Celebrate Recovery and stayed clean for about two months. One night, her parents called saying the cops had just left the house.

"I was wanted for burglary, entering automobiles, theft by taking," George said. "I honestly felt that was it. My life had just fallen apart. I ended up, of course, going to get high that night after I had been clean for two months."

She then went on the run for two weeks. When the authorities finally caught her, she spent 41 days in the Douglas County Jail and entered rehab. The inpatient rehab program was supposed to last nine months, but she only stayed for two.

"I just wasn't happy being away from my family," George said. "It was a very, very structured rehab and somebody that hasn't had responsibility in 10 years doesn't want to do that so I ended up leaving the rehab and going back to jail."

She spent another 41 days in jail and was offered drug court.

Misdemeanor Drug Court

The county's Misdemeanor Drug Court has been in operation since April 1. The idea behind accountability courts is to keep people out of jail and get them the treatment they need to help reduce recidivism. State Court Judge W. O'Neal Dettmering Jr. is the department head over the Misdemeanor Drug Court. Anita Grainger is the director.

There are currently eight participants in the program, which consists of four phases. The first 90 days, participants have to go to 90 meetings and there is also a drug testing component.

"It's eight to 10 times and that happens in the second 90 days too," Grainger said. "We don't let up on them in the second 90 days in drug testing. The meetings do drop off, but the contact is frequent. In the first phase, I see them two to three times a week. I have face-to-face contact with every participant two to three times a week in phase one because they come up here twice a week for treatment and we have court every other week."

Her meetings with participants decrease in phase two.

“They get to phase two and it’s sort of like, ‘oh, I miss you guys,’ “ Grainger said. “But we still see each other. I make sure I’m here on treatment nights and I see them on court days. I set up a one-on-one meeting once a month at least so that we can just sit and chat, make sure everything is going well. I’m very pleased with our program.”

When it comes to accountability courts, judges have to almost “unthink” the way they do court, according to Dettmering. During misdemeanor drug court, he stands down on the floor with participants, dressed in a coat and tie.

“It’s a lot less formal,” Dettmering said. “In regular courts, it’s more about punishment and looking after the public with not as much regard to the defendant.”

But there’s a big treatment component to drug court.

“It’s different because we’re looking at the bigger picture of not just you did something wrong (and) you’ve got to be punished,” Dettmering said. “It’s what caused this? What’s going on? How do we stop that kind of behavior?”

There is also an incentives component, according to Grainger. Small prizes are offered to participants who never had a late payment or is always on time for group meetings. Participants can also be rewarded for something like finding out someone’s car broke down and giving them a ride.

As participants get to know each other, they become like family.

“That was one thing I did not expect,” Dettmering said. “They tend to group up and they start caring about one another. A great deal of the treatment is that they have people caring about them at a time that’s really tough, then they end up quit worrying about themselves so much and start caring about somebody else.”

Douglas County has one of two misdemeanor drug courts in the state. Cherokee County has the other one.

“We feel like we’re having some successes,” Grainger said. “I feel like we’re affecting some individuals. We’ve got some that we’re having to work real hard at, some that are coming along rather nicely. But it’s good to know that the idea of accountability courts — the treatment component of it — is working. It makes us all as a team feel like, yay, we’re affecting some people’s lives.”

A coalition of local businesses and civic leaders have set up a foundation to help support both of the county’s drug and DUI courts. START is a nonprofit group that supports the work of the DUI/Drug Court program by providing education about addiction and identifying community resources that will help participants succeed. Those resources include scholarships for people that aren’t able to pay the participant fee and to help participants get jobs.

The hardest part — getting started

George has been in drug court since July. She admits that the first phase was difficult for her because she didn’t know responsibility.

“It was like the first day I had woke up and I was officially on the drug court,” George said.

She got up every morning and called the hotline a 9 a.m. to see if she had to be drug tested that day.

“They want you to go to seven classes a week,” she said. “It’s rough. It’s definitely something to be proud of at the end of that 90 days because I’m like, ‘whoa, I didn’t even know I could do that.’ “

George entered phase two in October and now has to take two classes a week. She expects to move up to phase three in January.

"I love the program and can genuinely say that I feel like this is my family," she said. "They've taught me responsibility. They've taught me how to control my mind. That's a big thing because you know when you're out there on drugs for so long, you have no control at all."

Now she has a great job and just recently bought a new car. But the number one thing drug court has done for George is help restore her relationship with her family. She doesn't have kids, but is really close to her niece and nephew.

"I wasn't allowed to see them for a year, of course, because they didn't trust me with them," George said. "They didn't want them in my car. They didn't know where I was going to take them. When I got in the drug court, I was like, you know what? I'm not going to let that hold bondage over me anymore. I am going to do what I need to do and if God wants that in my life, then he'll put that in my life."

After about two months of being in the program, her niece called and said she wanted to spend the day with her.

"She said, 'My mom said you could come get us,'" George said. "That was a huge thing. That was my first experience of like wow, you know what? This is really working out because I had been waiting on that for so long."

Not only has she reconnected with her family, but she also got the opportunity to develop a relationship with someone she least expected to.

"My experience with judges ain't been good so at first, it was a little nerve racking having to get up in front of a judge," George said. "Now that I've been in the program and I'm in the second phase, it doesn't make me nervous to get up there. I almost feel like he's family too. Like he cares about us."

The participants also look out for each other.

"We have a hotline we have to call every single day to see if we have to test," George said. "If one of our numbers is on there, two or three other people are texting you that day just in case saying, 'Hey look, heads up, you got testing,' if you forget to call. There has been times I forgot to call and their text saved me."

Drug court has also helped her learn that she can care about herself again.

"The thought of drugs still crosses my mind," George said. "I'm an addict. It's always going to. I have to remember that. But I also have to remember it's one day at a time."

She admits that her parents still struggles with her addiction.

"They're getting used to having their daughter back instead of having to fight with her when she comes in about everything," George said. "We still have disagreements, but I know how to handle it now."

Earl Dickerson's success story

Earl Dickerson just entered phase three. His journey to drug court began after he was pulled over while on his way home from work.

"The officer claimed that he smelled marijuana in the car and found a small amount," Dickerson said. "From there, I had to go court and then the program was offered to me."

While the program was hard in the beginning, it's turning into something positive for him.

"I'm maintaining, still having some ups and downs," Dickerson said. "But overall, it's a good program. For someone really struggling with addiction, it's very promising."

He began smoking marijuana in high school over 20 years ago.

"I graduated in '85," Dickerson said. "I stopped on occasion to get jobs."

Since being in the program, he has found that he can actually do without the drug and accomplish things he always thought he needed marijuana to help him do. Some of things included balancing his checking account and paying bills.

"(Marijuana) wasn't helping me accomplish anything really," Dickerson said. "It was really setting me back."

Marijuana affected the way he spoke to people and his ability to handle situations in a mature manner. He also admits that there is less stress not having to worry about police.

"If they get behind me and I know I'm not speeding or anything, I really don't have anything to be nervous about," Dickerson said.

He is also able to interact better with his wife and two kids.

"We talk more," Dickerson said. "I'm aware of a lot more things now."

'The best thing that could ever happen to me'

Getting in a bad car wreck while driving under the influence of alcohol may be enough of a wake up call to get someone to turn their life around. But that wasn't the case for Amber, who got in a wreck on Sept. 11, 2013. She got put on probation in February and violated her probation in May.

She used to do meth and had been clean for four years, but the drug found its way back into her life. She spotted the drug in her friends purse while looking for something else. She then took a little bit of the drug and ate it.

"I had done it two days before court thinking I wasn't going to get drug tested because I had just got drug tested Friday," Amber said. "I done it one time and I think that's the Lord's way of saying, 'You're going to get caught this time,' because it could have spiraled out of control."

She was ordered to spend 36 days in jail.

"I'm used to if I get in trouble somebody could always bail me out," Amber said. "Well, I was in violation of probation so momma and daddy and husband could not bail me out. Being in there for 36 days opened up my eyes because I've never been away from my kids — period."

When the judge offered drug court, she didn't know if she could do it.

"Well, he was going to let me stay in jail until January and my husband's like, 'You're going to do that,' and it's the best thing that could ever happen to me," Amber said. "He let me out June the 17th."

She is now in phase three and says drug court saved her life.

"I've never been sober like this," Amber said. "I've always had something in my system whether it be alcohol or a pain pill or smoking a joint, just always something. I have not felt this good since high school. My kids notice a big difference. My family, all the trust is there now and the relationships."

She also got a job and her driver's license back.

"Life is great," Amber said.

She admits that Dettmering was hard on her.

"He said he didn't think I was going to make it," Amber said. "He said I was going to be his poster child and I'm just sailing right through it. It's amazing."

She finds it funny that Dettmering has become like family.

"I never thought I'd be having brownies and cake with him," Amber said.

She recommends drug court for anyone struggling with addiction.

"They're here to help you," Amber said. "Fail a drug test, you're going to go back to jail. But they're not going to let you fail. They're going to keep you in jail until you get everything out of your system. Once you get in this program, you have no other choice but to get your life straight because you'll just have to stay in it. You can turn a year program into four years if you want to. But you're going to get right so you might as well do it right the first time."