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Army veteran completes Big Island Veterans Treatment Court

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By Tiffany DeMasters West Hawaii Today tdemasters@westhawaii.com
KEALAKEKUA — Drug addiction affects everyone — it doesn't discriminate, Judge Melvin Fujino said during a Big Island Veterans Treatment Court graduation Monday afternoon.

Family members, friends, former colleagues and veterans court mentors and staff filled the judge's courtroom at the courthouse on Halekii Street to celebrate Kealii Emmett's accomplishment in completing in program, which he started last March.

A U.S. Army veteran, then employed with the Department of Public Safety's Sheriff Division, Emmett suffered from drug addiction. Eventually, the 31-year-old traded the uniform for an orange jumpsuit.

Emmett served honorably from 2006-13. He was deployed to Iraq and was a paratrooper. He attributed his drug addiction to unresolved issues from his in time in the Army.

Joining veterans court wasn't an easy path in the beginning, but Emmett eventually was humbled and sought change.

"While veterans court allowed you to make those changes, you regained your honor," Fujino said. "Thank you for the honor of allowing us to watch you change into the man you are today."

In the early stages of his recovery, people talked about how Emmett would run. But once he got committed, he made the program look easy.

A turning point for Emmett was when he sat down with Brenda Austin with Veterans Affairs.

"When I first met him he was wearing orange. He seemed to want the treatment we had to offer," she said.

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At that point in Veterans Treatment Court, they had never sent a client out of state for treatment. Despite Emmett's "running" track record, they decided to take the chance and sent him to First Step Rehabilitation Center in Menlo Park, California.

After completing a 30-day program, Emmett said he was ready for the 90-day program. It was at the rehab he was able to connect with veterans his age that could relate to his struggles.

"I'm not alone," Emmett later told the gathering of people on Monday. "I'm not the only one who has nightmares at night."

Gaylene Hopson, Emmett's mentor, also spoke.

"For those who aren't veterans and don't work with veterans, they fight demons," Hopson said.

Emmett addressed those demons. Hopson said he learned what his triggers were and how to combat them.

"Honor, courage and commitment, you have them all," Hopson said to Emmett. "Veterans have already been trained. They just lost their way and we need to get them the help they deserve."

Sgt. Tanny Cazimero with the Sheriffs Division was Emmett's sergeant when the 31-year-old was with the department. He watched what happened to him.

When Emmett got serious about the program, Cazimero said he never doubted his resolve.

Emmett thanked Cazimero and others in the Sheriffs Division for having faith in him and never judging him. He also expressed his gratitude to all those who had significant impacts on his recovery.

"With them believing in me, I've been able to move forward in a positive direction," he said.

Emmett plans to go back to school and become a paramedic.

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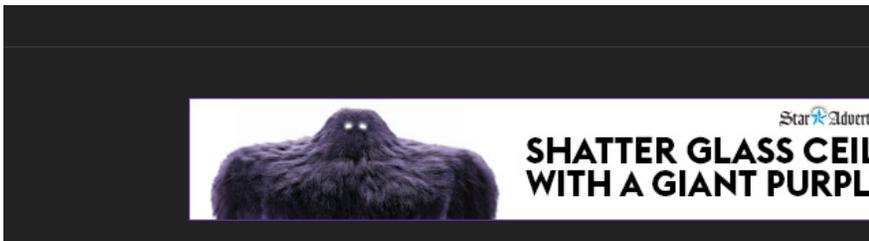
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