

## Cape drug court marks its second graduation

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CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE — Lynn Burton was all smiles Wednesday as she celebrated the changes in her life since joining the Cape May County drug-court program.

"It changed my life," she said after her commencement ceremony. "If it wasn't for the program, I'd be in prison."

Burton, now 39, said she started using illegal drugs when she was 20.

"My life was really a mess before I came on drug court. I was using every day," she said. "Now I love my life. I can hold my head up high."

Burton, of Cape May, was one of six drug-court graduates Wednesday cheered for making the program work for them.

Superior Court Judge Michael R. Connor, who oversees the program, said drug court offers hope for recovery to addicts whose lives are controlled by drugs.

The program's mission, he said, "is to combine justice with rehabilitation."

Senior Assistant Prosecutor Jim Herlihy explained that drug court is a real alternative for those who might otherwise find themselves in prison or dead because of drug use.

The county's drug court currently has 152 participants who must abide by an extensive set of rules designed to help them avoid either of those sinister fates.

Herlihy said participants take part in drug-treatment programs, must obtain employment, avoid breaking the law and pass drug testing.

Their progress is monitored closely by probation officers and as they make their way through each step of the five-year program.

Wednesday's commencement speaker was Susan Foose, an advocate for addiction treatment who lost her 22-year-old son when he died of a heroin overdose.

She credited the graduates with choosing to take control and responsibility for their lives and offered them as an example to the program's newest members.

"This morning you are able to look up with clear eyes and you don't have to hang your head in shame," she said.

One of the graduates admitted he came to the program with a bad attitude but was walking out today with a positive attitude about himself.

Omar Aguilar, the program's public defender, said he considered himself fortunate to witness such transformations.