

## **Country star Jeff Bates to speak to Drug Court graduation Oct. 21 in Hernando**

October 8, 2014

Country music star Jeff Bates on Oct. 21 will tell his story of drug addiction and recovery at the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court graduation in Hernando. The ceremony will begin at 2 p.m. in the main courtroom of the DeSoto County Courthouse at 2535 Highway 51.

Fifty-seven people are expected to graduate from the program that spans DeSoto, Panola, Tallahatchie, Tate and Yalobusha counties. Circuit Judges Robert P. Chamberlin and Jimmy McClure will preside.

Bates, who grew up in Bunker Hill in Marion County, Mississippi, has enjoyed more than 10 years as a successful musician. Stardom came after he hit rock bottom as a methamphetamine addict. He regularly uses the spotlight to tell his story of addiction, arrest, recovery and redemption.

“It’s an honor. It helps keep me clean and sober,” Bates said before he spoke to the annual Mississippi Association of Drug Court Professionals Conference in Natchez two months ago.

Drug Court Coordinator Craig Sheley saw Bates at the Natchez program and invited him to speak to the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court.

“I was very impressed with his story and his method of telling his story,” Sheley said. “We are always looking for not just another success story, but someone that can effectively communicate their story, and I believe he was effective in Natchez.”

On stage in Natchez before several hundred judicial, criminal justice and treatment professionals, Bates opened with his autobiographical “Rainbow Man.” For nearly an hour, he poured out his life’s story: abandoned as an infant at a childless couple’s doorstep, poor but happy childhood dashed when he learned he was adopted, drank and drugged for 20 years, then spiraled down into methamphetamine addiction.

“I never felt so good in my life” is how Bates described a meth high. He sold everything he had to buy meth. “I sold stuff I can’t ever get back, like my granddad’s pocket watch and my grandmother’s wedding band. And when I ran out of things to sell, I started stealing....I stole from everybody I ever cared about.”

He wore makeup to hide ashen skin. His teeth yellowed and broke.

Bates flashed a grin at the crowd. “That ain’t a bad smile, right? These ain’t my teeth. I mean, I own them. I didn’t steal from nobody,” he said as the audience roared with laughter.

He experienced an epiphany in the Nashville jail after his 2001 arrest. He prayed, asking for help to change himself. “I felt free for the first time in my life, in jail. I said, “Lord, what do you want me to do for the rest of my life?”

His first visitor was a song pitch man from a company that had fired Bates. Country stars Gene Watson, Tracy Lawrence and Montgomery Gentry had recorded his songs. “I said, ‘Thank you, Lord. I know what You want me to do now. I can write songs in jail.’”

He found hope. He got into a drug court program. He got his conviction and 15-year suspended sentence expunged. He landed a recording contract a year later. “Every dream I ever had came true when I turned it over to God.”

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