Eau Claire County recognizes treatment courts’ volunteers

By Joe Knight
Leader-Telegram staff

David Backstrom spent 37 years in law enforcement, working for the Eau Claire Police Department and later as police chief at UW-Eau Claire. A Vietnam War veteran, he now works with veterans who have ended up on the wrong side of the law.

For his efforts, he was honored by Eau Claire County’s newest treatment court — Veterans Court.

Backstrom was among the volunteers working with treatment courts to be honored Tuesday night by the County Board. The courts work with offenders who have drug and alcohol addictions or mental problems, rather than keeping them in jail.

Veterans seem to respond better when they are mentored by other veterans, said Susan Schaffer, coordinator for the court. "It's vets helping vets," said Schaffer, herself a four-year Navy veteran.

Backstrom started out as a mentor and soon became the coordinator of mentors, which requires matching mentors with participants in the program, and training each mentor for three hours, said Eau Claire County Judge Bill Gabler. Some of the vets Backstrom mentored have become friends; one is a regular fishing buddy, Gabler said.

As a member of the local faith-based social justice group JONAH — Joining Our Neighbors, Advancing Hope — Jackie Christner, a retired Fall Creek teacher, served on its TIP, or Treatment Instead of Prison, committee.

Her advocacy got her placed on the advisory committee for the relatively new Mental Health Court, but it had a personal side. Her son Ryan had mental health problems, frequently ran afoul of the law and ended up in jail.

Tuesday night, Christner and others also were honored for their volunteer work in treatment courts.
Ryan entered the program and appeared to be doing well, but on New Year's Day 2010 he died from an overdose of a painkiller he had been taking for a back problem.

Despite her loss, Christner continues on an advisory committee for treatment courts and to lobby, with JONAH, for increased funding for treatment courts.

Dr. Jenifer Bassett of Eau Claire Medical Clinic stopped in to watch the Drug Court in progress one day and was impressed with what she saw. She joined the Drug Court team, offering medical advice for participants. "She advocates for our participants," said Judge Lisa Stark.

Nancy Orth, owner of Starr's Sister Salon in Eau Claire, was honored for providing free hair stylings to women in a treatment court for offending moms — AIM Court, for Alternative to Incarcerating Mothers.

"When we started AIM Court we had no money for anything or any incentives for our participants," said Darla Midtun of the court's team, before the presentation. "We thought, well, lets check out community people we know. I went to Nancy. She was extremely enthusiastic from the get-go ... It's not always easy to come up with money for things like haircuts when you're in treatment court and a single mom."

Susan Wolfgram, a professor of human development at UW-Stout in Menomonie and formerly a therapist at Mayo Clinic Health Systems for 15 years, was honored for the Stop and Think program she runs, often with the help of students, at the Eau Claire County Jail.

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