

# GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

## Encouraged by first-round results, anti-meth ad campaign resumes

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Their voices are young, their stories tragic.

Just 15 years old now, Jen started selling her body for methamphetamine after getting hooked when she was 11.

"I don't know anyone who's quit after using meth once or twice," she said.

She is one of eight teens featured on a new series of radio ads by the Montana Meth Project. The spots are similar to those that launched the meth prevention campaign last September, but this time around many of the kids are younger.

After a brief break, the TV, radio, billboard and print ads are back today and the Montana Meth Project will again become the state's largest advertiser.

At community forums held across the state, people Wednesday saw a glimpse of the campaign to come and heard research about how effectively it reached teens and young adults in the past eight months.

"The Montana Meth Project brand after eight months is as strong as Coca-Cola in this state," said Thomas Siebel, the billionaire and part-time Montana resident who is funding the \$6.5 million campaign.

Their research of 1,460 people, found that 90 percent saw the ads three or more times a week.

"I thought the ads were very real," said sophomore Jessica Laverdure, who attended the Great Falls screening Wednesday. "Because of the ads, me and my friends talk about meth and imagine looking like that with the teeth."

Though Siebel suspects significant results won't be seen for years, already teens and young adults' opinions about the drug are changing positively.

Surveys testing whether teens understand the risks of meth use — rotting teeth, promiscuity, stealing and brain damage — raised 10 percentage points compared with before the campaign began.

And now, teens are more likely to discourage friends from trying the drug.

Siebel said the ads are prompting parents and teachers to talk to kids about the dangers. While before the campaign nearly half of teens said they had never talked to their parents about meth, that number dropped to roughly a third when surveyed in March.

"That might be the most important thing we're doing here," he said Wednesday. "It's out of the closet."

Siebel said the billboard and newspaper ads are designed to play on teens' vanity, showing close-up pictures of rotting meth teeth and sores on a boy's face and a girl's back. (One ad appears in today's Tribune on page 5A.)

The television ads have two themes.

In two spots, teens wish to be in a car crash or be jumped in an alley — anything to keep them from the party where they first tried meth.

The other ads show teens trying meth for the first time and instantly flashing forward to their lives when they are addicted and are surrounded by junkies with pockmarked faces.

As with the early campaign, Siebel said the radio advertisements with real stories from kids are the most effective.

Hoping to capitalize on that, the project sent in documentary film crews to do similar television ads with real Montana teens. But the kids were so far gone that the focus groups couldn't imagine themselves getting that hooked.

For Great Falls 18-year-old Vance LeDeau it's not that hard to imagine.

"When the TV ads first came out, I could relate because that's how people are when they use it," LeDeau said Wednesday after seeing the new campaign.

At age 15, he thought he'd never use and never be strung out. It was a friend who seemed fine at the time who convinced him to try meth.

"The first time was fun, so I did it again. Pretty soon, I needed it just to function."

When he could no longer keep his habit to the weekends, he dropped out of school. He began selling. It was becoming a father that convinced to him to get treatment seven months ago.

He took his GED test before coming to watch the ads at the Hampton Inn on Wednesday.

"I still have dreams about using it," he said.

Montana Meth Project Executive Director Peg Shea hopes to do more research, talking to addicts to see if the advertisements and the Web site play a roll in convincing them to quit.

For now, Shea and Siebel travel the state and country, giving roughly 10 presentations a month and gathering donations from \$25 to \$10,000 to make the campaign self-sustaining in 2007.

The goal is to raise \$8 million by the end of the year to fund two more years of advertisements and research.

Shea said national media attention has brought in out-of-state donations. Now that the project has research to prove its effectiveness, she said reaching the goal would be easier.

"Things are not going to change overnight," Siebel said. "This is going to take some work. We're cautiously optimistic that we'll accomplish something significant here."