

Decatur Herald & Review
Successful Ad Campaign has Meth Addicts Telling Their Stories

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DECATUR - Although Stephanie Auburn's boyfriend convinced her that methamphetamine would make her feel good, she later felt nothing but brokenness and despair.

Auburn, 25, a soft-spoken married woman with a 2-year-old son, embarked on a four-year nightmare as a meth addict when she was a teenager.

"At first, it does make you feel really, really good," said Auburn, who recently decided to speak out about her addiction. "And then, after you're already hooked, the more you have to snort or smoke to get high.

"It makes you feel real horrible about yourself. You know it's wrong, but you do it anyway. It's like torture. It's like you're torturing yourself. You're torturing yourself by doing it, but you still do it anyway, because you want it so bad."

Auburn recently contacted the Illinois Meth Project, a public awareness campaign to prevent meth use, responding to the project's call for former addicts to speak out about the drug's effects.

"I wanted to reach out to teenagers and other people that are even thinking about doing it," Auburn said. "To let them know that I was them at one time, thinking about doing it. And then I did it - and it got me absolutely nowhere."

The project, part of a nationwide campaign that has been effective in Montana and other Western states devastated by the drug, began filling Illinois' TV and radio airwaves and billboards in February 2008. Part of the project's strategy is to let young people hear from those who have suffered from meth use.

During her fifth stint as an inpatient in a rehabilitation clinic, Auburn finally decided to sweep meth out of her life. She had undergone hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, loss of her job and home and disintegration of relationships with friends and family members. She became a living skeleton at one point, down to 75 pounds, which was a loss of almost one-third of her normal body weight of 109 on her 5-foot-3-inch frame.

"The last time I went to rehab, I actually paid attention," said Auburn, who was addicted while living in Chatanooga, Tenn. "I went because I wanted to change, because I had enough of it. It was either do that, or I was going to die."

Auburn, who has been living on the city's west side for much of the past two years, hopes to one day work as a drug addiction counselor.

Steven Mange, Illinois Meth Project director, said the campaign has had a dramatic impact on meth use in Montana since it was implemented in 2005. Mange, who previously worked for Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan as policy adviser on meth prevention, hopes for similar results in Illinois.

The anti-meth campaign was founded and largely funded by Thomas Siebel, a software inventor, former chief executive officer and philanthropist, who recently donated \$100 million to the University of Illinois.

Siebel, a U of I alumnus who lives part time on a Montana ranch, was told by a sheriff a few years ago that the state had been devastated by a methamphetamine plague. At that time, drug was linked to about half the people incarcerated or in foster care in the state.

With so many resources devoted to cleaning up meth's messes, Siebel decided to invest in meth prevention. He hired a San Francisco-based advertising agency, Venables, Bell and Partners, which interviewed jail inmates and high school students.

"They discovered that young people begin considering using the drug at 12 or 13. The target group became between 12 and 17," Mange said.

The agency mounted its campaign around the "Not Even Once" slogan.

"The campaign was unbelievably effective," Mange said. "In the first two years, they saw a 45 percent drop in youth meth use, a 70 percent decrease in workplace meth use, a 62 percent drop in meth-related crime. It's been so successful in Montana, a lot of other states became interested."

John Stevens, commander of the Central Montana Drug Task Force, said the Montana Meth Project has succeeded partly because it brought the drug into the sunlight.

"It's opened dialogue between parents and kids that never was before," said Stevens, a lieutenant with the Great Falls-based Cascade County Sheriff's Office. "It's made meth a bad thing, versus something 'we're not going to talk about.' "

Before the campaign saturated Montana's TV airwaves, young people sometimes first heard of meth when they were offered it at a party.

"Now, with the education, if they go to the same party, they're not going to take it," Stevens said.

He said the ads, in which young people are portrayed as tormented souls who resemble horror film victims of attacks by zombies or psychopaths, are not exaggerating.

"Everything you've seen in those commercials, I've seen in real life," Stevens said. "They start chasing ghost people and all that."

While Stevens acknowledged that a weird consequence in the meth downturn in Montana is an increase in powder cocaine usage, he appreciates the effectiveness of the anti-meth ad campaign.

"When 12- to 17-year-old kids reach their mid-20s, that's when you will see the major impact, because you will see a whole generation that never started," Stevens said. "I think it's great. I'm glad it's going to Illinois and other states."

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