

Columbia Missourian: Veterans Treatment Court helps veteran get back on track

By Katherine Knott

COLUMBIA — When the St. Louis Cardinals lost to the San Francisco Giants in Game 5 of the National League Championship Series in October, Donald Stevens — who drinks a lot of coffee by any standard — had to make two more pots. He said the urge to drink alcohol again is powerful, but his resolve is stronger. And the coffee helps.

"(Alcohol) hadn't gotten me anywhere but in the gutter," he said. "The only direction to go from there is up, so I just quit."

Stevens has now been sober 30 months. He says he hasn't had a drink since May 1, 2012, the day he was arrested in the parking lot of Columbia Mall for driving while intoxicated. As a result of that day's trip to the mall, Stevens has served time in prison, lost his license and missed his daughter's graduation from MU.

Just over two years later, on Sept. 29, his 55th birthday, he graduated from the Veterans Treatment Court for Boone and Callaway counties. Stevens is one of the first to complete the program in its entirety since it started in July 2013.

The Veterans Treatment Court was established to create a support system for veterans who have been convicted of any crime, except sexual assault and murder. The court is focused on veterans struggling with mental health issues or substance abuse. For most participants, it's an alternative to incarceration.

To participate in the veterans court, the veteran must qualify for Veterans Affairs benefits since the treatment integral to the program is coordinated with the Truman Veterans' Hospital, court coordinator Clayton VanNurden said.

A toxic mixture

Combat veterans are at a high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder. And quite often, PTSD and substance abuse go hand in hand, with one in three veterans having both, according to the VA. One in 10 veterans who use the VA have a problem with alcohol or other drugs, according to the VA.

When substance abuse, mental health or alcoholism are coupled with other factors like unemployment or homelessness, veterans can find themselves in legal trouble. A 2004 report from the Department of Justice found that 10 percent of people incarcerated were veterans. That number is now estimated at about 9 percent.

The New York judge who had the idea for a special court for veterans in 2008 saw the impact on the docket in his mental health and drug court. With an increasing number of veterans appearing before him with criminal charges, he thought more could be done to ensure they were connected to the services they needed.

The partnership between the veterans hospital and the court has benefited the hospital, Veterans Justice Outreach coordinator Danielle Easter said. She said there are fewer missed appointments and better compliance with the programs.

"It has assisted veterans who have been recently discharged from the military to easily transition into the VA health care system," Easter said of the court.

According to Justice For Vets, a branch of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, there are now about 175 Veteran Treatment Courts nationwide, and Justice For Vets wants to see even more.

In Missouri, there are courts in St. Louis, Jackson, Pulaski, St. Charles and Boone counties. Southeastern Missouri has a regional veterans court division that serves 23 counties. Cole County is adding a court as well, presiding circuit judge Pat Joyce announced in October.

Ninety-six veterans have graduated from the six state courts since 2008, state treatment court coordinator Angela Plunkett said in an email.

Spiraling into addiction

Stevens' trouble started in 2008 when he lost his job at the Hubbell Inc. plant in Centralia, Missouri, after 12 years there. He didn't have a backup plan, and jobs were hard to find in the midst of the recession.

That was when the drinking started to pick up.

"I was spiraling out of control," he said.

Drinking had already been a part of his life. Alcohol was like coffee — always easily available.

"The addiction was there forever, you know," he said. "I didn't even really consider it an addiction because it had been such a part of my life."

Frustrated with the unsuccessful job hunt and bummed out by life, Stevens picked up a 12-pack and headed to Cosmopolitan Park for a liquid breakfast on that May 1. Hungry after slamming all 12 beers, he decided to head over to the Cafe Court at the Columbia Mall.

In the mall's parking lot, he was pulled over and arrested, and his life was set on a new track — all before noon. Resurfacing from that day has taken more than two years.

Charged with a Class C felony, Stevens faced seven years in prison or a \$5,000 fine. He served 210 days in jail, and now after graduating from the Court, he's on probation.

Getting help

Stevens enlisted in the Army at 19 because he "wanted to party and see the world," he recalled.

From 1979 to 1985, he worked as a radio operator. For four-and-a-half years, he was based in Germany.

His five years in the Army made him eligible for services from the veterans hospital and the Veterans Treatment Court. Once he was released from jail, Stevens entered the compensated work therapy program at the veterans hospital. Easter recruited Stevens to the program while he was in jail.

Through the program, he was able to work at the veterans hospital and live in VA-sponsored housing. For the first time in four years, he had a steady job.

"My CWT (compensated work therapy) experience was a good one," he said. "People I worked with and the things I did, I enjoyed doing, so I went to work every day because I liked being there. And I made money."

He lived at the Salvation Army Harbor House, the Phoenix Health Programs and housing from the VA.

Having roommates in a communal living arrangement wasn't for him.

"I like to live in a semi-neat atmosphere," he said. "I like my music, my movies, my Cardinals, mine, mine. I don't want to share or ask permission. Community living isn't for me. I get along with people great, but I don't want to have to share a bathroom or do their dirty dishes."

He paid \$210 a month for the transitional housing, and the low cost allowed him to save up to move. In March, Stevens moved into his current place, a one-bedroom apartment just off Stadium and Broadway. It has a porch where he can grill.

While Easter and the staff at the veterans hospital helped Stevens get back on his feet, court coordinator VanNurden and the veterans court worked on his legal problems.

"It can ease your sins a little bit," Stevens said. "Comply with the veterans court and your five-year probation can be knocked down to a year and a half."

Stevens said that he has "been a good boy," so he only has to call in to the probation office once a month.

Strict requirements

In the first year, the Veterans Treatment Court graduated eight out of 11 veterans for a rate of 72 percent, VanNurden said.

He said it was a pleasant surprise to have so many graduate, given the success rate of the other treatment courts.

The overall graduation rate for treatment courts is 60 percent, according to a fact sheet from the Drug Courts Coordinating Commission.

VanNurden credited the higher rate to the support and accountability built into the veterans court.

In order to graduate, participants must be in the program for at least a year. It requires weekly court appearances in front of 13th Associate Circuit Judge Michael Bradley, mandatory counseling and treatment at the veterans hospital and weekly meetings with a volunteer mentor. The treatment is either for substance abuse or behavioral health and depends on the veteran's individual needs.

While it can be tough to manage all that the court requires, it's on the veteran to do it all — find transportation and balance work and the various meetings involved with the program, VanNurden said. To ensure compliance, the court also does weekly random drug testing.

"I'm a firm believer that if we can't keep them sober, they are going to lose the structure," VanNurden said.

Stevens didn't need a drug test to keep him on the straight and narrow. In the weekly court meetings, the veterans who failed the drug test or other program requirements were handcuffed and taken to jail in sight of their peers.

"That's not going to be me," Stevens said of watching people get sanctioned. "I didn't want people to see me cuffed like that. That has to be the most helpless feeling in the world because there is not a thing you can do about it. Not only that, you probably feel like you are only two inches tall because everybody is seeing you get cuffed."

Moving forward

Today, Stevens is almost back to where he was before 2008, but without the booze, he said. He installs appliances with his brother-in-law, and on his days off, he puts together models — he's currently working on an airplane. It keeps his mind occupied with something other than drinking.

But the temptation isn't gone. He expects it to be greater with the holidays and family gatherings coming up.

"Everybody knows I am trying to quit and I am quitting, but there is always one that likes to try to shove it in my face," he said. "'Oh, c'mon, Don. One isn't going to hurt you.' Well, I have never stopped at one. I can't just have one. If I have one, I am going to have 12."

To resist temptation, Stevens said he thinks about what could happen if he got caught.

"I don't want to go back to jail," he said. "Jail sucks, it really does."