

Drug Court...from Page 1A

is “A Life Transformed,” and that is exactly what happens when graduates submit themselves to the rigors of the program, which includes two years of unannounced surveillance visits, three days a week of classes with homework, random and often drug screenings, the requirement of a steady job and more.

Getting accepted into the program, which doesn't take drug dealers or violent offenders, is the start of a second chance that each participant must decide they want to earn.

Otherwise, they go to jail.

And on Thursday, Dec.

22, five program participants joined the ranks of more than 20 others who in the last year and a half have not only avoided jail time, but have overcome addictions that had taken control of their lives.

Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge Stanley Gunter oversaw the ceremony, signing graduation certificates for participants and awarding them each a special coin to carry around in their pocket, a physical reminder of what they'd overcome and the investment they'd made in themselves.

District Attorney Jeff Langley signed orders for two of the graduates to dismiss

their charges upon successful completion of the program.

Lamar Paris, sole commissioner of Union County, spoke on how proud he was of each graduate, and announced that the installation of the new modular units that will house the drug court offices would soon be completed.

Friends and family members spoke on behalf of the graduates, and many messages of hope were shared with attendees who were themselves going through the program and looking forward to their own graduation ceremonies down the road.

In closing, Judge Gunter offered his unique perspective on the changing face of the criminal justice system.

“From 1972 to 1992, my father served as superior court judge in the Mountain Judicial Circuit, which included this county,” said Judge Gunter. “He would come home after dealing with persons that had addiction problems, and would be frustrated because they would come back time and time again.

“He could not fix them, and he knew the prison system couldn't fix them either, but that's all he had. There was a drug court in existence back then, but it wasn't well known – that was down in Miami, Florida. That program has grown, and now it's nationwide.”

Judge Gunter imparted his belief that accountability courts will help to shape the future of the criminal court system in America, with all kinds of programs becoming available to address problems of mental health, those who



North Enotah Drug Court Coordinator Barbara Honaker with Case Manager Rebecca Fowler

have gotten DUIs and more.

“It's a tool that I'm grateful to have and I wish my father had had,” said Judge Gunter of the drug court program. “It's been my honor and pleasure to serve as the drug court judge here in North Enotah, and to get to know the people that come through here.”

The success rate of the program has been remarkably high, right at 89 percent, considering successful participants as being graduates who do not go on to repeat their past offenses.

“There always has been and there always will be some addiction problems, but this program can minimize it, this program can give people hope and a chance at success,” said District Attorney Langley. “It's not going to work for

everyone, but it can give a lot of people a chance at success they didn't have before.”

The Fellowship of the Hills Church assisted the program in providing refreshments for after the graduation, and friends and family members gathered with graduates to enjoy the

reception that followed.

Barbara Honaker is drug court coordinator for the North Enotah Drug Court, and she makes a difference in people's lives every day with the help of other compassionate individuals associated with administering the program.



Cars on the roadside are said to be the cause of recent wildfires in Lumpkin and Union counties. This is one of the cars on U.S. 129 in Lumpkin County.

Fires...

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a serious danger to hikers in the area, and the Appalachian Trail is closed from Neel's Gap to Tesnatee Gap. Crews worked to evacuate all hikers from the trail, and provided structure protection to cabins nearby. The fire is also around 200 acres in size and was showing little movement with 6- to 8-inch flame lengths and backing uphill. The highway south from Neel's Gap to Turners Corner in Lumpkin County was expected to have increased emergency responder traffic. Road closures were possible.

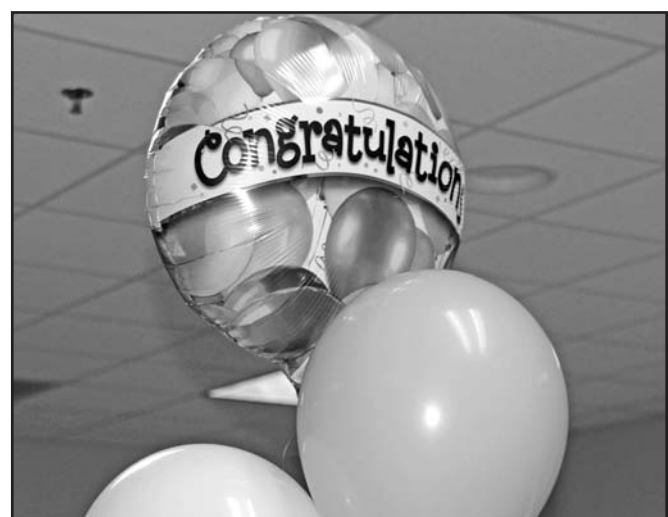
Please check ahead for activity in these areas and avoid if necessary to allow firefighters to do their work and keep everyone safe.

Both wildfires appear to be the result of vehicle fires that escaped onto the forest floor. The terrain is extremely steep with many rocky cliffs and difficult to access. Even with recent rains, we remain in drought conditions, and fires can easily escape.

Please, stay vigilant and do your part to help prevent wildfires during this unusual season of high fire danger.



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris is the keynote speaker for the December drug court graduation.



In order to safeguard the accomplishments and privacy of those who have completed the drug court accountability program, the North Georgia News has chosen not to publish the identities of the five graduates from Union and Towns counties.