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Allegheny County's Veterans Court has its 1st grad

By Bobby Kerlik

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Facing charges of simple assault in 2009, former Marine Michael Danny was looking to get his life back on track.

On Wednesday, Danny, 46, of Monroeville became the first graduate of Allegheny County's Veterans Court program after participating in a full year of treatment programs aimed at getting veterans who are charged with crimes back on their feet.

"It's what these people (who are charged) make of it," said Danny, who served in the Marines as a lance corporal from 1984-87 and now works in construction. "If they don't put anything into it, they won't get anything out of it."

Veterans Court started on the eve of Veterans Day a year ago. Thirty-five defendants are enrolled.

Under the program, veterans who are charged with nonviolent offenses typically plead guilty to at least some of the charges. Instead of a state prison sentence, the program puts veterans on tightly supervised counseling and treatment programs. Sentences usually range from probation to residential treatment programs, and getting through them is not easy. One veteran still in the program described to Common Pleas Judge John A. Zottola yesterday how he had relapsed on cocaine just days before.

They must report periodically to Zottola, who oversees the program and determines sentences. Assistant District Attorney Debra Barnisin-Lange oversees the program for the District Attorney's Office.

The judge's courtroom was packed to watch Danny and Kevin Geppert, 44, of Tarentum, the first two graduates, receive a military coin to keep in their pocket.

Two other veterans, including Thurmon Anthony, sat in handcuffs and shackles, watching the graduation.

"I want you to sit and watch the men who have completed this program," Zottola said.

Anthony pleaded guilty to burglarizing a county office in Wilkinsburg. He was sentenced to 11 1/2 to 23 months in jail with permission for parole into the

program.

"I've been battling problems since I left the military," he told Zottola.

Dr. Lawson Bernstein, a psychiatrist, spoke to the veterans about how post-traumatic stress disorder affects service men and women returning home from combat and can drive people to drugs and alcohol. Treatment programs have improved dramatically since the Vietnam War, he said.

"I've never been under fire," Bernstein said. "I can't imagine suffering as many of you have."

Bobby Kerlik can be reached at bkerlik@tribweb.com or 412-391-0927.

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