

## Rankin County Youth Drug Court first graduation is Oct. 22

October 17, 2007

The Rankin County Youth Drug Court will celebrate its first graduation on Monday, Oct. 22, at 4 p.m. at the Rankin County Justice Center, 301 East Government Street in downtown Brandon.

The program will be in the County Courtroom on the first floor.

Five teens will graduate – two girls and three boys ranging in age from 16 to 18.

Rankin County Court Judge Thomas Broome will preside.

The guest speaker will be Margo Hemphill of Richland, author of *They're Just Teenagers. What Do You Expect?!?* Hemphill, a motivational speaker, owns the graphic design and promotional products company OneWay, Inc. She is the founder and director of Margo's Cargo Softball, a youth tournament softball program for female athletes.

Members of the news media are invited to attend the graduation. Reporters, photographers and editors are reminded that participants are juveniles and the program is a Youth Court proceeding. **Because of the confidentiality required by law in Mississippi Youth Court matters, members of the media are asked to refrain from publishing or broadcasting any information or photographs which would in any way identify any juvenile participant or family member.**

The Rankin County Youth Drug Court began enrolling participants in November 2006. Twenty juveniles will remain in the program after the graduation, said Youth Court Administrator and Drug Court Coordinator Paul Bowen.

Judge Broome said, "We are proud of these first five graduates, who have set high marks for others to follow in the program."

Changes in behavior and outlook have been dramatic. One is enrolled in college. Several others will graduate from high school next spring.

Judge Broome said, "Many of them came in just wrapped up in low self-esteem, using drugs as a means to escape reality. They have developed a great sense of self-confidence and self-worth. They are capable of doing anything that they set their minds on."

"Grades have improved dramatically, and school attendance," Judge Broome said. "But more importantly, their relationships with their families have improved beyond measure. For some, where they once couldn't stay in the same room with family, they now enjoy being with them and doing things together."

Judge Broome said, "We are excited about the positive impact it is having on the lives of the children and the families who are involved in the program....We are particularly grateful for all of the support we have had from state and local officials in taking this new approach to help take care of our most valuable resource, our children. We believe the program holds great opportunity to make a positive, lasting change in the lives of our children, who are our future."

The program focuses on teens who have appeared before the Youth Court on non-violent delinquent offenses and who have been diagnosed with substance abuse or dependency.

Marijuana and alcohol are among the most prevalent, although there have been a smattering of possession charges involving cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy, prescription drugs and drug paraphernalia, Judge Broome said.

The incident which leads to the Drug Court referral does not have to be a drug offense. Teens

in the Drug Court program have been referred as a result of disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, simple assault, public drunkenness, petty larceny, burglary, auto burglary and shoplifting.

The program does not accept anyone accused of a violent crime or of distribution of drugs.

Participation in Drug Court requires approval and involvement of parents.

Judge Broome said, "Not only does it involve change in the lives of the participants; it also involves educating the family about how best to work with and help somebody who is having difficulties."

The program requires a minimum of eight months to complete. Participants start with inpatient or outpatient treatment, depending on the severity of the drug problem.

Participants who test positive for drugs or violate other conditions of the program while enrolled can get another chance.

"The whole point is to change their conduct. It takes a while to change somebody's habits," Judge Broome said. "We realize there will be setbacks along the way, but it's how you deal with those setbacks and how you deal with responsibility and accountability that matters."

The program operates on sanctions and incentives. The sanctions can range from writing an essay to performing community service to detention for up to 90 days.

Community service assignments have included working with local nonprofit organizations. Teens have sorted clothes donated to Gateway, worked with the Rankin County Human Resource Agency, and assembled bags of donated school supplies. They have also picked up trash.

Judge Broome is looking for more ideas for community service projects in Rankin County. "We would welcome additional community service assignments."

The Rankin County program is one of five juvenile drug courts in the state. Other juvenile programs are in Adams, DeSoto, Hinds and Madison counties. Sixteen adult drug court programs are in operation across the state.

#####