

[Click to Print](#)[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Meth Still Grips, but Doesn't Strangle, Montana

Raw anti-drug campaign awakens state

Ted Landphair | Missoula, Montana 04 February 2010



Photo: Montana Meth Project

Adults across Montana were frightened by what they were seeing. Some hardly recognized their meth-addled teenagers.

In 2005, one in seven teenagers in the sparsely populated western state of Montana admitted to using the seductive and highly addictive street drug, methamphetamine. One in three said they saw no danger at all in smoking, injecting or snorting meth. Today, thanks to a shocking statewide campaign against meth, that's no longer the case.

In one television ad, Montanans heard a teenage girl describe her experience with meth. "When I was on meth, I swear there were, like, little crawling things in my skin," she said. "It was so real, and I, like, cut my skin open. There was nothing there. Just blood gushing out. It was really scary."

Authorities had never seen anything like it. Young Montanans of all races - rich and poor - were seeking the jolting euphoria of a chemical brew cooked from bizarre ingredients like cold medicine, drain cleaners and the ammonium nitrate fertilizer found on farm fields all over what's called Big Sky Country.



Montana Meth Project

Methamphetamine is the fastest-acting addictive agent ever known, overwhelming the brain's emotional sensors, producing powerful feelings, pleasure, euphoria.

One girl, Josie, lived in Billings, near those fields. "I am in prison right now," she said on statewide television. "My entire adolescent childhood was involved in criminal behavior and doing meth and in and out of psychiatric hospitals."

People also heard from Matthew, age 20, from Kalispell, a resort town near the majestic mountains of Glacier National Park. "The thing I'm most ashamed about is shooting up my girlfriend [with needles full of meth] so I could have all control," Matthew said. "I pawned her off on the drug dealers. I said, 'Come on, baby, we need to get high.'"

Doctors soon discovered that methamphetamine is the fastest-acting addictive agent ever known. At first, meth overwhelms the brain's emotional sensors, producing powerful feelings: pleasure, euphoria.

Just ask Marcy Brakefield. "I didn't have to eat, I didn't have to sleep," she remembers. "I could just kind of party. It made me more wired and just happy and free and powerful and all sorts of good, good things." The fear, paranoia, uncontrollable trembling and violent anger that seize most meth addicts would follow soon enough.

Marcy had been a happy, athletic teenager in a loving home. But when her older brother went off to college and she shifted to a new and bigger high school, she got, as she puts it, really bored. She started hanging with a girlfriend who was into meth. Soon Marcy was lying to her parents and stealing from them and storekeepers to support her own meth habit.



Montana Meth Project

In 2005, one in seven teenagers in the sparsely populated western state of Montana admitted to using methamphetamine.

"I've heard people say that the first time they used it was the best time ever," she says. "And I know for me, once I got a taste of how good it made me feel, I wanted more."

As meth use was exploding across Montana, Bill Slaughter was director of the state's prison system, whose inmate population doubled, seemingly overnight. Montana has abundant wilderness in which to hide meth labs, he points out, and it's a favorite turf of motorcycle gangs known to transport the drug. In Slaughter's words, Montana had become the nation's petri dish for methamphetamine use.

To its horror, Montana suddenly ranked fifth in reported meth abuse. A Rand Corporation study estimated that meth was costing the state \$300 million a year. That's lost wages, cost of law enforcement, that's incarceration, that's taking kids out of their homes for foster care, loss of work, Bill Slaughter says.

Meth touched Slaughter's own family. His son, a rookie police officer in Great Falls, shot and killed a suspect, high on meth, who had barely missed with a shot of his own. As the elder Slaughter puts it, "Everybody in Montana has a meth story; about their uncle or their son like mine, a friend. *Everybody* has a meth story."



MethProject.org

Tom Siebel's foundation had already supported causes such as homelessness when he and his wife faced off against meth.

Could the meth epidemic be thwarted? Through their family foundation, wealthy Montana rancher and software executive Tom Siebel and his wife, Stacey, decided to try. They founded and funded - with more than \$2 million over five years - the Montana Meth Project, of which Bill Slaughter is now executive director.

"We purchased more media in Montana than any other single entity," he says. "More billboards, more radio, more television. Tom actually understood something that the rest of us didn't, that the power of the media with kids is amazing. But you can't have authority figures [telling the story] because it turns them off. It has to be a peer-to-peer campaign - a raw, gritty, right-in-your-face campaign because, in fact, that's how kids communicate with each other."



Montana Meth Project

Young people's own anti-meth messages popped up in unexpected places all across Montana during the Paint the State campaign.

Everywhere they went, Montanans came face to face with stark pictures and heard sad, frightening - and true - stories of tweakers, as meth abusers are called. Is it OK to try meth? the messages asked. Not even once.

The Montana Meth Project brought immediate and gratifying results. In something called the Paint the State campaign, teenagers in 56 Montana counties created and posted almost 700 anti-meth works of art on fenceposts, building walls, even the doors of restroom stalls.

And last year, carrying petitions with 55-thousand signatures, 2,300 Montana teens converged on the statehouse in Helena in what they called a March on Meth. They beseeched the governor and legislators to kick in funds to the Montana Meth Project.

One of the marchers was Tim Seery, a Great Falls high-school sophomore.

"Today," he told the crowd on the capitol steps, "we have made the decision to march together as students from every corner of Montana, using our collective voice to speak out against methamphetamine."

The legislature committed \$1 million over two years, but that amount has since been cut in half by the budget crunch brought on by the current economic downturn.

Still, reported meth use among Montana teens has dropped 63 percent since 2005, and the latest Rand Corporation estimate of meth's financial toll on the state - \$200 million - is a third lower than it was. Incarceration levels are way down, too. The Montana Women's Prison, crammed with nearly 400 women five years ago, for instance, holds just 130 or so inmates today.



Carol M. Highsmith

Today, Marcy Brakefield is drug-free and often shares her story with Montana teenagers.


As for Marcy Brakefield, she was caught and arrested while smoking meth with her friend. "One of the hardest parts was just dealing with my own guilt." She says she let many people down. "I let myself down."

Marcy avoided jail by entering a long-term treatment program. She ran into her friend again and relapsed briefly, but says she has since been clean for six years, two months and a few days. Now fully employed, she is working toward a master's degree in addiction counseling.

Every chance she gets, she meets with Montana teens, reliving her stark story about the powerful temptation and ruinous toll of methamphetamine.

Find this article at:

<http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/american-life/Meth-Still-Grips-but-Doesnt-Strangle-Montana-83532267.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.