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Emotionally vested in directing

By: Robert Goldrich

Wally Pfister's world-class visual acumen is acknowledged throughout the industry, reflected in three best cinematography Oscar nominations (for his lensing of the Christopher Nolan-directed features *Batman Begins*, *The Prestige* and *The Dark Knight*), among other honors.

So it stood to reason that when he moved into the commercial director's chair, the initial assignments would be of a visual bent, tapping into his renowned eye. But now there's a move to access matters of the heart as Pfister has made major strides in broadening perceptions of his directorial mettle with an emotional, powerful, heartfelt campaign for The Montana Meth Project out of Venables Bell & Partners, San Francisco.

The centerpiece spot of the package made *SHOOT*'s "The Best Work You May Never See" gallery in January. Titled "Ben," the PSA presents a series of flashbacks, showing scenes from a meth addict's life and the now eerily silent and empty venues in which they took place. First we see dramatic glimpses of a man going into convulsions on a couch. As we see the couch today--now sans the man--a female voiceover relates that this is where he started uncontrollably convulsing.

Next we're taken to a hospital emergency room where the addict nearly died--and then to an alley adjacent to what appears to be a junkyard. The young female voiceover continues, telling us that this is where he began smoking meth again right after he got discharged from the hospital.

And then we see a dark, dank, secluded basement/supply room which is where, the woman says, he hung himself because he couldn't quit meth.

Finally we see the woman who has been speaking to us. She continues, "And this is what I said when he told me he was going to try meth." What follows is a prolonged silence as we see anguish across her face.

An end tag carries the slogan, "Meth. Not Even One," accompanied by the website address MontanaMeth.org.

"Ben" is one of four TV spots telling stories based on composites of real testimony from addicts and those close to them across the State of Montana. The campaign tells the heartbreaking stories of kids who saw their friends consumed by addiction--and who recall with guilt, regret and sadness not having said anything when informed that their friends were going to try meth for the first time.

Pfister, who directs via Santa Monica-based Independent Media, was immediately drawn to the campaign. "Having teenaged children made it easy for me to lock into this material," he related. "I had also seen what The Montana Meth Project had done in the past--visceral, powerful advertising. They didn't cower from jarring, gritty or scary. I knew going in that there would be no roadblocks as we tried to

reach kids in a real, impactful, credible way."

To bring out the emotional core of the stories, Pfister's visual sensibilities represented but one, albeit important means. Playing just as if not more prevalent roles were his casting instincts, his creation of backstories for the addicts as well as the narrators to help propel the action on screen, his collaborations with the advertising agency creative team, including art director Keith Scott and copywriter Paul Johnson, and a close-knit working rapport with editor Paul Martinez of Arcade, Los Angeles.

"This was a breakthrough campaign for me as a director, being called upon to provide so much more beyond just my eye," said Pfister who added that the work elicited positive responses from movie studios which relayed on to him prospective scripts to direct.

"They respond to things that are dramatic and that have impact from an emotional standpoint. It was great to see new perceptions form about what I can take on as a director." The response from the advertising community was also an eye opener as Venables Bell & Partners came right back to Pfister to direct a Super Bowl commercial for Vizio starring Beyonce and entailing ambitious visual effects from MassMarket.

This adds to a body of spot work directed by Pfister over the past couple of years which spans such clients as Verizon, Subaru and Rolling Rock. He first saw the developing script and boards for the Montana Meth campaign as he was wrapping cinematography on the Nolan-directed feature *Inception*, which is slated for wide release this summer.

"It's been a great, ongoing education working with a master like Chris Nolan for ten years, watching him get great performances out of actors--from Leonardo DiCaprio in *Inception* to Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight*, Al Pacino in *Insomnia*, Michael Caine and Hugh Jackman in *The Prestige*. Chris has been a mentor and I learn and absorb so much from each of our collaborations."

In some respects, Pfister was able to apply those lessons to the public service campaign on behalf of The Montana Meth Project.

"It's always been understood that I would deliver the visuals as a director. But I was pining to play with performance, to tell full emotional stories with impact--and with hopefully enough impact to get youngsters to think long and hard about their choices," said Pfister.

"I felt I was able to draw from my twenty years of doing movies and being around some of the best directors in the world. And to be able to draw on that to potentially make a positive difference in the lives of kids that Montana Meth Project is trying to reach means a lot to me."