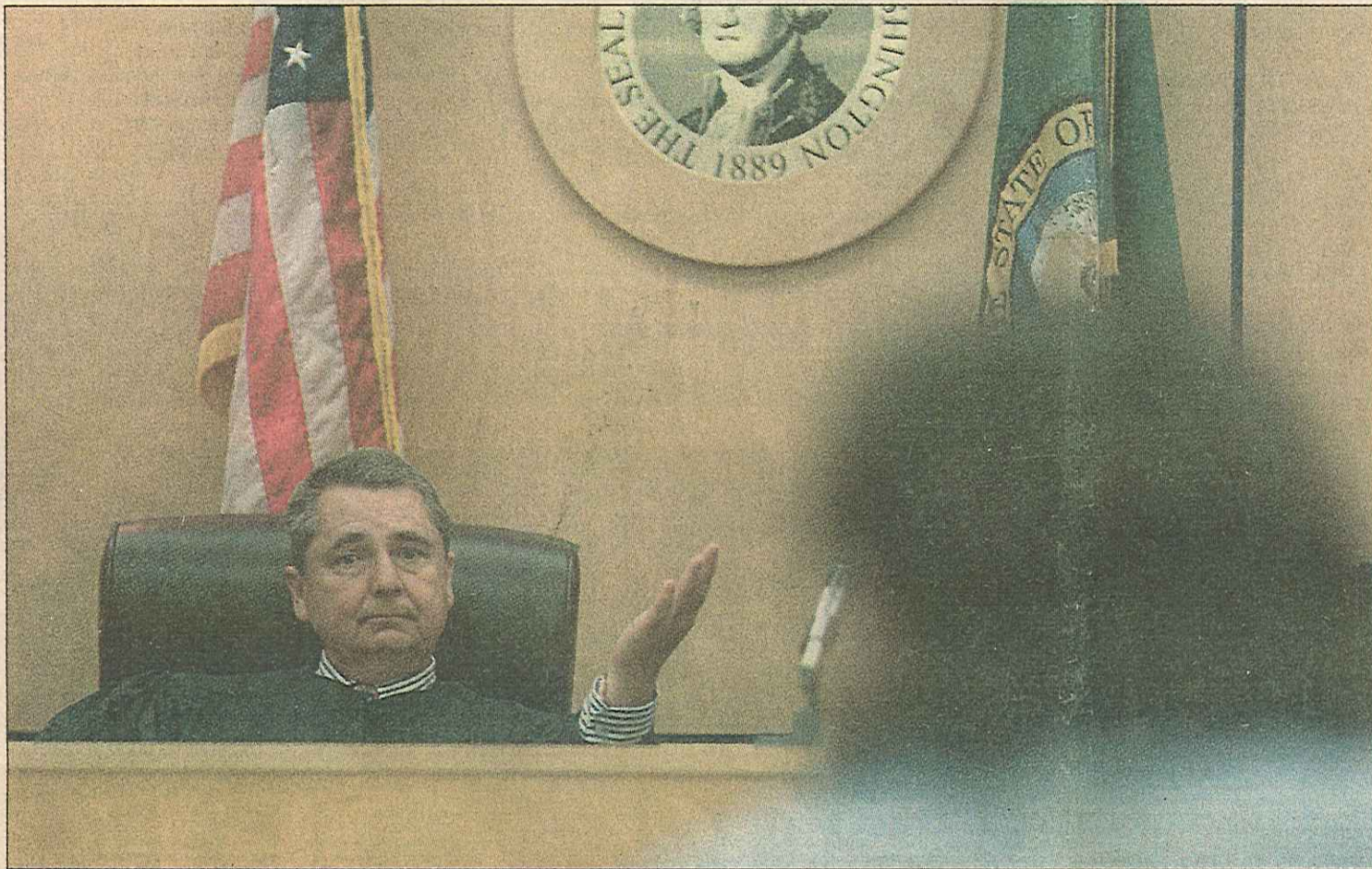




DRUG COURT

Meting out 2nd chances



Geff Hinds/The News Tribune

Pierce County Superior Court Judge D. Gary Steiner has presided over Drug Court since its founding 13 months ago.

Pierce County's year-old program is beginning to show some successes, giving drug users the opportunity to beat their habits and take control of their lives

Stories by John Gillie
The News Tribune

It will be more than a routine ceremony.

When one man and one woman graduate from Pierce County Drug Court Dec. 15, it will be official recognition that they have kept at bay the demons of addiction that led to their arrests a year ago.

It also will be solid evidence that the county's yearlong experiment at rehabilitating drug addicts can work.

"I think I've got a new perspective on life," said one of the soon-to-be-graduates, who used various drugs for two decades before she was arrested about a year ago for cocaine possession. "Drugs just don't seem so appealing when you've been through the program."

And for the judges, prosecutors, drug treatment counselors, defense lawyers and county officials who created the program in October 1994, it will be cause for celebration.

"This is the kind of result we've been working for," said Pierce County Superior Court Judge D. Gary Steiner, the Drug Court's first magistrate.

The program grew out of a concern that while jail kept drug offenders off the streets for a limited

time, it didn't help them solve underlying problems that inevitably led to another arrest.

A group of local law enforcement and court officials, including the Superior Court judges, Pierce County Prosecutor John Ladenburg and Department of Assigned Counsel Director Jack Hill, studied drug court programs in Miami, Portland and other locales before starting the program last year.

Although the rules differed somewhat from those in other programs, the basic idea was the same: Give a select group of drug offenders a yearlong outpatient treatment program instead of jail.

The results so far are encouraging. Although just two of the 76 people who entered the program in the past 13 months are ready to graduate, records show that 50 percent of the entrants are still participating. Many of them are nearing the end of their treatment.

If only 30 percent of Pierce County Drug Court's participants succeed, the program will have matched the national norm. Steiner believes the program will do much better than that.

The program is highly selective.



One man's battle

■ Drug Court's first participant was a former logger who stayed clean for more than 60 days during treatment but has since disappeared. Raymond Clark opened his life over the past year, sharing successes as well as darker moments with photographer Wes Pope and reporter John Gillie. **Back page.**

■ Judge Steiner: A patient man who won't be pushed around. **A13.**

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Drug Court

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No one convicted or charged with drug dealing or a violent crime is considered. Candidates must be willing to spend a year or more in treatment to succeed or accept a sure jail term if they fail.

Screeners selected the 76 participants in a review of the cases of 1,008 drug defendants.

Those who complete the program and show they have taken to heart what they have learned by abstaining from drugs can then graduate and receive a dismissal of the drug charges that brought them to court.

Treatment consists of group and individual counseling and acupuncture to reduce the craving for drugs.

Drug tests are administered frequently, with the results reported periodically to the judge. Ordinarily, a single relapse won't merit jail time, but repeated drug use or failure to attend counseling or testing sessions earns participants jail days.

If the participants repeatedly fail, they are dismissed from the program and given an automatic jail sentence, sometimes for a longer term than they might have received had they bypassed Drug Court.

Raymond Clark, the Drug Court's first participant, for instance, quit the program in July. The court issued a warrant for his arrest. When he returns to court, he faces a strong likelihood of a nine-month sentence instead of the three months he otherwise would have faced.

Although the program is no panacea, it is far more effective than jail, Pierce County Councilman Dennis Flannigan says. Flannigan, who chairs the Governor's Commission on Substance Abuse, contends that jail simply warehouses addicts without rehabilitating them.

"It's been my experience that treatment works," said Flannigan, who headed a drug abuse prevention agency for eight years before he entered politics.

"It may not work on the day you want it to. It may not work the first time or the second time or even the fifth time, but it works eventually."

Tacoma Police Chief Ray Fjetland said Drug Court is one of the most innovative ideas he has seen in his 25 years in law enforcement.

"I think it's important because Drug Court was founded by a coalition of law enforcement people, people who are committed to working together to help people change, not just to give them due process."

DRUG COURT BOX SCORE

A look at who's in, who's out and how participants have fared as of Nov. 29 in Pierce County's pioneering program.

Who's in

Defendants admitted to Drug Court **76**

Drug Court participants sent to inpatient treatment **15**

Drug usage while in program

Used drugs one or more times **42**

Didn't use drugs **11**

Left program before drug use tested **23**

Participants' program status

Participating satisfactorily **38**

Failed program and sentenced to jail **28**

Active warrants for arrest **8**

Jailed, fate to be determined **2**

Source: Pierce County Alliance

Jacie Chun/The News Tribune

"It's important because it's a program that nurtures people and gives them the tools to change, but holds them accountable if they fail."

Money for the program has been harder to come by than praise. Pierce County started Drug Court with \$98,000 to pay for treatment of offenders. The salaries for judges, prosecutors and public defenders come from their offices' regular budgets.

When federal funding didn't come through in July and October, the county provided an additional \$64,000 to keep the program running through Jan. 1.

Pierce County Executive Doug Sutherland has included \$175,000 in his 1996 budget for the program, about \$75,000 less than was sought.

The program is seeking \$75,000 from the City of Tacoma, said Terree Schmidt-Whelan, executive director of the Pierce County Alliance, the nonprofit agency that provides counseling for program participants.

City Manager Ray Corpuz said he is reluctant to set a precedent by using city money to pay for what basically is a county responsibility: running the Superior Court system.

Schmidt-Whelan said the prospect for federal funding next year has improved.

Meanwhile, Gov. Mike Lowry has asked Drug Court programs in King, Pierce and Spokane counties to submit funding requests to him.

Steiner wants to see the program continue. "This is a program that deserves to be funded," he said, "because it works."