



Community and court system come together to aid in people's

# recovery

By BETH FORKNER MOE

“A single arrow is easily broken; a bundle of ten is not.” So goes a Japanese saying, referring to many people working together to become stronger. That might mean that they are coming together to become stronger together, or perhaps that the group is holding one person up, to help that individual become stronger.

One local woman who could have been considered a “single arrow” just a couple years ago has been surrounded by an entire group of people who have helped her become stronger and a different

person today.

When she was arrested in December 2016, Amber Brockmiller was an active drug user. Now, she's has been sober for (at the time of this writing) almost 850 days, is the mom of 2 healthy children, working, going to college, preparing to buy a home and more.

This is thanks to the work she did and the care and guidance she received through Rice County Treatment Court (RCTC). A Treatment Court is a relatively new addition to the criminal justice system, one that works with people addicted to drugs and committing crimes related to that addiction. They are designed to work specifically with “high-risk, high-need” people with drug-related offenses. They are growing in popularity across the state and across the nation.

When a person has completed their time in Treatment Court,

they are much less likely to re-offend, much more likely to stay clean and sober, and more likely to be reunited with their children (often, offenders have lost custody of their children due to their crimes), be working, paying taxes, and generally leading a healthier life. Treatment Courts save significant money in a community. It's costly to keep a person in jail or prison, instead of having them working and paying taxes. If children are removed from their parents and placed in foster care, that's another huge cost to a community, both financially and societally.

When Amber Brockmiller entered Treatment Court in December 2016 after her arrest, she didn't imagine all the support she would find. She began in the Steele County Treatment Court, then transferred to Rice County in May 2017. She graduated from RCTC in February 2018.

According to RCTC Coordinator Yvette Marthaler, Treatment Courts are intensive and involve a team of people working together with the participants to help in their treatment and their – hopeful – success. Rice County has had a Treatment Court since July 2014, with 47 participants (20 of them women) from its inception until the end of 2018. So far, four women have graduated – or “commenced” – from the Court.

Marthaler was the original Coordinator of RCTC and helped develop it. She left for a couple years but has been back since November 2017. She gives a lot of credit to now-retired Judge Thomas Neuville for gathering the community support to start the Court.

She explained that offenders are evaluated by a team of professionals and must be accepted as participants into the Treatment Court. There are two teams, one that determines policies and one that works specifically with the participants. Some members serve on both teams.

The policy and steering team consists of professionals from Rice County departments - including Social Services, Community Corrections, Court Administration, Sheriff, and County Attorney – and members of chemical dependency/treatment providers (including Fountain Centers, Omada and West Hill Lodge), Judge John Cajacob, a member of Northfield's Healthy Community Initiative, and a defense attorney. This team is responsible for overall administration of RCTC, overseeing its budget, policies, and more. If there are changes or decisions that need to be made, this team needs to approve them. They meet every couple months, or as needed.

The staffing team meets weekly and reviews the progress of participants. They make recommendations about incentives, sanctions, progression, and more to the judge, who is then responsible for implementing any of those. This team includes the Judge, a defense attorney, representative from the County Attorney's office, two probation officers, representatives from the law enforcement community (Sheriff's Department and Police Departments from Faribault and Northfield, who annually rotate terms on the team), the above-mentioned treatment providers, Social Services, a psychologist, Rice County social workers (chemical health and child protection), and various mental health practitioners.

“It's a real collaboration,” Marthaler said. She said they are fortunate to have two probation officers who work together, in seeing the participants and doing home visits to ensure participants are following the conditions of being in Court.

When Marthaler originally became interested in Treatment Court, she was (and still is) a chemical health worker. She saw, during her training and the development of the program, that Treatment Court is a good way for people to achieve success; it allows them to be in the community, with support, rather than sitting in jail or prison without that support. It's a more effective way of keeping people sober.

“I worked with people who struggled with relapses,” she said. “Treatment Court is a way for people to get support to make changes

(in their lives).”

When Brockmiller was arrested for and charged with first-degree possession – a felony - she was given the chance to participate in Treatment Court, or to potentially go to prison for five years. “I chose Treatment Court for the stability and what it can do (for a participant) instead of sitting (in prison,” she said. “It was an easy decision. I have kids. I wasn't going to be away from them for five year.”

Not that Treatment Court is easy, Brockmiller said. There is a lot of accountability and a lot of structured activities that participants must agree to and stick with. If not, they can have sanctions, up to and including being terminated from Court and have their jail or prison sentence put back in place.

There are several Phases of Treatment Court, Brockmiller explained, and it lasts 18 months or more, depending on an individual participant's progress. In Phase I, participants must attend six NA/AA meetings or counseling sessions a week, attend court weekly, have a 9 p.m. curfew, meet with their probation officer regularly, and pass random drug screens.

The team decides when a participant is ready to move onto the next Phase. Generally, after three successful months in Phase 1 in RCTC, a participant is allowed to move to Phase 2.

Phase 2 requires several NA/AA meetings or counseling sessions a week, attending Court every two weeks, having a job (although Brockmiller was exempt from that for a time, since her infant daughter was ill and not able to attend any daycare facilities), continued random drug screens, and meeting with the probation officer.

Phase 3 generally lasts about three or four months, with the participants required to attend several NA/AA meetings a week, appearing in Court every three weeks, meeting with their probation officer, holding a job and having a driver's license, and gaining a GED if they didn't have one. Brockmiller had graduated from high school and had her driver's license. She began working after her infant was well.

According to Marthaler, RCTC met with several other area Treatment Courts last fall and made a few changes. One was to change RCTC from three Phases to five. “As people build recovery and make accomplishments in the community, we want to still help them in

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their sobriety,” she said. In the later Phases, participants come to Court and meet with their probation officer monthly and still have random drug tests, but they have continuing care from the team.

During all Phases and even after Commencement, the participants meet regularly with their probation officer. They are still on probation for a certain amount of time, as ruled by the Judge at the initial time of sentencing. In Brockmiller’s case, she will be on probation until March 2027, but can get discharged as early as March 2022, depending on how well she continues to do. Once she is successfully discharged from probation, the original charge will be dropped to a misdemeanor.

Brockmiller works at an area organization that helps people who need memory care. She and her children live with her parents, who – along with her sister – help her out with the children when she is working and attending South Central College. She is leaning toward getting an LPN (licensed practical nurse) or ADN (associate’s degree in nursing) degree and is currently taking two classes – psychology and interpersonal communications. She will be done with school in 2-1/2 to 3 years, and has a goal of buying her own home in about 2 years.

“It feels really good to be a year out (of Court),” she said. “A year ago, I wasn’t working and was not in school. I’ve completely turned it all around.”

“I know a few of the (Court) participants, and we talk once in awhile. I’ve made new friends. I’m able to be sober with new people,” she said.

For her future? “I’m definitely on a straight and narrow path. I don’t talk to any of the people I used with. I don’t go to the old places,” she said. “I have a happy and health future, for me and my kids. I don’t even think about my using days anymore; it feels like they’re not a

part of me anymore.”

According to Marthaler, the community is supportive of RCTC. “You can see it by the ongoing commitments from agencies, and we’re getting a positive response from the community,” she said. “It’s great that people are looking at Treatment Court as a positive change in the community. And families have been impacted by it, including parents and siblings. It’s good for them to see (their loved one) change after struggling for years.”

People are looking for alternatives for those who are in recovery and trying to stay crime-free, she said, and RCTC is one of those alternatives. She also said that by being careful about the eligibility and selection of participants, they account for public safety and a good utilization of public resources.

“The team is important, and contact with the Judge is important, but participants do the hard work,” Marthaler said. “It’s their success. We give them a huge amount of credit, and we’re inspired by them.”

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“So many people don’t know what (Treatment Court) does or how much it helps people,” she said. “It’s nice for people to (learn) what it does.”

And she has a shout-out for her probation officer, Trace Miner. “My (probation officer) has really helped me through everything. She’s definitely an all-star,” she said.

For those interested in helping RCTC, there is a recovery fund at Northfield’s Healthy Community Initiative. Donations are used for RCTC participant incentives, to help with the cost of GED classes, and to provide refreshments at Commencement ceremonies. For more information, call 507-664-3524 or e-mail info@northfieldhci.org.

## ONLINE DIRECTORIES OF LOCAL RESOURCES

### *Directorio de recursos locales en línea*

### **ricecountycmhc.org/get-help**

#### Chemical Health

- Substance Use Aftercare/Recovery Support
- Substance Use Assessments
- Substance Use Inpatient/Residential Treatment
- Substance Use Outpatient Treatment

#### Recursos para la Salud Química

- Cuidados Posteriores/Apoyo para la Recuperación para Uso de Sustancias
- Evaluaciones de Uso de Sustancias
- Tratamiento Internado para Uso de Sustancias
- Tratamiento Externo para Uso de Sustancias

#### Mental Health

- Mental Health Counseling Services
- Mental Health Evaluation/Consultation
- Mental Health Support Groups

#### Recursos para la Salud Mental

- Servicios de Consejería para la Salud Mental
- Evaluación/Consultas para la Salud Mental
- Grupos de Apoyo Mutuo para la Salud Mental

#### Early Childhood Resource Directory

- Activities Calendar
- Childcare Services
- Educational Services
- Health, Wellness, and Child Development
- Free Books Locations

#### Recursos para la Niñez Temprana

- Calendario de actividades
- Servicios De Cuidado De Niños
- Servicios educativos
- Salud, Bienestar y Desarrollo Infantil
- Ubicaciones de libros gratis

