

California Courts News Transcript

Title: Visalia Drug Court Graduation

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There are more than 200 drug courts in California, for adults and juveniles. This joyful graduation ceremony in Mendocino is typical, with 10 grads and about 100 folks in the audience.

In Tulare County, it is way different. They literally fill the Visalia Convention Center for the evening; 3,000 people in the audience to celebrate with graduates – 184 this time. Award winning composer Paul Williams delivered the keynote address. He's been clean and sober since 1990.

Paul Williams, Singer, Composer, Actor *"I have spoken around the country for 19 years. I have never seen this kind of a turn out for a drug court graduation. This is brilliant."*

This is a huge, important annual event in Visalia, underwritten by the Rotary Club and other donors. Plus drug court has strong buy-in from the mayor, the council, supervisors, law enforcement and community organizations.

Hon. Gary Paden, Tulare Superior Court *"The whole community has bought into the program. And we're successful. We are really getting a lot of people clean and sober, and everybody understands clean and sober people don't commit crimes."*

Judge Paden presides in the Visalia Division of Tulare's Drug Court. Every Monday he has 130 to 200 cases on his calendar. This is his fourth graduation.

Judge Roper's in the Porterville Division, where he started the drug court 13 years ago.

Hon. Glade Roper, Tulare Superior Court *"I was very opposed to the drug court concept. I just thought it was nonsense. I was flat wrong, and I'm glad I had enough sense to follow my better thought process rather than my initial instincts. If you look at what any drug court accomplishes and compare that to what jail or prison accomplishes, it's night and day difference."*

The 18-month program is completely self supporting. Participants pay their own way, including testing and treatment, which costs about \$4,000 a year.

Hon. Gary Paden, Tulare Superior Court *"When you're spending that money out of your pocket, all of a sudden you've got an investment in your recovery. All of a sudden you want to get clean and sober."*

But these graduates say it sure wasn't easy.

Donald Lee Cleek, Graduate *"Each week five 12-step meetings, 2 groups, \$40, one on ones with my treatment provider, and testing."*

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Plus weekly visits to come see the judge, where the standards are high.

Hon. Gary Paden, Tulare Superior Court *"If you think you're getting into drug court to avoid doing your jail time, do your jail time because it's going to be easier. I am not going to babysit you here and kick you out and just put you in jail later."*

About 40% of those who start the program are successful. For graduates, it is a dramatic accomplishment.

Hon. Gary Paden, Tulare Superior Court *"I can't tell you how many times I hear people say 'you've saved my life.' I mean what greater thing can somebody hear than 'you saved my life.' Nah, they did all the work, I just kind of monitored them. But it gives you such a good feeling and it's so inspiring."*

Marc DeWitt Weaver, Graduate *"My whole life was pretty hopeless. Yeah, it is truly amazing for me to be standing here."*

And in this community, that success is celebrated in a big way. (applause)

I'm Leanne Kozak reporting in Visalia, Tulare County, for California Courts News.

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