

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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## Graphic assault on meth

### Ads make impact in North Idaho

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**A motorist drives past the Idaho Meth Project billboard on Seltice Way in Coeur d'Alene May 29.**

#### On the Web

For more information about the Idaho Meth Project, go to [www.idahomethproject.org](http://www.idahomethproject.org).

The signs of methamphetamine use are all over North Idaho. Now, thanks to an ad campaign aimed at Idaho's youth and young adults, the signs that are tied to the chemical concoction are more obvious than ever.

The cracked and decaying teeth. The weeping sores and sunken cheeks. The devastated families and sense of hopelessness. The message from the Idaho Meth Project is simple: not even once.

Through graphic advertisements that portray in unnerving detail the horrid costs of using the homemade drug, the group is hoping to reduce first-time meth use from the Panhandle to the southern plateaus.

The Idaho Meth Project, which was carried over to the state last year from the similar campaign that launched in Montana in 2005, is a wide-scale prevention program featuring public service messages, public policy and various community outreach initiatives. Since the project was founded in the Big Sky state by billionaire businessman Thomas Siebel, organizations have sprung up in half a dozen states including Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona and Hawaii.

Megan Ronk, executive director of Idaho's Boise-based campaign, said their goal is to reach – even inundate – the public before it's too late. The hard-hitting imagery is based on years of research, with several thousand people interviewed in annual surveys that track the project's impact.

#### **The goal: reducing first-time use**

"Our primary goal, and our reason for being, is to reduce first-time meth use among teens and young adults," Ronk said. "The ads are purposefully shocking and put up in places where there is high traffic and people are going to see it. People need to see what's happening in their community, and people need to see the effects of meth use."

Unfortunately, because meth use is such a pervasive problem in the area, more pictures and other notices are going up all the time. Currently there are 55 billboards placed throughout the state – 10 in North Idaho. The nonprofit campaign, which operates on an annual budget of \$1.7 million, also has advertisements running on about 40 radio stations, in high school newspapers, and online sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

“Certainly North Idaho isn’t immune to the problem. I would say it has definitely received a proportional percentage of the advertising,” Ronk said. “Through the compilation of ads...our objective is to reach 70 to 80 percent of teens and young adults three to five times a week.”

According to the Idaho Meth Project Web, site the drug “is the number one drug problem in Idaho. The financial and social consequences of meth abuse are devastating. Meth is increasingly gaining popularity among Idaho’s most vulnerable – teens and young adults.”

### **A firsthand reminder**

For Sandpoint resident Cynthia Miller, the billboard that hangs over her workplace in Athol is a welcome reminder of her firsthand addiction to the toxic soup nearly 22 years ago. Right above the restaurant, an Idaho Meth Project poster with a young man’s face, pocked with open wounds and decaying teeth, declares: “Actually, Doing Meth Won’t Make It Easier to Hook Up.”

While some customers have expressed their discomfort with the graphic ads lingering over a restaurant, it serves as a constant reminder for how Miller’s life could have been.

As a youth in Vancouver, Miller spent six years using everything from crack and heroin to opium and meth. Finally, it took a heart-wrenching edict from mom for Miller to finally kick her drug addiction. It took a year and moving away from the area for her to get clean.

“It’s a demon that eats at you. It will turn you into someone you never wanted or thought you’d be,” said the now 41-year-old Miller, in between taking orders and serving pizzas at KKJ’s Pizza Place in Athol. “It finally took something my mom said for me to get clean. My mom told me that I didn’t respect her love. That has stuck with me,” Miller, a mother of three young and successful adults, said. “It’s a monster. If you can’t get more, you’ll find a way to get more – it wants you to. You’ll steal for it.

“I put my mom and dad through some hell. I thank the good lord that my family was there to help me through it,” she said.

Miller said she’s glad to see the Idaho Meth Project ads, though she said that some people question their placement. They capture the same message her mom once told her, she said. And they don’t exaggerate the truth, she emphasized.

The drug can tear families apart, while letting everything else, an education and even personal hygiene, fall to the wayside.

“I didn’t get to see those things when I was younger. You will get sores on your body and you will pick at them. Yeah, you will go to jail. It won’t take you far,” Miller said. “So I’m glad they are doing it. These signs are already helping our youth understand the dangers of meth.”

## **Mixed feelings about graphic signs**

KKJ's owner Dan Holmes said that he has mixed feelings about the powerful picture above his restaurant. "Ultimately I feel they are necessary. There is a problem in the area, and we definitely support the meth project altogether," Holmes said. "However, I would prefer it wasn't above the pizza place. A number of our customers have said it's not very advertising. ... So it's kind of a Catch-22. If it meant helping somebody get off drugs, then I would prefer it be up there."

Ronk said that the eye-catching ads have shown early signs of success.

"In one year of the campaign we've seen some pretty significant changes in how young people in Idaho view meth," with a 63 percent of teens and more than three-quarters of young adults saying there is a great risk in trying meth, she said.

Just as important, Ronk continued, is that the project has served as a catalyst in sparking conversations between adults and their children when they drive by a billboard or see a TV ad. And the bulk of the project's feedback has been positive, she said, with very few complaints about ad placement (TV spots are only on after 7 p.m.) and even more people offering to volunteer in their community.

"Honestly, we've been almost overwhelmed by the response," Ronk explained.

## **Encouraging signs in schools**

Mona Stafford, an English teacher and adviser at Lake Pend Oreille High School, said she's seen signs that the ad campaign is accomplishing its goal in the classrooms. The alternative school, in a partnership with Idaho Meth Project, hosts an annual March Against Meth event where guest speakers offer their stories and many of the students offer their own experiences of friends or family members touched by an addiction.

"We started the March Against Meth because we had, in my classroom, a wall of photos of known meth abusers – some of them our former students," Stafford said. "It's designed for our high school to be informing the community. A lot of the kids have been there through meth abuse either with family members, or themselves... It's run by the kids and I think they get a sense that they are really helping the community."

Since the march launched three years ago, she added, "I'm not seeing what I used to see, so I think it is working. The general consensus is that it's working, it is a no-no."

For Miller, she's glad to discuss her past so she can persuade others. As a testament to the drug's powerful pull, and the strength it takes to overcome it, she said she wants to do her part to help others through the hell of meth addiction.

"Peer pressure is one of the worst things out there. I wanted my kids to know what it does to you," she offered. "I'll always help anybody who is on it. I'm honest with people because there is no reason to be ashamed if I can help somebody. You have to be stronger than the drug because if you're not, you won't care about anything and it will take over. I'm just glad I had the strength and support from my family to get through it. I didn't let the monster beat me, I beat it."