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Not Just for the Drunk and Famous: Ankle Bracelets That Monitor Alcohol

By JOHN ELIGON

Christopher Nelson would hardly be considered the Hollywood type. He is a beer-drinking construction worker who lives in Seattle and speaks in a carefree tone.

But Mr. Nelson, 35, could be just the adviser that Lindsay Lohan needs right about now.

About two years ago, Mr. Nelson completed six sober months wearing an ankle bracelet that monitors alcohol consumption — the same device that a judge in Los Angeles ordered Ms. Lohan to strap on last week.

Mr. Nelson got his bracelet after he was arrested for drunken driving in Queens about two years ago. It was his second drunken-driving arrest, Mr. Nelson said, so his sentence included a treatment program and six months wearing the bracelet. While he wore it, he said, it was always on his mind, he said.

“I would still go to bars, but I would just eat and drink soda,” Mr. Nelson said. “It just wasn’t worth having a beer and then dealing with whatever the repercussions would have been.”

While celebrities are apt to create a buzz when they are ordered to wear a monitoring device — Ms. Lohan, [Tracy Morgan](#), Jayson Williams and the singer Eve come to mind — the truth is that the devices are primarily used on ordinary people like Mr. Nelson.

He was skeptical of Ms. Lohan’s ability to resist temptation. “I haven’t seen a movie she’s been in, but you see all the tabloids,” he said.

Ms. Lohan will have to wear the device, a Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitoring, or Scram, bracelet, at least until her next court date, on July 6.

There have been reports that Ms. Lohan is already back on the party scene, bulky anklet and all. And then there was this tweet from Ms. Lohan herself: “can CHANEL please help me out by getting me some stickers to put on my scram bracelet so that i can at least wear a chic dress?! maybe!?”

More than 330 defendants have been ordered to wear Scram bracelets in New York City, the

majority of them in Queens, according to Kathleen Brown, a spokeswoman for Alcohol Monitoring Systems, the company that develops and monitors the devices. The court in Queens that handles drunken-driving cases, the Queens Treatment Court, requires those who are convicted and some defendants to wear the device for at least 90 days.

Justice Marcia P. Hirsch, who presides over the Queens Treatment Court, said defendants tend to be male, from their early 20s to mid-60s, are usually employed and “essentially have been functional drunks for a long time.”

The bracelet has a pump that sucks in what is known as insensible perspiration every 30 minutes, Ms. Brown said. The box attached to the bracelet contains the same mechanism as a Breathalyzer, she said, and the data it collects is uploaded through a modem and analyzed by monitors.

When someone is unsuccessful in a treatment program, a bracelet could be a better option than jail, which can disrupt the person’s life and lead to job loss, said Judge Michael J. Yavinsky, who presides over most misdemeanor drunken-driving cases in Manhattan.

“Can we somehow keep them out, monitor them and force them to be sober?” Judge Yavinsky said. “If we can do that in combination with treatment, and the person remains productive and employable and stays off the road and sober, then maybe everybody makes out better in the long run.”

Forcing a person to stay off alcohol for months can be an enlightening experience, said Joseph McCormack, chief of the vehicular crimes prosecution bureau in the Bronx.

“It allows them to realize they can live without alcohol,” he said. “The cloud of alcohol abuse lifts.” Then, he said, they begin to see how damaged their lives have become because of alcohol.

In Queens, there has been a 94 percent success rate among defendants who have worn the bracelet for the stipulated period, District Attorney Richard A. Brown said.

Those who fail do not lack for excuses, Justice Hirsch said.

There is “the NyQuil excuse,” she said: defendants say they took the medicine for a cold, not knowing the quantity one would have to drink to register a positive reading. Or there is the somebody spilled beer near me when I was in a bar excuse, Justice Hirsch said.

“We also hear environmental excuses, like ‘I had a rash; I put some cream on; it must have had alcohol in it,’ ” she said.

Mr. Nelson said he had a scary moment while wearing the bracelet when, as he was painting a truck, he spilled acetone on himself.

“Of course I freaked out,” he said. “I called the girl. I said, ‘Yo, I’m at work. I just spilled something on this thing. I don’t know if it’s going to give you a funny reading.’ ”

The woman assured him that it would be all right.

Henry Minoofar, who had to wear the bracelet for 90 days after his second conviction in five years for drunken driving in Queens, said he had no problem avoiding alcohol while he wore it. Mr. Minoofar, 57, a clothing manufacturer, often entertains clients but had an excuse ready when they asked why he was not drinking.

“I told them I was taking medication,” he said.