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Court gives veterans chance at a clean slate

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Cody Arnett's golden dog tags tell a story of redemption.

Arnett, 37, of Bellevue, earned the symbolic tags for completing the five phases of Douglas County's Veterans Treatment Court, a diversion program for criminal offenders who have served in the military.

Each phase means completing specific tasks related to mental health, rehabilitation, employment and sobriety. It's done alongside other veterans.

"A big part of this program is that it targets the discipline factor that you should have picked up on in the service," said Arnett,

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Veterans

an Iraq war veteran who earned his original dog tags serving in an Army field artillery unit from 2006 to 2010. "I learned more than I thought I was going to."

Arnett was one of five veterans to graduate from Veterans Treatment Court on Sept. 1 amid smiles, hugs, cheers and tears. They represent the seventh group to graduate from the program since it started in 2016 — 57 veterans in all. Another 35 are currently enrolled.

"This day is about you. You earned it," said Tom Riley, the Douglas County public defender, who works with the program. "I'm sure it wasn't an easy path

to get to where you are today." Judge Horacio Wheelock dismissed or reduced felony charges against all five graduates as part of the ceremony.

State Sen. John McCollister sponsored legislation to launch the Veterans Treatment Court in Douglas County in 2016. Additional courts are now operating in Lancaster County and in Central Nebraska, said Rob Owens, Problem-Solving Court coordinator. Another is starting up in Sarpy County. The program focuses on treatment rather than punishment. Military veterans charged with crimes can avoid prison by sticking to a strict regimen of keeping a job, staying clean from drug or alcohol abuse, completing rehabilitation classes, paying restitution if required, and meeting frequently with a judge.

The recommendation and approval of Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine, one of the program's founders, is required for a veteran to be admitted. "They have to be screened to get in," said Owens, a Marine Corps combat veteran. "They have to want it."

At the same time, the program adds an element of support and forgiveness that is uncommon

in the larger criminal justice system.

"If one of our participants fails, we are there to pick them up," Wheelock said. "We are a court of second, third and fourth chances."

Rod Armstead, another of Thursday's graduates, said the difference was stark. The 48-year-old Alabama native was an Army infantry soldier in the 1990s, including tours in South Korea, Cuba and Bosnia.

He later worked as a nuclear field engineer. "You're being judged in a different court," he said. "Over there, you're a mug-shot photo. Over here, they look at me as a prior service member."

Armstead now runs a small electrical business in Omaha. Arnett has an auto repair shop in Bellevue's Olde Towne. Arnett

has already signed on to serve as one of the program's veteran mentors. Armstead hopes to help out, too.

Rep. Don Bacon, a retired Air Force brigadier general and a guest speaker at the ceremony earlier this month, noted that the graduates are among only 6% of the population to serve in the military.

"I am proud just being here with you, as a fellow veteran," he said. "To hear your intentions, to hear your heart — it does warm my heart."

Bacon challenged them to serve their families and communities, just as they once served their country.

"We all need redemption," he said. "Today's your chance. Earn this. Make it good."

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Wheelock



Owens



CHRIS MACHIAN PHOTOS, THE WORLD-HERALD

The audience applauds as Judge Horacio Wheelock, right, and Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine dismiss charges against Doug Larson, seated left, after he graduated from Veterans Treatment Court. The program allows veterans charged with crimes to avoid prison if they follow certain requirements, including staying sober.



Doug Larson holds the certificate and flag he was given after he completed Douglas County Veterans Treatment Court.



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Victor Corrales, left, shakes hands with Veterans Treatment Court Officer Eric Schult after completing the program.