

Beating the street with encouragement, blunt advice

By BETH VELLIQUETTE, The Herald-Sun
February 23, 2004 6:22 pm

CHAPEL HILL -- When Kevin Campbell stood before Chief District Court Judge Joe Buckner during Community Resource Court, he was ready for a lecture.

He'd been spotted recently on Franklin Street holding a box that said he was homeless and asking for money.

Members of the court staff felt disappointed when they saw or heard of Campbell on the street panhandling. That's exactly the behavior the court and the team that works with him is trying to discourage.

Campbell, who lives with his sister and brother-in-law in a modern, nicely decorated home north of Hillsborough, is not homeless. If he's out on the street panhandling, it's a bad sign. He may be trying to get money to buy alcohol or drugs.

Buckner spoke bluntly as Campbell stood before him recently in the Chapel Hill courthouse.

"Look Kevin, here's the deal," Buckner said. "If you're using your money to go down on Graham Street to buy crack cocaine, one, it's going to kill you, and two, I'll put you in jail, and you're not going to make bond because I care too much.

"Let's get rid of the box. Let's stop hanging out and asking people for money."

Buckner assured Campbell that he wants him to succeed. "I like you too much to give up on you," the judge said. "You're one of my proudest successes."

Campbell promised to do better.

A day or two later, Campbell sat in a big comfortable chair at his home tapping his fingers nervously. He was thinking about what Buckner told him about going to jail. "I was just out," he explained. "I had messed up and kind of went drinking. I'm not going to do it this month no more."

Campbell, 37, who has been diagnosed with an unspecified psychotic disorder, alcohol abuse and cocaine dependence, has been a defendant in Community Resource Court for more than a year. He says he's ready to graduate, but the CRC staff thinks he has a ways to go and that he does better within the structure of the court.

Campbell entered the CRC about a year ago. After he had repeatedly gotten into minor trouble for panhandling, drinking, stealing, trespassing and damaging property, his attorney and a doctor recommended him for the court.

Campbell grew up in Durham, living in a series of foster homes with his brother and sister. Despite the unstable childhood, he was smart, graduated from high school and went to college at the University of Science and Arts Oklahoma.

"Everybody thought he was going to come back to Durham and save the world, but it didn't happen that way," said his brother, Delton Campbell of Durham.

Kevin Campbell graduated from college with a math and computer science degree, but when he returned to Durham, his friends and family saw that he had changed, Delton Campbell said. "He was just a different fellow altogether," Delton Campbell said. "Then he would go do drugs, and that made it worse."

Nevertheless, Kevin Campbell got a job and was managing on his own for a while. He recalled, though, feeling changes occurring within himself about seven or eight years ago.

"It just seemed like one day that God pulled my spirit out of body," he said. "They say the spirit lives in the heart. I don't know what happened, but it left a big impact. Before that I had never been in any trouble."

Sometimes his illness makes him so depressed he can't get out of bed, said his brother-in-law, Wade Worley. "He might do good for two weeks or three weeks, then he'll go down in a deep depression," Worley explained. "It's like he's

trapped, like he's in a confined space. He's got air, but his mind is like it's locked. If you open the door to let him out, he wants to stay in."

For Campbell, breaking out sometimes meant going to Franklin Street. "Most of the time I just go down to kind of do something different from what I'm doing, just trying to feel better," he said. "Meeting all the people, having all the people curse you out kind of makes you feel different. Sometimes it's just a different feeling."

When he's downtown, "I start to drink, go out on the street and pretty much just don't care about anything," he said.

A few times, he acknowledged, he became intoxicated, broke windows or harassed people for money. A couple of weeks ago, he borrowed a cardboard box from another panhandler and stood on the street with it collecting money. "Sometimes I buy something to drink or something to eat, or sometimes I just give it to some of the people in the homeless shelter," he said.

He denied using the money to buy drugs, but he's been seen hanging out near a drug house down on Graham Street, authorities say.

Campbell's trips to Franklin Street are heartbreaking for his family, Worley said. "When he goes to Chapel Hill, he might stay there two or three days," Worley said. "I'd get worried about him and go look for him. Some days he'll get in the car, and some days he won't."

One time when Worley found Campbell on Franklin Street, he told him to get in the car, but Campbell refused. Worley sometimes spoke with police officers, who also encouraged Campbell to go home with Worley, but still Campbell refused.

"It's sad that you have to leave him up there, and tears come to your eyes and you know what he is doing," Worley said.

Campbell said that sometimes he acted up downtown because he wanted to go to jail. "I felt paranoid. I felt a lot of people were out to get me, so I felt jail was a safe place to go," he said. "I actually wanted to go to jail at the time. I thought if I was in my own cell, I thought nobody could get me in there."

A change in attitude

Through CRC, Campbell receives services from the Assertive Community Treatment Team, which visits his home once or twice a week, depending on how he's doing. One or two members of the team stop by to make sure he's taking his medications, find out what problems he may be having and hope to find he's engaged in positive activities.

Because Campbell was hit by a car last year in front of Duke Hospital, the ACT Team often helps him get to and from doctor's appointments for medical treatment he is receiving for his injuries.

Since he's been in CRC and since the ACT Team has been managing his case, he claims he's feeling better, and he doesn't want to go to jail. Two weeks ago, he felt so good that he called Worley up and asked to go to work with him.

Other days, he gets down and discouraged. "I just don't have any feelings -- like my sister argued with me this morning, and I felt like I wasn't getting anything out of what she was saying," he said. "I don't really have any emotions like I used to."

At his next court date, the CRC staff will give Buckner a short evaluation of how Campbell's been doing since the last court session. As he has in the past, he'll likely show up for court and if he's been compliant with the court's recommendations, he'll receive encouragement and praise for his efforts.

If not, he may get another lecture. For Campbell, every day is another day of decision. Will he stay home and try to comply with the court recommendations? Or will he hit the street again?