

Drug Court graduates to hear Andy Taggart's tragic loss

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Madison County attorney Andy Taggart and his wife Karen have turned their personal anguish at the suicide of their son Brad into a mission to reach others before drugs drag them down the same path.

Andy Taggart will be the guest speaker May 8 in Walnut Grove at the Eighth Judicial District Drug Court graduation. The ceremony is scheduled for 2 p.m. at the Pine Grove Pentecostal Church, 3379 Pine Grove Road, Walnut Grove.

Fifteen participants are expected to graduate, said Drug Court Coordinator Marcus Ellis. About 170 people from Leake, Neshoba, Newton and Scott counties are enrolled in the Eighth District Drug Court program under the supervision of Circuit Judge Vernon Cotten.

Ellis said, "These graduations represent a long, hard struggle to gain control of addictions, both drug and alcohol related. They are the culmination of rehabilitation programs, extensive aftercare programs, Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, significant staff intervention via random and frequent drug testing, and intensive judicial supervision."

Ellis repeats his mantra about Drug Court graduations: "They are positive proof that Drug Courts *work!*"

Since their son Brad Taggart's death, Andy and Karen Taggart have spoken at churches, to high school groups, and on college campuses. He spoke to a Drug Court gathering for the first time on Oct. 22, 2013, during the Seventeenth Circuit Drug Court graduation in Hernando.

"We were so impressed with the program, and with the need to continue to expand drug court services," Taggart said in an interview last fall.

Taggart, an attorney, author, frequent political commentator and former chief of staff to the late Gov. Kirk Fordice, is angry. He is determined to do something about it.

"Don't believe this can't happen to you," he said. "This scourge is going to continue taking lives until we are willing to beat it back."

"The message is, hear the alarm of the series of bad choices our son made that ended up ultimately in his death. We are very hopeful that by telling our story, that we can have an effect on other people's decisions," Taggart said.

"He was 21. He took his own life July 10 (2012). He had been involved in drugs for about a year," Taggart said. "He shot himself in our front yard and we didn't know anything about his drug use. Brad sort of suffered it silently without us ever knowing about it."

Taggart said that a toxicology report showed that his son had no drugs in his system when he died. But the letter Brad Taggart left for his parents laid out the devastating psychological toll of his addiction and summarized the downward spiral of the past year.

The two-page suicide note began, "I hate that I'm putting you through this. The last thing I want is to bring you all grief but I cannot go on living any longer. I've lost my mind due to drugs. I have no emotion, I cannot be happy ever and I'm empty inside. Drugs have robbed me of my memory and knowledge that I've gained. I have zero reading comprehension skills and my attention span is about 10 seconds. I spend the majority of the day staring off into space."

The letter outlined a progression from marijuana use to LSD, which Brad Taggart wrote of as "a way that I could escape into an alternate reality, one that was euphoric and free of problems. I also began using mushrooms, MDMA, cocaine and nitrous oxide. My drug use didn't seem to affect me. I actually felt as though I was improving as a person somehow. I knew

myself better and was outgoing and it was nice. My view of reality was skewed by drugs.” He concluded the letter with, “I love you.”

Seventeenth Circuit Judge Jimmy McClure of Sardis has heard similar stories repeatedly in supervising Drug Court, although not with such a heart-wrenching end. “This can happen to any family. It can happen to young and old, rich and poor, black and white. Drugs are the great equalizer.”

Seventeenth Circuit Judge Robert Chamberlin of Hernando said, “It was an extremely powerful message. It certainly helped us realize what we are working towards in this drug court program. Hopefully, these efforts will lead to more stories of redemption – such as the ones told by our graduates ...rather than a family's painful tragedy.”

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