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Bridges graduates new class

By Lou Sian Daily Journal correspondent

For more than a year, the 15 graduates of the county's Bridges Program faced the truth about their addictions.

In Jordan Patterson's graduation speech in Judge Mark Forcum's court room Jan. 25, he said he had two choices: jail or no jail.

The people filling the gallery and jury box laughed knowingly as Jordan made light of the precepts he acquired while in the alcohol and substance abuse treatment program.

"I apologize for being late. In a way it's their fault," Patterson said, gesturing to a contingent of probation officers, counselors, teachers, judges and public defenders. "If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't have a job to be late from."

The day treatment program directed by the Superior Court of San Mateo and managed by the Probation Department is a sobering dose of reality. Every month, the participants are brought before either Judge Forcum or Judge Barbara Mallach to give an accounting of their progress with their probation officers.

Monday's ceremony was Bridges' eighth graduation and 80 percent of those who started a year ago graduated. The program has saved the county \$2 million in custody costs, according to the Probation Department. Participants contributed 8,000 hours of community service. The program does not accept sex offenders or violent criminals.

During the first phase of the program, probation officers conduct drug testing four to six times a week, random testing on weekends. One positive and they go to jail, no questions asked, said Deputy Probation Officer Lisa Farris.

"Once a month for a year, it keeps you in line and makes you think of your next court date. It helps keep your priorities straight," said Tom Wozniak, a Bridges graduate.

Wozniak's priorities were to get gainful employment, take care of his family and stay clean and sober; all of which he accomplished once his time with the program was over.

"I really wanted to change. If you really want it, then it's a great program. If you don't, then don't waste anybody's time," Wozniak said.

As a drug and alcohol treatment program, Farris said they know people are going to mess up and have difficulties. Whether they get kicked out of the program depends on the case. If they commit a crime while on a binge, they are not likely to stay in the program.

Sandra Baron came to see two people graduate on Monday. A petite, blonde woman with bright, expressive eyes, she recommended the Bridges Program to her friends after successfully graduating from it a few years ago. She started taking gateway drugs such as marijuana and alcohol at the age of 15. By the time she reached her 40s, she couldn't imagine a life without being high on drugs.

"I've never been clear in my life. It'll be four years in May," Baron said. "The program is a long length of time to get into a different frame of mind and environment. The 90-day programs aren't enough time to get clear-headed."

For Armando Burgos, his difficulties concerned an "ex" who he eventually severed ties with in consideration of his children and grandchild. He had been in and out of several out-patient programs, Mallach said in her introduction of her charge. She allowed him to be in Bridges on condition that his probation officer tells her "morning, noon or night" if he fails.

"I actually accomplished something," Burgos told the gallery before becoming emotional at the sight of his daughters and grandson. "I kept a job for a year. This program works. Believe it in the back, it works."

Several of the graduates addressed the gathering in the back of the gallery filled mostly with newbies in the program. In Phase I, success is an uncertainty, stakes are high and probation officers are relentless. Many of the participants are in the program because the probation officers advocated on their behalf in a pre-sentencing conference comprised of the judge, the district attorney, the defense attorney and the probation officer.

"I let them know when they walk through that door, they have a clean slate. We know their criminal history, but we give them a second chance," Farris said. "I let them know I won't give up on them. It's my job."

For Gina, who declined to give her last name, the spiral from social drinker to a DUI conviction occurred in a span of six months. From a middle-class homemaker and mother of three to Bridges participant, she didn't understand why she would risk everything by drinking and driving.

"You don't think it's going to be you. At the time, I had three young children. I now have four. I was involved in church and school. I did volunteer work. I mean, I wasn't a bad person," Gina said.

She took her conviction seriously. Even before her sentencing and going to Bridges, she studied and researched her alcoholism. And when she got to Bridges she did everything she was told. She even dropped "dead-weight" friends and loved ones to stay sober.

On Monday, she was the keynote speaker.

“Do what they ask you to do. Don’t bother to try to work the system. The system will work you,” Gina said. “Denial is worst than the disease.”