



Montana meth ads winning drug battle

August 22, 2008

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BBC News, Montana

They call Montana "Big Sky Country" or "The Last Best Place" - and it is easy to see why with its wide open spaces, majestic mountains and meandering rivers.

But there is a far less wholesome side to this wilderness, a problem more associated with grim urban despair - drugs.

And one drug in particular - Methamphetamine.

Also known as crystal meth, the stimulant is more addictive than heroin or crack cocaine. It is also relatively easy to get hold of the basic ingredients, including drain cleaner and cold medicines, although more dangerous to mix them.

That said, Montana's wide open spaces have provided the perfect cover for makeshift meth labs, which are used to make the deadly cocktail.

Until recently, the north-western state was ranked among the top five in the US with the worst meth problem.

Fifty percent of the children in foster care in Montana were there because of meth, while 50% of the prison population was there because of meth-related crime.

'Life-destroying'

It was a drug destroying lives, like that of Gerri Gardiner, whose daughter Angela starting using meth in school as many of those who eventually get hooked do.

Addicts talk of the initial highs, the burst of energy, the loss of weight. But for Angela it ended with depression and despair and her eventual suicide.

About a year later, Gerri's grieving father took his own life too.

"The day that meth walked into our house was the day our life took a spiral," she says.

We also met Katrina, who started taking meth when she was 11 years old - and carried on until she was 20. She got the habit from her mother.

"I did it all the time... I liked everything about it," she says. "I didn't have time for my boyfriend or my daughter."

Now she says: "I think it's retarded - I wish I had never done it."

'Un-selling meth'

Katrina managed with help to break the hold of the drugs. Many others have failed.

But fortunately for Montana, there was a rich part-time rancher in their midst. The good, among the bad and the ugly.

Tom Siebel made his millions in the computer software industry and he approached the scourge of meth as if it were any other business.

"We took an unusual approach," he said when we went to meet him at his holiday home.

"We viewed it as a consumer product, researched it as a consumer product and marketed it... or un-marketed it as a consumer product."

Mr Siebel says the task of "un-selling" meth was particularly easy because it is so nasty - "pure evil" in his words.

He then used his money to set up the Montana Meth Project.

Shock tactics

The project came up with a "shock campaign" - a series of hard hitting adverts and posters that graphically portrayed the costs of taking meth.

He brought in Hollywood directors to produce the ads, which were shown on prime-time television.

They illustrate all too well the breakdown in family relationships caused by meth, and the physical decay for those who use it - the dramatic weight loss and the scabs on the skin.

If you live in Montana, the chances are that you have almost certainly seen or heard the ads on television or radio, ending with the slogan: "Meth - not even once."

Two years on, the posters are still on prime billboard spots around the state.

The campaign has been a remarkable success.

In just two years, meth abuse in Montana has nearly halved.

Teenage meth use is down by 45% and adult use down by 75%. The state that once had the 5th biggest meth problem in the US is now ranked 39th.

More than that, about a dozen other states are now in the process of following Montana's lead.

Montana still has a problem - but one that it is now rooting out and something that will no longer overshadow its image as "The Last Best Place".