

Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee, Monroe County Veterans Court



From left, Honorable Dwaine Thomas, Vet to Vet Tennessee Chaplain Melvin Oggs, Justice Sharon Lee, Representative Lowell Russell.

Monroe County Veterans Court gained a state audience on Monday, March 6, 2023, with former Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court Sharon Lee witnessing proceedings at the bench of Judge Dwaine Thomas in Madisonville. Lee serves as one of five justices on the state's highest tribunal.

Also in attendance, were Assistant Commissioner Lorenza Wills and Regional Director Tim Forte, Tennessee Department of Veterans Services, and Monroe County Mayor Mitch Ingram.



From left, Mayor Ingram, Heidi Ables, Beverly Finch, Michael McGrail, Ernest "Taylor Moore, Tyrome Ferguson, Dallas Grant, Gail Evans, Don Davis, Randall Scott, J. "Badger" Beacham, Gail Dillon, Joseph Low, Lou Danner, Bob Goguen, Jamey Sands, Tom Hatley, JD Phillips, Laurin Stockman, daughters, Winston Stockman, Justice Lee, Judge Thomas, Melvin Oggs, and Representative Russell.

At hand on Monday, six former soldiers in trouble with the law, their individual experiences before and during Veterans Court, its focus on treatment in lieu of punishment, testimony by each justice-involved veteran and his therapist or therapists and mentor, and recognition by the court for taking on rehabilitation.

Up for review, is Monroe County's homegrown Veterans Court. Volunteer driven, mentor focused, veteran centered, at present not sanctioned by the State of Tennessee.

Of a total of 104 justice-involved veterans served over the years, 71 graduating the program, and less than four (4) percent were charged with a repeat offense after mentoring and treatment. The success rate of 96%: state target for recovery-oriented court, 25% or one in four.

A team of people recognized for supporting and maintaining the program.

- State Representative Lowell Russell
- Monroe County Mayor Mitch Ingram and staff
- County Veterans Service Officer Andy Boyd
- Vet to Vet Tennessee – directs Veterans Court, assigns, trains, and engages mentors.
- McNabb Military Services Center – veteran-friendly therapy, mental health professionals Lou Danner and Gail Dillon
- Blended Recovery - family counseling – Director Heidi Ables
- And U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Following commencement, Justice Lee addressed the six (6) graduates.

"I am a believer of rehabilitation and redemption," she said. "There's been a whole bunch of people surrounding each of you and I hope you are grateful."

Lee talked about her father's experience in World War II, he was a farmer from Tellico Plains, enlisted in the Army Air Corps, was shot down in May 1944, taken prisoner, returned home weighing less than 100 pounds, and had life-long health issues.

She recalled her dad saying he was grateful to be alive, he admitted he wasn't a hero, the heroes were the ones who never made it home.

"Monroe County is lucky to have Veterans Court," Lee said. "No one made anyone create this court. They are doing it for these veterans."

Transferred to Lee was a Veterans Court Participant handbook detailing the structure of Monroe County Veterans Court for conveyance to state officials.

Lee is the only sitting Supreme Court Justice originally from a small town.

Of the handful of Tennessee-recognized Veterans Courts, most are in urban jurisdictions.

"There has to be a champion for small counties," she said, "and I am grateful you all had the benefit of Monroe County's Veterans Court. I loved hearing your stories."

Not finished, Vet to Vet Tennessee president Ed Junod and Chaplain Melvin Oggs presented Lee with a certificate, a commemorative document named after one of Vet to Vet's founding fathers.

George Thomas, according to Junod, in the nascent days of Vet to Vet calmed in-fighting among the group, provided direction, requesting a prayer open every meeting, a tradition upheld today. Thomas at the time suffered Agent Orange poisoning.

The George R. Thomas Memorial Award was extended to Justice Lee as a thank-you for fidelity to the Veterans Court.



Left, Bob Goguen, Melvin Oggs, Tom Hatley, Justice Lee, Jamey Sands, JD Phillips, Ed Junod, Don Davis, Randall Scott.

Vet to Vet Tennessee mentor Bob Goguen, in closing: *“We ask you to witness the process and results of what this Veterans Court has accomplished...to rehabilitate and restore purpose to our veterans...the Veterans Court system works, its reduces caseloads...justice is served, a pathway to second chances, a more human way of administering justice.”*