

INVITATION A DISGUISE FOR AWARD CEREMONY

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Steve and Joetta Clark went to the meeting of the Gastonia Junior Woman's Club Wednesday to speak about their family's experience with drug dependency. Their oldest son and daughter had developed drug problems, worked their way through them and joined their parents in an anti-drug campaign they've presented to civic groups and other organizations for more than two years.

The Clarks left Wednesday's Junior Woman's Club meeting with the organization's annual Community Service Award.

Club member Charlene Swilling nominated the Clarks for the award. She figured the best way to keep the presentation a secret was to enlist them as speakers for the meeting.

It worked.

"It was much to our surprise," Joetta Clark said Thursday.

Swilling said she thought the Clarks should be recognized for the courage and concern it took to tell their story publicly.

"They were chosen for the unique nature of what they had done," Swilling said. "This is the first time we have given the award to a couple."

Swilling said she met the Clarks several years ago, when she was serving as a volunteer for Shepherd's Way, a private Gastonia alcohol and drug abuse counseling program.

Steve Clark is a civil engineer with Public Service Co. of North Carolina Inc., a Gastonia-based natural gas firm. He serves as a director of Gaston Families in Action, a family-based anti-drug program, Swilling said.

"Joetta worked as a volunteer at Shepherd's Way before she was hired (as intake coordinator) at Rotary Adolescent Treatment Center when it opened last year," Swilling said.

The Clarks became interested in chemical dependency when they discovered that two of their children had problems, she said.

"They went through a tremendously painful and difficult time as a family," Swilling said.

Swilling said the Clarks' oldest son "had been involved in the drug scene for several years" when he saw his younger sister trying to imitate him.

"He went to his parents and talked with them. They got help from Frank Edwards," Swilling said.

Edwards was then director of Shepherd's Way. Last year, he became director of the Rotary Adolescent Treatment Center near Belmont, a Rotary Club-sponsored drug treatment center for teenagers.

The daughter solved her drug problem by attending Straight, a private drug-treatment program in Atlanta.

The Clarks then presented an average of three to four programs a week for about 18 months to help other parents become aware of drug dependency and what to do about it, Swilling said.

“They haven’t done as much since Joetta became involved with the Rotary Center,” she added.

Swilling said the son now is attending college. The daughter has graduated from high school and will begin college in the spring. Even though they have talked to civic groups about their past, the Clarks asked that their children’s names not be published.

Swilling said she admired the Clarks’ willingness to disclose their story. “It’s an act of generosity that you don’t see very often, because they’re speaking from an intense personal sense,” she said.

Swilling said their story illustrates that even good parents can have problems with their children.

“Their children were no more involved in experimentation than their friends, but ended up with a problem that required professional help because they had a physical predisposition to become drug-dependent,” Swilling said. Joetta Clark said Thursday she was embarrassed by the award, but is never embarrassed to share the family story.

“We’ve been very public with it in the hopes that it would help someone else,” she said.

“A lot of this next generation is going to be faced with this,” Clark said. “If it can change some of that, being public is the least thing we can do.”

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