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### Clean and sober Chesco lawyer commended for helping addicts

By Kathleen Brady Shea  
Inquirer Staff Writer

In the 1960s, booze emboldened the quest for justice of a brash young lawyer born during the Depression in a West Philadelphia taxi.

But heavy drinking and drugs also threatened to derail John J. Duffy's legal career, sometimes blurring the distinction between himself and the criminal defendants he represented. On more than one occasion, Duffy said, he ended up in handcuffs on charges ranging from drunken driving to reckless endangerment.

Last week, Duffy, 76, who lives and practices law in West Chester, received a standing ovation in a packed Chester County courtroom for his work helping others to beat their addictions. He has been sober for 35 years, he said.

Duffy received the Osceola Wesley award from Chester County's acclaimed Drug Court on a day celebrating the graduation of participants from the program, now in its 11th year.

Judge William P. Mahon, who oversees Chester County Drug Court, said Duffy's tireless efforts to assist others with recovery made him a logical choice to become the award's second recipient.

The first was Wesley himself, a 13-year heroin addict who got clean in the early '70s and devoted more than three decades to helping others do the same. Wesley, of Coatesville, died in February at the age of 81.

"He was my hero," said Duffy, a father of seven and grandfather of 19. "I'm no Osceola Wesley."

Others disagreed.

District Attorney Joseph W. Carroll, who presented Duffy with the award, said he and Duffy, whose license plate reads "ACQUIT," have had a longtime adversarial relationship.

"We are seldom seeking the same goal in the courtroom," - except in Drug Court, Carroll said.

Like Wesley, Duffy displays an intuitive ability to show addicts "the value and beauty of a sober life" that has enabled him to save lives, Carroll said.

More than 2,300 Drug Courts now operate across the country, and have reduced costs and recidivism, Mahon said. The expense to incarcerate an inmate for a year in Chester County exceeds \$26,000, he said, adding that treatment and job training requires \$3,500.

Nonviolent offenders who successfully complete the program - a rigorous one- to two-year regimen of treatment, meetings, and drug screenings - have their charges expunged.

Before the presentation, Duffy's wife, Marie, said some of her husband's prospective clients had gotten a surprise when they tried to hire the attorney who made headlines as a freedom fighter in Mississippi during the '60s and in local cases such as Abscam in the '80s.

"He wouldn't agree to represent them unless they promised to get sober," she said.

In accepting the award, Duffy, well-known for his courtroom quips, introduced himself as a criminal attorney.

"Those are both nouns," he said.

A graduate of La Salle University in 1959 and Villanova Law School in 1962, Duffy said he is proudest of his 1974 graduation from Chit Chat Farm, a rehab facility in Berks County now known as the Richard J. Caron Foundation.

"Anywhere you ever drank, there was a room named after me," Duffy told the audience, pausing before adding, "The john."



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

John J. Duffy, a West Chester lawyer, received the Osceola Wesley award at Chester County Drug Court for his work helping others beat addictions. He's been sober 35 years, he said.

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He said he spent the first 19 days of his 30-day commitment resisting treatment and anticipating his return "to the good ship Cutty Sark."

A determined counselor had other plans, Duffy said. He said the young man came back one night on his own time and spent eight hours talking to Duffy about how he had shed his own demons and how Duffy could, too.

In November 1979, Duffy joined the board of directors of the not-for-profit Caron Foundation. He served two terms as chairman and was named chairman emeritus in 2007.

Missy Orlando, Caron's executive vice president of marketing, said that during the last 31/2 decades, Duffy has referred 1,000 people to Caron - the foundation's highest single source of patients.

"That's a lot of lives he's helped save," she said, adding that the number of people affected by his outreach is even greater. "We are forever indebted to him."

Duffy is also a founding governor of Pennsylvania Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, a group formed to assist lawyers suffering from addictions, and is a past trustee and current member of International Lawyers in Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1994, Gov. Robert P. Casey appointed Duffy to the Governor's Advisory Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

Before the ceremony, Duffy said that when he learned that Drug Court wanted to give him the Wesley award, he felt undeserving. Then he recognized a potential benefit.

"If just one person reads in the paper that this happened . . . and then says, 'If that old guy can do it, then so can I,' it will be worth it," Duffy said.

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