



OYA Partners With County to Help Youth on Path to Recovery

By [Sarah Evans](#), OYA Communications
Sept. 25, 2017

Teenagers don't typically look forward to appearing in court, but for Tori, this day was special. After two long years of hard work, setbacks, and more hard work, the 19-year-old had finally reached a long-held goal: graduating from Marion County's juvenile drug court program.

As she stood in front of juvenile court Judge Cheryl Pellegrini, Tori smiled — and her smiles got even bigger as she approached the front of the room to ceremonially shred her juvenile criminal record.

The youth who commit to the program, called STAR Court (Supervised Treatment and Recovery), face a challenging path of continual court appearances; drug and alcohol treatment; regular meetings with their parole and probation officers, counselors, and court officials; and frequent urinalysis tests to ensure that they're staying away from the substances that brought them to drug court in the first place.

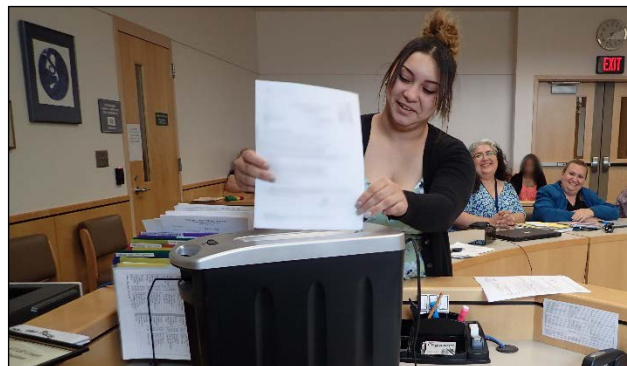
But if they graduate — by being clean for at least 120 days, engaging in their treatment, participating in school and work, paying their restitution, and completing community service — the reward is great: an immediate expungement of their juvenile record. Typically, young people in Oregon must wait five years after their last juvenile court termination before applying to get their record expunged.

County drug courts are not uncommon, but STAR Court has one aspect that its organizers believe is unique in the nation: youth committed to the Oregon Youth Authority, the state's juvenile justice agency, may participate alongside teens in the county juvenile system. At the time of her graduation, Tori was completing two years of OYA probation.

Typically, juvenile drug courts are run by counties and are only for teenagers with substance abuse problems



Tori celebrated her STAR Court graduation with OYA juvenile parole and probation officers (JPPOs) Daniel Sifuentez and Heidi Lung. Sifuentez and JPPO Funaki Letisi act as liaisons between OYA and STAR Court.



STAR Court graduates earn an immediate expungement of their juvenile record. During their graduation ceremony, they ceremonially shred the record in court.



Tori read a statement in court that she had written about her changes. "I've grown so much as a person, and I love who I am," she wrote.

who are on probation at the county level for non-violent offenses. If a youth in the program were to escalate to the state juvenile system, they usually would no longer be eligible to participate in their local drug court.

In Marion County, this changed about three years ago as a result of conversations between Mike Runyon, OYA's Marion County field supervisor, and Judge Lindsay Partridge, who was the county juvenile court judge at the time. The two of them were discussing how to better serve STAR Court participants who started out on county probation but then had to quit the program because of being committed to OYA.

"Generally that commitment to OYA would suggest they were not successful on probation," Partridge says. "But we decided to take a longer and broader view of it. Maybe they weren't successful on juvenile court probation because we hadn't matched them up with the right services and skills to help them be successful."

Partridge says he often was faced with a decision to commit youth to OYA probation because there were no services available at the county level to serve their needs. In the case of teens in STAR Court, many of them were struggling to succeed because of home lives that continued to foster drug and alcohol use. Committing these youth to OYA meant they would be placed somewhere safer and more conducive to treatment and rehabilitation.

Because of the partnership between Marion County and OYA, these youth can still participate in STAR Court during their OYA probation, as long as OYA places them in a residential program or foster home in or near Salem, so that they can continue meeting with their support team and coming in for court appearances. That's not always an easy requirement to meet: a lack of OYA programs and foster home options in Salem has sometimes meant that youth had to temporarily quit STAR Court until they could return to their home community.

But for those who have been able to stay in the area while with OYA, like Tori, the benefits have been huge. She describes herself as being "into meth really bad" when she started STAR Court. "I was doing what I wanted, out on the streets, being bad," she says.



Tori, on her graduation day, with Marion County Juvenile Court Judge Cheryl Pellegrini.

But on graduation day, 150 days clean, she had a much better view of herself. "Now I'm more positive and look at the brighter things in life," she says.

Tori had a lot to be proud of at the end — she had earned her GED, had been working in a good job at Ross Dress for Less for seven months, and had just earned a college scholarship from the county juvenile department. She planned to attend Chemeketa Community College to study mechanics.

On her graduation day, her mother and many family members were in court to celebrate with her. But so were the STAR Court team members who had supported and encouraged her along the way — including multiple OYA juvenile parole and probation officers, county drug and alcohol counselors, and Judge Pellegrini, who presented her with a copy of Dr. Seuss's classic book, "Oh, the Places You'll Go!"

Despite the difficulty of the program, Tori says she would recommend it to other teens because of that support network. "All of the support was important," she says. "Once I'm done, I'm done for good. I don't have to worry about it anymore. That feels really good."