

# ADVOCATES COURT REPORT

ADVOCATES FOR GRAFTON COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH COURT

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*Grafton County Mental Health Court Coordinator, Shelly Golden, checks in with Sunny a few months following her graduation for an update on school, family and life in general.*

## Alternative Sentencing Makes a Difference

Sunny became a mom at 17 in a very contentious marriage. “We fought every day,” she said, shaking her head. They hit each other and both she and her former husband were jailed at different times for assault and domestic violence. While in prison, Sunny gave birth to her second child and when she was released, she left her husband. But they continued to fight and Sunny, now the mother of two little girls, was charged with assault and property damage.

Facing jail time again, and with diagnoses that indicated emotional and mental instability, it was suggested in 2013 that Sunny might benefit from mental health court (ASSERT) in Littleton.

“It was very hard at first,” Sunny recalls. “I wasn’t good at keeping appointments and getting to meetings.” But with support from her mom and dad and eventually a new husband, she began to see the value of the program. “It really changed my perspective,” she smiles, “I never used to think about the consequences of my behavior but I learned to think before I act.”

“She also learned to care for herself,” added her mom, “instead of putting everyone else first.”

“The [Mental Health Court] program

gave me a year to think. To step back and go low. And reality smacked me in the face!” It was not an easy time. Pregnant with her third child, Sunny and her new husband welcomed a healthy son during her year in the program.

“It was nerve-wracking to make sure I had enough gas to get to court or to meet with my caseworker,” she remembers, but she was thriving on the one-to-one counseling. She had never liked structure but having to keep appointments helped her experience a new stability.

“Sometimes I wasn’t sure I’d make it,” Sunny recalls, “but my caseworker was like family and I felt supported by everyone.” When her son was born, she was able to conduct sessions with her social worker by phone.

She graduated from the Grafton County Mental Health Court program in September of 2014 and Sunny credits her caseworker, her parents, her husband, children, siblings and aunt with supporting her accomplishments.

Sunny is grateful for her year in the program and would like to see some kind of follow up contact. “You get to know everyone there for that year and it would

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## Judge Albert Cirone Reflects on His Tenure at Mental Health Court

Known as the “class arguer” in high school, Al Cirone always wanted to be a lawyer. And three influential figures kept him on that track. “Perry Mason,” he laughs. “Jesse Feldman, a prominent, wealthy, connected and socially-conscious San Francisco attorney,” who mentored young lawyers including Cirone, and was active in pro bono work. And Ray Staley, a 30-year Air force veteran at NASA, where Al worked one summer. “We couldn’t have been at more opposite ends of the political spectrum,” he recalls, “but I learned management skills I use to this day, fairness, and ways to recognize and encourage talent in young people.”

Cirone was in Chicago for the 1968 Democratic Convention, and his new



awareness of social justice, protection rights and non-violent protest followed him to The George Washington University Law School.

Recently retired from over 25 years on the bench in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit, District Court in Lebanon, Judge Cirone counts his tenure in the Grafton County Mental Health Court as one of the highlights of his career.

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## Judge Albert Cirone

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“Mental Health Court provides a significant alternative sentencing option to the courts,” he emphasizes, “and provides a cost-effective, alternative sentencing option with a higher probability of success than traditional sentencing options.”

Cirone recalls with compassion and respect the adults of all ages who have come before him, ranging in background from those who dropped out of high school to one with a Ph.D. “Sometimes you have to be the strict father,” he smiles, “and sometimes you’re the lenient grandfather. Because all too often, these people have had neither in their lives.”

While his concentration in law has been estate planning, corporate, and transaction work, his comprehension of mental health issues is broad and deep. “You only have to see one child abuse case to understand the trauma,” he notes, compounded by the fact that, “Prisons today are the biggest residential centers for people with mental illness.”

“We want people who come to mental health court to succeed,” he continues. “The rehabilitation factor together with enforced oversight and structured lifestyle are supports that help it to happen.” In the three years that he led the establishment of Grafton County Mental Health Court, Judge Cirone made it clear to the defendants that he had a stake in their well-being. He listened carefully to their

## Alternative Sentencing

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be helpful to continue meeting, as people who are currently in the program could learn from those who have graduated.”

Today Sunny takes SNHU college courses on line. She’s interested in applying psychology to children and adolescents who are in DCYF. “I’ve been there and I’d like to help others who have been there.” She’s also interested in law enforcement. She loves her college classes and spends as much as four hours a day studying. “After the kids are in bed.”

Her mom is thrilled with Sunny’s new outlook. “The [Grafton County Mental Health Court] program made a big difference for my daughter,” she states. “Without it, she would not have her life, her children, or anything else!”

challenges and encouraged their hard work. He balanced his conversations with admonishment for missed appointments and nonconforming behavior. It was evident that he knew them as individuals and that he cared about each outcome.

“We can do more to sustain those who graduate from the program,” he adds, “such as education for families to be more supportive, and to raise the level of confidence in the defendant so that he or she understands that reaching out for additional support is not a sign of weakness. That there is someone to go to who can help.” He has suggested a follow up that would train program graduates to be mentors to new program participants.

For those just entering the program, Cirone notes that this is an opportunity to change a lifestyle but that it requires a level of commitment and expectation that may be new and unfamiliar. And for those who have graduated, he offers, “Be proud of your accomplishments. See yourself as a beneficiary of the program but go further and become a contributor.” In his new semi-retirement, Cirone continues his law practice, balancing work with travel and charity commitments. “I love being a local lawyer and having an impact on people’s lives.” Clearly this has been a large part of his experience with Mental Health Court. “We try to bring stability to an unstable segment of society,” he muses. “We do it with dedicated oversight, with understanding and most importantly with a sense of humor.”

## Why Mental Health Court?

There are ten times as many people with mental illness in jails as there are in hospitals today, according to NAMI.

The closing of mental health institutions in the 1980s was intended to be replaced by community-based services, but these supports have never been adequately funded at federal, state or local levels.

As a result, people with mental illness who are convicted of criminal offenses go to jail which does not address the root causes of their behaviors.

Grafton County Mental Health Court is a progressive model and part of a growing national model that brings together mental health and criminal justice agencies to address the unique needs of people with serious mental illness, providing a path to treatment while still holding the individual accountable.

Instead of a jail sentence, program participants agree to a contract that includes therapy, medication, team meetings and court appearances. When they graduate, 12-18 months later, they are on their way to a healthier, safer and more productive involvement in their communities.

The Advocates for Grafton County Mental Health Court is a 501(C)(3) nonprofit, volunteer board that supports the courts in Haverhill, Lebanon (Halls of Hope), Littleton (ASSERT) and Plymouth.

For more information contact Annette Carbonneau, 603.823.5374 or Rosemary Affeldt, 603.632.4934.

### ADVOCATES for Grafton County Mental Health Court [www.advocatesgcmhc.org](http://www.advocatesgcmhc.org) Supporting the Program with Private Donations

*The ADVOCATES champions the efforts of program participants and supports judicial programs that provide an effective and meaningful alternative to the traditional criminal justice system for people with mental illness.*

*However, funding for mental health court does not cover incentives and financial assistance critical to program participants' success.*

*Your tax-deductible gift can help them become self-supporting and healthy members of their communities. Donations or correspondence may be sent to **Advocates for GCMHC, PO Box 303, North Haverhill, NH 03774.***

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