

## Family Drug court honors first grad



Shanterri Russell is hugged by her son Markel after becoming the first graduate of Fulton County's family drug court on Wednesday.

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In the six years that Shanterri Russell smoked crack cocaine, she lost her job, apartment and custody of her four children. She took shelter in abandoned buildings. And she got pregnant again.

Now Russell, 31, lives in a tidy two-bedroom apartment in southeast Atlanta and works full time as a housekeeper at Grady Memorial Hospital. She has regained custody of three of her five children and hopes to reunite with the rest, who are living with an aunt.

She has not used drugs for more than a year.

Russell credits a new program in Fulton County Juvenile Court with giving her and her children a second chance at being a family. It's called family drug court. It's the only one in Georgia and one of 153 nationwide, according to the National Drug Court Institute.

Russell became the program's first graduate Wednesday, after attending family drug court for a year and meeting its requirements. At a joyful ceremony at Juvenile Court, Associate Judge Sharon Hill told Russell she symbolizes the program's mission to build healthy, drug-free families.

"Step by step, you are reassembling your family and you are leading the way," Hill said.

Tears streamed down Russell's face. "I want to thank the drug court team for their support and love," she said, as two of her teenage children smiled at her from the crowd gathered on court benches.

Created in December 2003 to help parents in danger of losing their children because of drug or alcohol addictions, Fulton's family drug court has grown to 19 participants, all of them women. "Many of these parents have already lost one child to foster care, if not more," said John Zoller, the program's coordinator.

Family drug court handles only a fraction of the cases before Fulton County Juvenile Court. In 2003, the court's judges heard more than 3,000 cases involving child neglect or abuse.

In family drug court, parties who might be adversaries in traditional child neglect cases team up to encourage mothers to kick their addictions and pull their families back together. It's a

collaborative effort on the part of the judge, treatment providers, parents' attorneys, prosecutors and child welfare workers.

The women in the program get the benefit of intense attention, counseling, supervision and a likelihood of keeping or regaining custody of their children if they complete the program. But they also could be sent to jail or lose their children if they don't make headway.

One requirement for the program's "freshmen" is that they go before Hill every Wednesday to report on their progress in treatment, as the team and other women in the program watch — and clap for those who are succeeding.

Hill can be a stern enforcer or cheerleader, depending on a parent's progress or lack of it.

"At first I thought Judge Hill was mean, one of them tough, rough judges," Russell said. But she learned differently. "I feel that she's our angel from God," Russell said. "She has something positive to say to each of us. She tries her best to help each one of us make it."

By the time Russell learned about family drug court, she had checked into a residential treatment program that helped her withdraw from crack and begin to learn about how to live without abusing drugs. While in treatment, she gave birth to her baby, Angel. But she had to surrender Angel to Fulton's Department of Family and Children Services, she said, because of her drug abuse and neglect of her other children. "It broke my heart."

Family drug court helped Russell confront what she needed to do to get back her children, now ages 1 to 16. Last year, she regained custody of Angel, 1, then Telisia, 9, then Shanreka, 16, a teen mother of two children who remain in foster care. Russell wants her grandchildren to live with her, too.

Said Judge Hill, "We are working on pulling her family back together, but we're doing it a little bit at a time."

The drug court team monitored Russell's regular drug screenings, and coached her on parenting skills, finding a job, locating an apartment and managing her new drug-free life.

"Going up to that drug court gave me a lot of support," Russell said. "I look at that place as a whole bunch of people loving me until I was ready to love myself."

On Wednesday, Russell vowed, "I plan to do all I can in life to keep my family together."

She also promised she would return to family drug court — as a mentor for other women. "I look at them as family," Russell said.