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‘Such a blessing’

Former Columbus man graduates from Problem-Solving Court

HANNAH SCHRODT
The Columbus Telegram

Daniel Johnson has been struggling with a methamphetamine addiction since he was a teenager growing up in Columbus. His life has been a cycle of ups and downs, but, as Colfax County’s first recent graduate of Problem-Solving Court, Johnson said he’s been to drastically change his life for the better.

Born in Kearney, Johnson lived in Schuyler until the age of 7 when his family moved to Columbus. Now 33-years-old, Johnson’s addiction began as a preteen when he started drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana.

“I had stayed out one night and my parents were worried about me, they didn’t really know where I was at, so they called the cops,” Johnson said. “It all started with a truancy ticket back when I was 13-years-old.”

Johnson’s six-month probation turned into four years as he continued breaking the law.

“I couldn’t smoke weed anymore, I couldn’t drink anymore so then I started selling meth and then eventually I tried it,” Johnson said, noting he used drugs to

help deal with his problems.

He graduated from Columbus High School in 2005 and finally finished probation. But, he said, that’s when his addiction got even worse.

“I started breaking into a bunch of places in Columbus,” Johnson said. “At 19-years-old,

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COURTESY PHOTO

Judge Christina Marroquin congratulates former Columbus man Daniel Johnson for successfully completing Problem-Solving Court during a ceremony held Aug. 31 at the Saunders County Courthouse in Wahoo. Johnson is the first person from Colfax County Court to complete the program.

Court

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years in prison for burglary. I was running around stealing stuff to try and support my habit.”

While serving time in prison, he was transferred to a maximum-security facility where he completed a substance abuse program.

“My whole mood kind of changed,” Johnson added. “Eighty percent of the (population) there is lifers, people who have been given life sentences. I just started acting right, there was a lot more to worry about there.”

Johnson was paroled in November

I got sentenced to five to eight

2011 and was doing well for a while. He stayed away from drugs and alcohol and had been attending Central Community College-Columbus for welding.

Addiction is a vicious cycle, though, and he went through both good and bad phases – marrying and having a child, drinking again, a second marriage, cleaning up his habit but then falling back into alcohol and meth.

The height of his struggles played out at the end of August 2019 when he rented a room at a hotel in Schuyler to eat and rest before reporting to probation. However, the night also involved meth that, unknown to him,

was laced with hallucinogens.

Johnson said he trashed the hotel room and jumped out of a bathroom window, seriously injuring himself. He said the police officers later told him he started acting aggressively, was shot with a taser and taken to the hospital in Schuyler. He was later transported to another hospital in Omaha, where he stayed for three days.

"They didn't even know my name, just because I was so messed up. My wife had to identify me," Johnson said.



COURTESY PHOTO

Judge Christina Marroquin, left, poses for a photo with Problem-Solving Court graduates Daniel Johnson, Justin Johnson and Jason Dean during a ceremony held Aug. 31 in Saunders County Court in Wahoo.

Johnson underwent a rehabilitation program in Columbus and was charged with a number of offenses, including assault of a peace officer

and destruction of property.

His second chance came in the form of a phone call from Colfax County Attorney Denise Kracl. Johnson had been selected for Problem-Solving Court, which is an alternate route through the justice system for non-violent drug-related offenders. It's also commonly known as drug court.

According to the Nebraska Supreme Court's website, the purpose of a Problem-Solving Court is to reduce recidivism by utilizing early intervention, appropriate treatment and consistent judicial oversight. Those who complete the program have their charges dismissed; those who fail are sentenced on their charges.

Johnson is the first person in Colfax County Court to graduate from the program, which he did during a ceremony held Aug. 31 at the Saunders County Courthouse in Wahoo. Two other men, who had been facing charges out of Saunders County, graduated as well.

"He is the first person we've put into the Problem-Solving Court and he will successfully complete (it)," Kracl said in August.

Johnson said he was skeptical of the program at first, but waking up in the hospital in Omaha changed his view on things.

"...I thought I could control things," Johnson said. "I thought, 'oh, I could use a little bit here. It's going to take away what I'm feeling

or 'it's going to make me feel better.' Waking up in the hospital really put into perspective that this is going to kill me."

Through Problem-Solving Court, Johnson said he's learned how to keep steady employment, utilize healthier coping skills, hold himself accountable and give back to the community.

"When I was in the program, I had a two-bedroom house, me and my wife had a vehicle. I never really had that before in my life," Johnson said.

Johnson now resides in Norfolk. He said he has been sober for six months and free of meth and marijuana for two years.

"It's an impressive feat," Kracl said. "He has a good job, he's working at the grocery store warehouse up in Norfolk. Things are going well for him. We're really excited."

Johnson said graduating from the program was a proud moment because it helps show others that everybody deserves a second chance.

"I'm really grateful for the things I have today," Johnson said. "The friends I have in recovery, getting back the relationship I have with my family because I've hurt them over and over and over again but they've shown me nothing but unconditional love through all of this. It's just such a blessing."

Hannah Schrodt is the news editor of The Columbus Telegram. Reach her via email at hannah.schrodt@lee.net.