

# The Maui News

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## Drug court rose from scorned to celebrated, changing grads' lives



Graduates and 2nd Circuit Court judges pose for a photo after the 72nd graduation ceremony for the Maui Drug Court program, which is in its 20th year. From right are 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Richard Bissen, who serves as Drug Court judge, retired 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Joseph Cardoza, 2nd Circuit Judge Rhonda Loo, Joseph Kaikala, Robert Kaikala, Desiree Collier, 2nd Circuit Judge Peter Cahill, Michael Woods, Starr Begley and Kianu Pelekai-Peneku. The Maui News / LILA FUJIMOTO photos

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WAILUKU — When the Maui Drug Court started 20 years ago, it wasn't met with the response that organizers had been hoping for the program that offered treatment as an alternative to incarceration for some criminal defendants.

*“Indeed, the first two times I asked an attorney whether a particular defendant was interested in participating, the attorney’s answer was a very clear no,”* retired 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Joseph Cardoza recalled Thursday. *“Even more, I was informed there would be no referrals to Drug Court. At first, I was stunned by this development.”*

He said the first two Drug Court participants didn't agree with their attorneys and chose to enter the program.

Since then, the program has gained more than 1,200 applicants and 650 graduates, including six who were part of the 72nd graduation ceremony Thursday.

The ceremony in the courtroom of 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Richard Bissen, who serves as the Drug Court judge, celebrated the accomplishments of the graduates, as well as the 20th anniversary of the program.



Retired 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Joseph Cardoza talks about the beginnings of the Maui Drug Court program Thursday. He was a special guest speaker at the 72nd graduation in the 20th year of the program that offers intensive treatment and supervision to defendants with drug-related crimes.

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Cardoza, who was appointed to the bench in June 1999 and retired last year, shared some of the program's history as special guest speaker for the graduation ceremony.

Cardoza said he was *"fortunate enough to be around from the beginning"* when then-2nd Circuit Chief Judge Boyd Mossman and Judge Shackley Raffetto were part of early discussions about starting a Drug Court.

At the time, Drug Court was a *"rare and new combination"* that included *"supervision, counseling and instruction, compassion and encouragement,"* Cardoza said.

*"This treatment model has been proven to work,"* he said.

Raffetto was the first Maui Drug Court judge, presiding over its first court sessions in August 2000.

The first two Drug Court defendants graduated *“and I have not seen them back in the criminal justice system since,”* Cardoza said.

*“So they made good decisions,”* he said. *“For the community, this meant a great deal. These two graduates became contributing members of our community.”*

One graduate *“proudly reported he had just filed his tax returns,”* Cardoza said.

*“It might sound strange to people, but it felt good to know that he was paying his taxes and living right,”* he said. “In addition to being contributing members, the participants were no longer involved in the criminal justice system and criminal behavior.

*“Children benefited because their parents were sober and setting an example for their children.”*

Cardoza recalled how in December 2001, after the program had been running for about a year and four months, participants organized a family Christmas party.

*“I was moved by what I saw,”* Cardoza said.

Even with the program at about half its size compared with later years, *“there were 264 children present at that Christmas party, all children of our participants,”* Cardoza said.

*“It was at that point in my life I understood the positive impact the program could have, not only on the current generation of participants but the future.”*

Over the years, he said the rate of those reoffending has remained *“pretty low”* at 14 to 16 percent.

*“This is a testament to the foundation put in place by the Drug Court team led by Judge Shackley Raffetto,”* Cardoza said.

He said even those who didn't complete the program reported it *"eventually helped them overcome some of their major problems in life."*

After Judge Raffetto retired, Cardoza became Drug Court judge.

Later, a Molokai Drug Court was added so the program became the Maui/Moloka'i Drug Court. *"The beautiful people of Molokai have brought their special culture to the program,"* Cardoza said.

*"The program has been the envy of other programs,"* he said.

Aerosmith founding member Steven Tyler, who knows Judge Bissen, has been a guest speaker at graduations.

Cardoza described recently encountering a couple of Drug Court graduates, including one who has had the same employer for more than a decade after starting in an entry-level position while in Drug Court.

*"I think I surprised him when I said, 'You have just made my day,'"* Cardoza said.

Another graduate asked if the judge remembered her. *"She said, 'You saved my life,'"* Cardoza said. *"Of course, I did not save her life. She saved her life."*

He said community support has been one key to the success of the program.

*"As they say, it takes a village,"* Cardoza said. "That means all of us.

*"As happy an occasion as this is, it is important to practice what you have learned,"* he told the graduates. *"Tonight and in the days to come, spend quiet time with your loved ones who have been on the journey with you."*

He reminded graduates to *"take deep breaths"* when they're in stressful situations.

While graduates will no longer have to appear in court, *"the challenge of daily life will remain, especially during the pandemic,"* Cardoza said.

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