

# ADVOCATES

## COURT REPORT

ADVOCATES FOR GRAFTON COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH COURT VOLUME 7 ISSUE 1 MARCH 2020

### ***Mental Health Court Provides a New Context for Self-Awareness***

Jeannie was the oldest of six in a chaotic household that included the violence of sexual abuse and a domineering and controlling mother. Growing up in an environment of harsh criticism, trauma and uncertainty, Jeannie considered it a reprieve when she was sent to boarding school. She went on to college and earned a Master's in creative writing and for many years she taught writing to all ages throughout the Northeast.

While she had been diagnosed with PTSD, Jeannie didn't know she had Bipolar I, and was not on medication. During this unstable time, two years ago, she had been hospitalized for three months of residential treatment, then found herself living in a volatile neighborhood where people acted bizarrely, and drugs and guns were often in plain sight. "I was struggling," Jeannie recalls. "I thought I could manage on my own."

But trying to find a new apartment was overwhelming and one night she was arrested for intoxication and psychotic behavior and, not thinking clearly, she fought back. Shortly after her arrest, she was diagnosed with Bipolar I.

Following seven months of residential treatment and still facing jail time for simple assault, Jeannie was offered the chance to participate in Halls of Hope, the Mental Health Court of Grafton County and Lebanon District Court. "I was terrified of going to jail," she remembered, "and being accepted to HOH gave me a sense of hope, that this mess I'd created could be resolved and that there could be a future."

While Jeannie had finally found a safe residence and had a case manager  
*continued on page 2*



*A graduate of Grafton County Mental Health Court with Shelly Golden, (left) the GCMHC Coordinator, who, with a team of case managers and therapists, works with each program participant to encourage successful completion.*

### ***To Whom It May Concern: from a Graduate of the Grafton County Alternative Sentencing Program***

*First and foremost, I would like to thank the HOH Program, committee and members for giving me this opportunity. This program gives many of us a second start and I do not take that for granted. I do understand that there is a zero-tolerance policy for alcohol and I am striving hard to comply. I have slipped a few times lately because I've just been in so much physical pain and I am used to self medicating. I know it is not an excuse, but is an explanation.*

*That's how my relationship with alcohol started. That's so important, isn't it? To know why it started. I was in a physically violent relationship and when doctors are not an option, alcohol is a pretty good pain killer. I'm still not sure when drinking went from pain management to daily use for me, but it did. And that brought on a whole new set of problems, mostly legal. I've spent thousands of dollars on fines, classes, rehab, counseling, and on and on. I will be paying the financial burden for my mistakes for many years to come. There's not much point in dragging up all my criminal charges in this letter; I can assure you that I feel incredibly guilty even though I don't always show it. I cannot change the past, however I am starting to accept it, and that's huge for me.*

*I suspect the whole point of this letter is to make me sit down and think. Well, it worked! I understand that physical pain is a trigger for me and drinking will not help. Anything, it will delay the healing process. I am fully committed to graduating from this program. I am sorry it has taken so long for me to come to this moment of clarity.*

*Yours truly,*

*(Name submitted)*



## Thank you to all who have supported The Advocates 2016-2020

*Your gifts have made it possible to award incentives to the Grafton County Mental Health Court participants, encouraging their success and independence.*

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### **Context for Self Awareness** *continued*

and a psychiatrist she was already seeing, Halls of Hope provided a structure that included checking in with the alternative sentencing group every month. And during that year she resolved to spend time writing and meditating each morning. She attended church, made time for yoga each day and began teaching again.

At first, she wasn't sure she could relate to others in the HOH group, who were often in survival mode. "But listening to their stories helped me to recall that I, too, had been homeless and psychotic at one time," Jeannie remarked. This awareness generated feelings of humility and gratitude." She emphasized that, "Shelly's generous spirit and genuine kindness toward all of us as individuals, was reinforced by the program's support. Shelly and the HOH team were a safety net we could access, at any time, if we needed it."

Shelly Golden is Coordinator of the Grafton County Mental Health Court programs at the District Courts of Lebanon, Littleton/Haverhill and Plymouth.

Reflecting on her time with Halls of Hope, Jeannie explains that it gave her a new context for self-awareness. "Meeting each month and listening to others in the group helps you to reassess where you are in your life."

Looking forward, she wants to continue with her therapy, to make new friends, laugh more and find joy. Her psychiatrist continues to encourage her recovery following graduation from the program.

Jeannie is cautiously optimistic about the future. She wants to put trauma, shame, and guilt behind her. She has collaborated with her psychiatrist to find medication that works. She aspires to publish a collection of her writing. And she is grateful for the HOH program and the

second chance it provided and hopes that others can have this opportunity.

"Each day gives us a chance to make some small change that will eventually become a big change. Even if it's just getting out of bed and saying good morning to someone," Jeannie adds.

She also credits the Advocates for Grafton County Mental Health Court who attend the HOH sessions and support the participants, saying, "the conversations I had with Pat and Donna about our daily lives – the normal stuff that has nothing to do with court or mental illness, but about the books we were reading and connecting on an everyday level – meant a great deal to me. It felt like I was just a normal person."

At graduation from HOH, Jeannie shared that the alternative sentencing meetings helped her to become more intentional about where she was in her journey and how important it was to her to know that if she needed to, she could have called Shelly or her team at any time.

"You still can." Shelly responded. "We are always here for you. If you need help, and also just to hear that you are doing well!"

### **The ADVOCATES' Mission**

*champions the success  
of Grafton County Mental Health Court  
participants,  
supports and promotes the work  
of judicial programs in Lebanon, Littleton  
and Plymouth District Courts  
which provide an effective and meaningful  
alternative to the traditional criminal justice  
system for individuals with mental illness.*

*The ADVOCATES for Grafton County Mental  
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## **A Day in the Life of Mental Health Court**

The participants in Mental Health Court today are pensive, wary but talkative, as they acknowledge one another, the group leaders and advocates.

They come together once a month to review their progress, to share gains and losses and coping skills they are learning. They are all in this together.

"Everyone is complicated. Everyone." Shelly Golden, the GCMHC Coordinator, begins the session.

In about an hour, up to a dozen individuals will share their struggles with sleeping, diabetes, blood pressure and stress. One participant is volunteering at the library which, "is daunting but boring, as they don't really need the help," she sighs, "but I actually feel useful."

Another, a recovering alcoholic, admits to a new addiction to coffee, "But that's progress, and I am glad to be here."

"I am trying to stay away from people and places that get in the way of staying sober," another participant chimes in. "What I really need is a better place to live that I can afford. And closer to my job. I have no transportation."

The Halls of Hope program participants support one another in their collective efforts for independence. One woman offered the name of her attorney who helped her attain short-term disability. Another shared her tried-and-true way to titrate off caffeine dependence.

All of them at one time or another express their gratitude for the program. "It's very grounding." "I'm trying to do the things I don't want to do." And at graduation, "I wish I could keep coming to these meetings!" "When you know other people are there for you, you can accomplish some amazing goals."