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Lunch and Learn program covers addiction; *ForVets announces Camp Valor project progress*



Keynote speaker Darla Jeffries Jackson of Georgia speaks about the power of drugs over an addict's willpower. Jackson says people should never give up on trying to beat an addiction.

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Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 23, 2017 at 9:27 p.m.

GILCHRIST COUNTY -- A group of organizations met to collaborate Thursday (Sept. 21) as the individuals in those groups helped the people of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties learn about addiction.

The Lutheran Services Florida Health Systems, with Lesley Hersey of Gilchrist County; the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition, with Katrina Gross VanAernam, Cale McCall, Rebecca Fusco and Debby Sweem; the Levy County Prevention Coalition, with Robert Wells and Rose Wilder; and the Gilchrist County Sheriff's Office, with Capt. Sheryl Brown, hosted the event.



Katrina VanAernam (microphone in hand) looks out at the audience near the end of the event as Lesley Hersey stands in the background.

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Katrina VanAernam introduces Dan Cavanah and Debbie Destin.



Dan Cavanah explains the four fundamental concepts that form the foundation of Camp Valor.

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Debbie Destin hands out brochures from ForVets about the Camp Valor project.

In addition to those nine people, five dozen other individuals from many different churches and agencies in Levy, Dixie, Gilchrist, Suwannee, Taylor, Bradford, Union, Alachua, Citrus, Hamilton and other counties came to the event.

It was held at the Otter Springs Park and Campground, where Dan Cavanah and Debbie Destin helped people learn about the For Vets Lodge in which the meeting was held. Cavanah spoke about the Camp Valor Project as Destin gave out brochures in regard to that mission.

As she opened the program, Hersey noted that the Lunch And Learn series of programs for agencies and individuals in the Tri-County Area results from the combined efforts of many people who care about the health and well-being of people.

After a relatively quick introduction of each of the 60 guests at the event, and then an ice-breaker event led by McCall, the keynote speaker took the floor.

Darla Jeffries Jackson of Georgia was the speaker of the day. Originally from Cross City, she retired from the United States Army.

Jackson entered the field of helping people cope with addictions after she returned to the United States from the war in Iraq. She saw returning soldiers who dealt with the destruction and death of war who became addicted to alcohol and other drugs upon their return home.

She decided to learn what to do to become proactive in the lives of returning soldiers.

With that goal, Jackson earned a bachelor's degree with a major in psychology. She then earned a master's degree in substance abuse and addictions counseling. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Walden University, a for-profit public benefit corporation, headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

She is very active in her professional field in Georgia, including serving as president of Substance Abuse Systems LLC of Georgia, which provides assessments and treatments for people addicted to alcohol and other drugs.

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Jackson helped the scores of listeners understand misconception about addiction as well as what are now seen as best treatment options. Continuously incarcerating drug addicts, she shared, is not the most efficient use of tax dollars; nor is it the best management practice for the good of everyone in the community.

Addiction is an illness where the brain is changed. At some point, the addict is driven to obtain whatever drug at any cost.

They will miss their children's sports games. They will ignore family, job and social obligations. The drug becomes their single focus.

Addiction is preventable and treatable, she explained. It can take a lifetime to overcome it and that can be a struggle every day.

Jackson says to never surrender or abandon hope on any addict. She spoke about a woman who went into rehab 28 times, and went to jail or prison several times as well. It was that 29th visit to rehab, though, when she reached the point to overcome addiction.

This disease knows no socio-economic boundaries, she said. Military personnel, doctors, lawyers, law enforcement officers, firefighters, journalists, heads of huge corporations, blue-collar workers, and the beggars who are homeless can all suffer from the very same addictions to alcohol, pain killers, heroin, other opioids, sedatives, tranquilizers, narcotics, amphetamines and barbiturates, she explained.

Addicts lose self-control as the drug affects their brains.

Jackson provided some stories for people who have not experienced the impact a drug may have on a person.

She spoke about being on a diet and avoiding sugar. She goes to her Momma's house and sure enough, Momma has cooked a pecan pie. Sugar is an ingredient.

Jackson smells the pie. She tells her Momma that she is not going to be eating any pie, because of her choice to refrain from sugar. She will just enjoy the smell of the pie.

After dinner, the pie is on the table. Well, perhaps it will be OK to just eat one of the pecans off the top of the pie, even though it is coated with a glaze of brown sugar.

Then, Momma lets her know it might be OK to have a small piece of pie. And the next thing the sugar-avoiding person might experience is going home with the entire remainder of the pie as a take-home gift from Momma.

She spoke about everyone having their own Coca-Cola bottle.

The contents of the Coke bottle are in there, she said.

"It's sittin' there on the table," Jackson said. "Nobody's bothering it. It's just doing its own thing."

"Well," she continued, "somebody comes along and they shake up that Coke bottle. And all the contents in it start fizzing, and they're going everywhere. And you open it up, and it comes out everywhere. It's just a disaster."

Jackson used this as a metaphor for a person who is living their life. Everything is going along smooth and steady – well balanced. Their life has an even keel.

Something happens to shake up the person's life and the lives of their family members, she said.

"Then you open up the Coke bottle and it explodes," she said, "because it has gotten out of hand."

People who have become addicted to drugs, Jackson said, do not realize they "are in control of their Coke bottle."

Jackson said "Stay away from that pecan pie, and keep control of your Coke bottle."

VanAernam wrapped up the anti-drug part of the two-hour meeting.

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She said that when she began working toward the creation of the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition more than six years ago, she heard many people who told her “There are no resources.”

Over the years, she found there are services and people who care in this part of Florida. She found “a big gap” nevertheless between the resources and the people who need the help offered by those agencies.

VanAernam sees one mission is to bring the people who need help and the people who can provide assistance together.

There is a plan now, VanAernam said, to have Jackson help the people of Dixie County to establish “a drug court” with services wrapped around them.

VanAernam shared with listeners her request to aid in this venture, but not just in Dixie County. Instead, she continued, this effort can begin in the entire Tri-County Area of Dixie, Levy and Gilchrist counties.

From her speaking about the vision of putting the people who need help in contact with those who can and will help, VanAernam spoke about another vision. With that, she introduced Cavanah and Destin.

VanAernam pointed out that the event on Thursday afternoon was the third Lunch and Learn at the ForVets Lodge at Otter Springs Park and Campground.

The formula for success, she said, it to have people with passion, plans and other resources. That leads to action and then to results, such as the very lodge in which the audience as sat on Thursday.

* ForVets and Camp Valor

Cavanah spoke about his life. He has been in Gilchrist County for the past 25 years.

He is currently the town manager for the Town of Bell.

In late 2011, Cavanah met a man who had a 23-year-old boy who had returned from war missing both legs and an arm. That man was a general contractor who wanted to build a facility to help the severely wounded veterans.

That man -- USMC Sgt. Michael Nicholson -- expressed four fundamental principles to be a foundation for this transitional living and learning facility for veterans and their families.

The four fundamental points are rehabilitation, education, enterprise and recreation.

The plan is to construct this facility on the 636 acres of Otter Springs Park and Campground, Cavanah said, thanks to a 99-year lease provided to ForVets Inc. by the Gilchrist County Board of County Commissioners, Cavanah said.

ForVets will offer adaptive living accommodations, advanced education, specialized therapeutic services, workshop enterprises, vocational and employment services, recreational activities and lifestyle adjustments for veterans and their families.

ForVets Inc. plans to build a 95,000 square-foot resort style of main lodge that will provide consolidated support and services that require residents to participate in the programs centered on the four fundamental principles that are the foundation to help these severely wounded veterans and their families.

There will be family cabins as part of the project.

Cavanah said ForVets plans to break ground on the project in 2017, and construction is anticipated to begin early in 2018.

To learn more about ForVets Inc. or to make a tax deductible donation to Camp Valor, visit www.forvets.us or call 352-463-0800.