

Veterans Court celebrates first graduates

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DeKalb Circuit Judge Kurt Grimm, left, congratulates Kurtis and Trey, the first graduates of the DeKalb County Veterans Treatment Court, at a ceremony Thursday in DeKalb Circuit Court at Auburn.

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AUBURN — Many victories were apparent in DeKalb County Veterans Treatment Court Thursday, with proceedings that culminated in the court's first graduation ceremony.

The DeKalb County Veterans Treatment Court is led by DeKalb Circuit Judge Kurt Grimm. It began serving veterans involved with DeKalb County courts in March 2018 and is an alternative to traditional case processing of veterans who are offenders.

Successful completion of the program allows eligible participants the opportunity to have their charges dismissed, be granted a reduction from a felony to a misdemeanor, or to not have a further sentence imposed. Participants agree to complete a substance-abuse and/or mental health treatment program, remain alcohol- and drug-free, meet with a veteran mentor and complete other program requirements as determined by the veterans court team.

Thursday afternoon, Grimm conducted an abbreviated veterans court hearing, followed by a graduation ceremony for two participants, Trey and Kurtis. Their last names were withheld for privacy.

During the official court hearing, Grimm heard progress reports from other participants and their mentors.

When reviewing the progress of one veteran, Grimm noted that the veteran has been in the program for 254 days.

“You’ve never, ever violated one single rule” Grimm told the man, describing his efforts as “extraordinary.”

“He’s doing really good,’ the veteran’s mentor affirmed.

“How are things going?” Grimm asked another veteran.

“Great, sir,” the veteran replied with confidence.

Grimm commended the efforts and successful participation of one veteran in the program for 285 days.

“You’re doing fantastic. When I look at the progress you’ve made, it’s thrilling. It’s absolutely thrilling,” Grimm said.

To another veteran participant, Grimm said, “Everything I hear about you makes me proud.”

With official case hearings complete, Grimm moved into the celebratory aspect of the afternoon that recognized the success of its first two graduates.

“It is a big deal to me. You can’t have a graduation unless you have successful participants. I’m here to tell you I have successful participants,” Grimm said.

U.S. Rep. Jim Banks, R-3rd, was the guest speaker.

“I applaud the court’s commitment to providing a second chance for these American heroes, and I applaud your significant investment of time, effort and commitment to completing this program. I am confident that you will utilize the training and expertise that you’ve gained during your service to contribute to our workforce, region and the greater good of our society,” Banks told the graduates.

“Gentlemen, you both have the opportunity to serve as a shining example for future graduates of this program and our entire veteran community. And thank you so much for your service to our country. I look forward to watching you grow and succeed in all you do.”

Grimm gave each graduate a special patch and a rock that symbolized everything they did in veterans court and “the journey that we took.”

“You have to continue walking forward. ... I hope you’ll always throw that rock forward,” Grimm said. “I am tremendously proud of you.”

DeKalb County Deputy Prosecutor Joshua Byanski presented the two graduates with papers dismissing their criminal charges.

The ceremony concluded with the playing of “Taps” by trumpeter Robert E. Prinzing Jr., who, Grimm said, played “Taps” at the Twin Towers site in New York City during the removal of the remains of the New York City fire chief.

After the ceremony, graduates Trey and Kurtis reflected on their time in the program.

A Marine Corps veteran, Trey said he appreciated the help and support of all who guided him through the program.

“I learned more about myself than anything,” Trey said. “I can get through it, even if I find myself between a rock and a hard place.”

“I never realized in DeKalb County there were so many people dedicated to the support of veterans in their time of need. They showed compassion and dedication to the mission to help us,” said Kurtis, an Army veteran. “It was a lifesaving experience ... It helped me develop tools for everyday life, to face problems head-on and not carry them.”