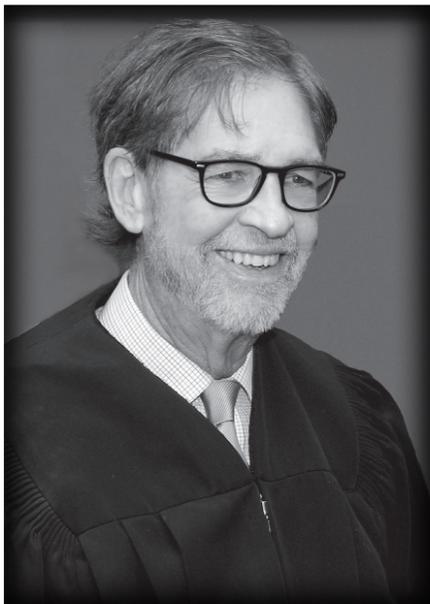


What Goes on at Sarasota's Drug Court?

Emotional, humbling, empowering stories of lives turned around

“People hang in there. This is a complete reorganization of their lives.”

—Judge Andy Owens,
Chief Judge of the Twelfth Judicial Circuit Court



Drug Court for the 12th Judicial Circuit has been in operation for over two decades. Judge Owens and Mr. James (the Drug Court Director) have worked together 16 years. While the entire country has felt the scourge of drug abuse and drug addiction, Florida was also known as a place to get pain pills. When the state finally shut down the “pill mills” addicts were left with few options. Many chose heroin.

This country also has an opioid crisis due to

doctors prescribing drugs like oxycodone etc., for those suffering from pain caused by a myriad of problems from back injury to medical conditions. After the prescription runs out, many find themselves craving what these dangerous drugs deliver. It all adds up to many people being addicted. And without an option or a second chance, they could be headed to jail or prison. Or death.

A day at Drug Court

You enter the Silvertooth Judicial Center on Ringling Blvd., clear security, look up on the board and head up to the third floor. It's 10:15 a.m. and inside the courtroom Judge Owens is meeting with staff and they're engaged in serious conversation.

But out in the hallway, men and women start to congregate. Today they're mostly male, mostly young (under 35), mostly white, but a few women are also coming off the elevator. Some bring a buddy or a parent and one fellow has an attorney and both are wearing suits. The majority wear street clothes. Two men have backpacks.

There's no tension. Most are scanning their phones. Some hug people they've gotten to know. Conversations range from talk of one day getting a

car or what Judge Owens may say to them. “Be honest with him and he'll be more lenient. Do not lie,” one woman tells another. “I didn't want to come today,” the other woman replies. “Don't ever do that,” the woman tells her.

For others it's the more mundane things like where they're working (I hear the names of a few prominent restaurants mentioned). Quite a few talk about “drops” as well as the ins and outs of the legal system. (A “drop” is a drug test or urinalysis that tests for the presence of drugs or alcohol which they're required to do as part of the Drug Court program). Suffice to say, they're all alert, relaxed even happy. There are no guards in sight, which is unusual since this is inside the courthouse and just before an appearance before a judge.

Without anything really happening, they start to line up in front of the door at about 10:45. One man reaches for the door before I do and says, “Here you go, ma'am.” They all file in and choose a seat in the courtroom. Many are holding a piece of paper. Judge Owens has donned the traditional robe, but speaks to them, not at a podium or from the bench, but right in front of them within reach. Everyone goes quiet. Judge Owens thanks them all for showing up since heavy rain and wind made travel difficult on this particular day.

Then he gets to the issue at hand and gives a pep talk. “You're not bad; you made a bad choice,” he reminds them. “You can't change one bit of the past and no one knows the future. Stay focused on now,” he advises. After his pleasant reassurances

he begins the session by honoring two program graduates.

He hands each of them a certificate and a gift of a book. And then the room breaks into loud applause. They both speak, but it's the first fellow who puts it so bluntly. “My choices make my destiny. I have 10 addicted friends. Don't be a toe tag.” His record cleared, he's eligible for financial aid and hopes to go to college. They both march out of the courtroom. One quietly, the other with noticeable determination in his step.

Even more awards come next as more clients progress through the year-long program, closer to completion. It's designed to give them motivation and

manage the program's requirements. Others opt to enter drug treatment centers.

The Judge heads to his more traditional elevated seating and calls out names. One by one they come up and he talks directly to him or her. Everyone else can see and hear all that takes place. One woman has not shown up in over a month. The same with another man. After very little protestation, they are placed in handcuffs and led out. I hear the muttered words “fucked up” from someone seated near me. They are out of the program and must report to jail. It's painful to watch. Even so, the Judge asks for things to be done to see if they can come



Misty Christensen (Counselor), Alfred James (Director), Judge Owens and Casie Baldwin (graduated client)

recognition for what seems like “small stuff” but the “small stuff” is staying off of drugs and following the program's rules exactly. All told there can be as many as 500 clients (which is the preferred term for participants) enrolled in the program that covers both Sarasota and Manatee Counties. Clients work with Drug Court case managers, counselors and probation officers with whom they are required to meet with every week. It doesn't stop there.

Depending on the nature of their actions and their addiction, they must attend sessions with a therapist (addictions) and/or attend meetings like AA and NA. And then there are those “drops” which are mandatory and are scheduled randomly to keep anyone from preparing or trying to outsmart the system — which is hard — not to mention a seriously bad idea. Some people work and

back and enter the program again in the future.

There are several tables of men and women who also work in Drug Court. Alfred James, the Drug Court Program Manager is monitoring the proceedings. Then there are members of the State Attorney's office as well as the Public Defender's office and staff from Probation and Parole. Also there are the case managers and counselors who spend extensive time with each client.

And, since it is still a courtroom, there are two guards plus court clerks recording the proceedings. More people come up to face Judge Owens and quite a few hear an effusive, “Super!” or “I'm proud of you!” Judging by the clients' reactions, you wonder if anyone has ever said that to him or her or if they've ever said that to themselves. Some seem genuinely surprised.

One is going back to school,
continued on the next page

drug court continued



Karina Clarke (Asst. Director), Sabrina Hamilton (Counselor), Terry Drake (Public Defender), Bonnie Kulha (Probation Officer), Misty Christensen (Counselor), Andrew Saputo (Case Manager), Thomas Quigley (Counselor), Judge Andrew Owens, Alfred James (Director), Diane Gray (Probation Officer), Sara Davis (State Atty. coordinator), Rachel Lane (Case Manager) and Adam Haberman (Probation Officer)

one works in a casino of some sort, one is a contractor. "The secret is persistence," the Judge reminds them. Oh, and showing up. To echo the woman in the hallway, ya gotta show up. Turns out one of the women addressing the Judge missed an appointment with her counselor and was dealt a night in jail. Another fellow couldn't even remember what drugs he took and started guessing, even as the judge was holding the report from his drop. A lot more work needed there and not a sound in the room as he has to bear the weight of his inability to stay off drugs in front of everyone.

A tall, young man puts down his backpack and goes to the podium. "You look great!" the judge says. He has progressed to the next level and seems invigorated. I decide to leave the session even though the stories are so fascinating to hear. I walked out with the tall fellow with the backpack. I congratulated him and he thanked me and we chat a bit before arriving in the lobby. It's pouring rain. "Not a day to be riding a bike," he says as he lights up a cigarette. Somehow I think this storm is not the worst thing he's seen.

While it takes commitment to enter and stay in the Drug Court program, it takes a tough, but understanding Judge to make it work. Once out of law school, Judge Owens began practicing law with a firm in Punta Gorda. In 1977 he moved to Sarasota, where he began a civil trial practice with the law firm of Dickinson & Gibbons. A new circuit court judgeship opened up in Sarasota and he applied for it.

Owens was appointed by then-Governor Bob Graham to the new judgeship on the

Twelfth Judicial Circuit back in 1982. He presided over many cases including the horrific murder of Charlie Bruscia. According to his Wikipedia page, "He was one of the driving forces behind the creation of a Mental Health Court in Sarasota" as well as Drug Court.

His long, lanky build suggests, well, hints strongly at being athletic and indeed, many know Judge Owens for his skills on a different court – a basketball court. Taught by his mother (who had played basketball at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia), Owens attended Hillsborough High School in Tampa, where he became a standout basketball player for the Hillsborough Terriers basketball team. He was named as a high school All-American along with Lew Alcindor and Pete Maravich. If you know basketball, that's pretty darn good company to be in.

Owens received athletic scholarships to attend Kentucky and North Carolina, but he accepted a scholarship to attend the University of Florida and played forward for coach Tommy Bartlett's Florida Gators men's basketball team for three seasons from 1967 to 1970. A prolific scorer, he was an All-Southeastern Conference (SEC) selection in 1968 and 1970, and an Academic All-American in 1970. The Seattle SuperSonics selected Owens in the eleventh round of the 1970 NBA Draft, and the New Orleans Buccaneers picked him in the twelfth round of the 1970 ABA Draft. Instead of playing professional basketball, he decided to attend law school.

Sports such as college basketball and indeed, the demands of getting through law school,

require that you must focus. And you can't cut corners by missing practices or not preparing for exams. Judge Owens could be tough on those in his Drug Court, but while he strictly adheres to the Drug Court protocol, you get the sense that he really wants these folks to succeed.

Drug Court's goals are to reduce crime and substance abuse by adult offenders. While its "target" group is nonviolent offenders living in Sarasota County, consider all the others this program affects—partners, parents and children. If one family member has an addiction the whole family suffers.

Clients must be referred into the program and they sign a "contract" with strong reminders of their need to stay in the program. Judge Owens has observed that when they first come in they're not perhaps listening very well; some are simply not focused as the drugs still have an effect on them. Today's heroin is often cut with fentanyl (because it makes it cheaper). Fentanyl is very powerful and can kill you, but an addict doesn't think that way. They may not realize that this program keeps them alive and away from a miserable, tragic, drug-induced death.

If you go online, you can find and read the story of a woman Judge Owens had in his courtroom back in 1997. She had 10 felony convictions on her record including drugs and prostitution. She was also the program's first graduate. Her name is Brenda Owens-Philhower (it should be said she is no relation to the judge) who started using drugs when she was 13. Her life spiraled downward to where she was so addicted to crack co-

caine that she weighed but 87 pounds. Twenty years into her drug habit she found herself in Drug Court and facing a potential 10-year sentence.

She completed the Drug Court program. Then-Governor Jeb Bush presented her with the Point of Light award and also pardoned her. Brenda had asked Bush for the pardon so she could lead Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at Lowell Correctional (a prison for women) in Ocala. From what can also be found online, she went on to starting her own outpatient drug and alcohol recovery program in Ocala called Recovery Road. It gets even better. Judge Owens presided over Owens-Philhower's wedding.

Sarasota's Drug Court will mark its 20th anniversary next month. This progressive program offers its clients "the tools to re-enter society," according to Judge Owens. Yes, they can opt out and get probation if it seems too daunting. But, as he has noticed over the course of his long dedicated time in Drug Court, "People hang in there. It's a complete reorganization of their lives." Since everything in Drug Court has accountability built in, it needs to be said that this Drug Court has an 83-85% success rate. Think of all the lives that have been saved. 

STORY: Louise Bruderle
IMAGES: Evelyn England

Drug Court Locations

- **Manatee County Office**
Manatee County Judicial Center
1051 Manatee Avenue W., Bradenton
(941) 749-3670
- **Sarasota County Office**
Main Plaza
1991 Main Street, Sarasota
(941) 861-8120

Overview of the Program

(this is an edited excerpt from the info given to clients as the begin Drug Court)

- The Sarasota County Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court Programs consist of a four (4) phase intervention program for substance abusive adults who have committed non-violent felony or misdemeanor crimes.

Your participation in the Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court Programs is completely voluntary, that being said, you will determine whether you are successful or not.

Each phase of the Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court is designed to help you confront and overcome various obstacles in your treatment. As you move up in phases, your program requirements will be less, but your personal requirements will increase. Throughout all phases two requirements remain constant, to be crime free and drug free, these are two non-negotiables in the program.

The Sarasota County Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court is designed to be completed in one (1) year, but this time may be prolonged due to lack of progress in the program. Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court participants will be required to reach certain milestones in order to move from one phase to another, these requirements will be reviewed by you and your assigned primary counselor. Once you have reached certain milestones, it is important that you maintain these milestones so that you do not add time to your stay in Drug Court or Enhanced Drug Court.

Drug Court & Enhanced Drug Court is a hybrid or combination of judicial supervision and treatment. As a result, you will be required to report before the court on a regularly scheduled basis while also participating in treatment. It is important that you talk with your primary counselor in order to schedule all your appointments to include group treatment, AA/NA meetings, 1:1 treatment, urine testing, as well as via court sessions. Completion of these responsibilities will result in you maintaining your freedom as well as your progression through the program. These programs are designed to assist non-violent substance abusers that are charged with one or more specific felonies or misdemeanors.