

**Steuben County Problem Solving Court
Drug Court Graduation**

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Invited Keynote Address

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It is my privilege and honor to speak to you this morning. The wise Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu was once quoted to say, *“The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step”*.

Today we join in celebration as a member of the program enters a new phase of life. Graduation is not the closing of one period but rather a springboard to new experiences.

We took the first step when we decided that our addictions were something that held us captive. This admission and acceptance of the problem is a necessary agent for change.

We had a choice to come to this step. For some the decision was a legal issue and for others it was losing everything that life had to offer them.

Decisions are abounding. We often think we do not have choices. Certainly, being in active addiction has robbed us all of choices. The unending cycles of using, pain, and suffering have often kept us stuck in our addictions.

Choose to unstick yourself. Make a conscious choice to forge a different path.

Recovery is an opportunity to grow and end the cycle of human caused suffering. It requires a willingness to accept and be accountable for decisions made.

The decisions that make us look our worst and our best cannot be separated. Shame and guilt are the most common emotions people experience when entering drug court or treatment. The belief "I am a bad person if you really knew who I really am" is something many have thought.

We all deserve second chances.

If today you take anything away from today, please know that you are worthy of second chances.

Nothing you have done has not been done before. You are not the first person to get a DWI or Manufacturing charges.

Recognize that many before you have made similar choices.

And many after you will make the same choices. What defines those who graduated from those who did not is the willingness to face what has happened in life to this point.

Certain people may never see you as a changed human being. That is their choice. But remember that you also have a choice and a decision. You can choose to live out someone else's reality of you. The other choice is to show others your reality. Your past is part of who you are.

Do not let it define you. Some of the greatest people I admire have a past and know how to tell their story; the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you dig deep enough, probably every person you know has a past. Choose to tell your story. As a therapist in long-term recovery I often find joy when someone I work with can use their experience to save another life.

Today we take joy and celebrate someone who has taken the hero's journey and survived. People in recovery are warriors. Often, we do not give ourselves credit for our own goodness. The pain and suffering we have endured through active addiction can become fuel for a fire that sparks creativity, passion, and a renewed sense of purpose. Without the pain we have endured to this point we would not be the compassionate and caring people we are today.

You are worthy of love and understanding. You are worthy of a fulfilling life. Never settle for people, places, or things that create a feeling within you that you are unworthy. Too many people have died from addiction with a belief that they are not worthy.

Addiction is not a moral failing. No one among us has chosen to become addicted.

People who enter drug court and treatment often think “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I stop using?” The people we meet along our journey are our greatest teachers and guides. Some of the people you are sitting next to you have taught life lessons that will one day make sense to you. Allow yourself to nurture the side of you who wants to be more authentic and vulnerable. Tear down walls that block you from finding true joy and happiness.

Be compassionate toward yourself and others.

Recognize the hard work and dedication it takes to be a changed person. Never give up on yourself. Let us remain steadfast to being authentic with who and what we say we are. Addiction is always there to call you back unless you recognize that you are deserving and worthy of life.

Recovery is never easy. The decision to take drug court is often one filled with anxiety, confusion, and tension. Tell yourself that you made the right choice.

Take every opportunity ahead of you and grow, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

The choice is yours what road you choose to follow.

Just remember that you are deserving of a life with a purpose.

Congratulations and best wishes!