

Mental Health Treatment Court: It works!

by pat kimbrough enterprise staff writer

pkimbrough@hpe.com

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HIGH POINT - After nearly 20 years of battling addictions to cocaine and other drugs, it was probably a safe bet that another stint in jail was not going to get Priscilla Anderson to change her ways.

Anderson, who turns 34 this month, had amassed a long rap sheet of drug-related offenses when she entered the Guilford County Mental Health Treatment Court in High Point last year. After a rocky start in the program that led to a stint behind bars when she failed a drug test, Anderson found help at an inpatient treatment facility. The move got her started on a major lifestyle change, and last month, she became one of the court's seven graduates.

"I was ready to get clean. I was tired of the things I was doing," said Anderson, who pleaded guilty to possession of drug paraphernalia and driving while license revoked last year and was enrolled in the mental health court as part of her sentence. "I looked forward to coming to court. When you find people out there that really want to help you, it makes all the difference."

Anderson said the program also helped her get a handle on the depression with which she's struggled much of her life. She's been clean for seven months - by far her longest-ever stretch - and says she's determined to stay away from the people and places in High Point that contributed to her problems. To that end, she's relocated to Greensboro and lives in a house for recovering addicts where everyone is required to help pay the rent and maintain the home. She has another year of probation to serve.

"She's president of the house and has taken a lot of responsibility," said Natalie Williams, case manager for the mental health court in High Point. "She doesn't have a job but is trying to go back to school to get her GED. She's really a perfect example of how this program can work."

Williams said one of the goals of the court is to help defendants address the connection between their illness and whatever crime they may have committed. Like Anderson, many of the clients have had regular justice-system contact for years and have racked up a slew of petty charges - second-degree trespassing, intoxicated and disruptive, misdemeanor larceny, and so forth.

"Most of the charges are misdemeanors, but in many, folks are homeless and have a mental illness," said Jon Bellows, trial court administrator in Guilford County. "Our jails and hospitals have sort of become the safety net for folks who are mentally ill, and those who slip through the cracks of the normal mental health system generally wind up in jail or hospitals."