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With Scenes of Blood and Pain, Ads Battle Methamphetamine in Montana

By KATE ZERNIKE

KALISPELL, Mont.

The camera follows the teenager as she showers for her night out and looks down to discover the drain swirling with blood. She turns and sees her methamphetamine-addicted self cowering below, oozing from scabs she has picked all over her body because the drug made her think there were bugs crawling beneath her skin, and she lets out a scream worthy of "Psycho."

Turn on prime time television here, and chances are this or another commercial like it will interrupt.

The spots are part of the Montana Meth Project, a saturation campaign paid for by Thomas M. Siebel, a software billionaire and part-time resident who fell in love with Montana's vast skies and soaring mountains as a ranch hand in college and now wants to shock the state away from a drug that has ravaged it.

Since it began in September, the project has become the biggest advertiser in the state, blanketing radio, television, newspapers and billboards with advertisements so raw that officials quickly asked that they be removed from television before 7 p.m. Now, with other states expressing interest in the campaign, Mr. Siebel and state officials say they want to make it a national template for halting a problem that has cursed many largely poor, rural states.

The advertisements have inspired poems and raps. High school groups have replayed them in place of morning an-



Photographs by Lynn Donaldson for The New York Times

Dillon Foley, center, with members of a student antidrug group, said watching a spot was like seeing "a car wreck, you can't take your eyes off it."

nouncements and devoted newspaper issues to them. Students readily quote dialogue and characters from them and cringe recalling, for instance, how a methamphetamine-addicted teenager in one calmly plucks out her entire eyebrow, oblivious, in her drug-induced compulsion, to the blood and pain.

In a state of fewer than a million people — as one school principal said, "a small town with very long highways" — it can seem that every parent meeting turns to

talk of "those ads."

"People are talking about this like I've never seen anything in our state," said Attorney General Mike McGrath, whose office was flooded with hundreds of calls, pro and con, demanding to know who was behind the ads. "When they first came out, I couldn't walk anywhere without someone asking about it."

At Flathead High School on the edge of Glacier National Park here in northwest Montana, students complained that the

Using graphic television advertisements, the Montana Meth Project hopes to illustrate the dangers of the drug. In the spots, a girl, near right, sees a vision of herself as a scarred addict; a boy in a drug-induced rage, center, robs a family; and another girl compulsively plucks out her entire eyebrow while high.



The Montana Meth Project



Thomas M. Siebel, the billionaire who is financing the project.

television spots were too gross to watch first thing in the morning — but they did watch.

“It’s like a car wreck, you can’t take your eyes off it,” said Dillon Foley, 18. “It’s totally gross, totally graphic, you know it’s going to be bad, but all you can do is watch it go down.”

The project reflects frustration with fighting the methamphetamine problem, which began here about a decade ago and is now enough of a public concern that a meeting about it on a recent Friday night in Kalispell drew 600 people.

Like most states, Montana has restricted pseudoephedrine, the cold medicine that is the key ingredient in homemade methamphetamine, only to discover that demand for the drug remains just as high and has been met by imported methamphetamine.

State officials say the drug is responsible for 80 percent of the prison population — and 90 percent of female inmates — and about half the foster care population.

“It’s destroying families; it’s destroying our schools; it’s destroying our budgets for corrections, social services, health care,” Gov. Brian Schweitzer said. “We’re losing a generation of productive people. My God, at the rate we’re going, we’re going to have more people in jail than out of jail in 20 years.

“This isn’t just a few ads,” he said. “If this thing works, it can be a template all over rural America.”

The commercials ranked in the Top 20

on AdCritic.com, a Web site covering the advertising industry, and Mr. Siebel has been asked to speak to the National Governors Association and before a Congressional town hall meeting. People mob him at speeches around the state, offering ideas, testimonials, checks.

“You may not like the ads, but they’re effective,” said Robert A. Nystuen, the president of Glacier Bank in Kalispell, who approached Mr. Siebel after a presentation and offered to sponsor radio spots.

Peg Shea, a former drug treatment specialist who signed on as the project’s executive director in late September, said she started out a skeptic, considering most antidrug commercials “dorky.” “Then I saw these ads, and heard them,” she said. “I saw the quality and the impact.”

Mr. Siebel, who recently sold the software company he founded to Oracle, his former employer, began hearing of methamphetamine’s damage while fishing with a sheriff friend. “There’s a human tragedy of magnificent proportion taking place here,” Mr. Siebel said. “I don’t think putting everyone in jail is contributing to a solution.”

Gruesome warnings have captured teenagers’ attention.

Few people think the commercials will stop addicts; the aim is to deter new ones. While users tend to be older than 25, the project focuses on teenagers, who are at an age when decisions about drug use start.

Surveying 12- to 24-year-olds, the campaign found that most said methamphetamine was readily available; 26 percent said they had been offered the drug in the last year. A quarter did not see great risk in trying it, and more than a third saw benefits: losing weight and feeling happier or more energetic.

Mr. Siebel, 52, set out to “unsell” methamphetamine. He hired Tony Kaye, the director of the stark 1998 movie “American History X,” to make commercials graphic enough to, as he said, “break

through the clutter.”

The radio spots are particularly powerful, some say, because they use real addicts, not actors, recovering from methamphetamine addiction. One girl introduces herself: “Hi, my name is Cindy. I’m 15 years old. I’m from Browning, Montana, and I started doing meth when I was 12.” She then tells how she prostituted herself for the drug. Tim, who started using meth at age 19, talks about how using the drug cost him his home and his job and left him no memory of a period of several months, but plenty of regrets: “I did things that, you know, only God can forgive you for.”

Teenagers say the spots succeed because they are showing the effects of the drug rather than preaching.

“You see a fast-food commercial, and you want to go buy some because it looks so good,” said Marcus Hafferman, 18, a senior at Flathead High. “Or you see a car doing tricks on an ad, and you want to buy it because it looks so good. These commercials are exactly like fast food or cars, except they show how bad it is.”

Donna Feist, 18, a student at C. M. Russell High in Great Falls, agreed. “Kids are too desensitized to gore and violence,” she said. “They see gory television, gory movies, so the only thing that’s going to get their attention is blood and gore.”

Others, though, doubt that any ad can break through to jaded teenagers. “The ads are dead on, that’s exactly the way it is,” said Wendy Kongstvedt, 17, a student at Helena High School. “But it’s just another thing adults are telling us not to do.”

In the project’s survey and in interviews, parents said they had rarely before discussed the drug with their children. “The meth ads have given us a focal point,” said Matt Dale, a Helena parent whose son is 15. “Without the ads, if you say to kids, ‘Don’t do meth,’ there’s an allure; you’ve intrigued them.”

So far, the Montana Meth Project has run 30,000 minutes of advertisements on radio, 30,000 minutes on television and 150 pages in newspapers, with a budget of \$5.5 million for 2006.

It tests new advertisements in focus groups to make sure they are shocking, but not so much so that teenagers dismiss them as unlikely. It is now testing spots by a documentary filmmaker who visited hotels to film desperate and strung-out addicts, including a pregnant teenager who says she fears for her baby but soothes that fear with more methamphetamine.

Mr. Siebel, though, worries that these may simply be too real.