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'Meth abuse costs Georgia an estimated \$1.3 billion'

Sunday conversation with ... James B. Langford

By Bill Hendrick
For the AJC



James B. Langford heads the Georgia Meth Project, which raises awareness about the dangers of the drug.

James B. Langford has his hands in so many things — including dirt in archaeological digs — that he's often asked how he finds time to run the companies and nonprofits he's founded, and now the Georgia Meth Project, which aims to fight the state's burgeoning problem with the illicit drug.

"I'm a pretty energetic guy, and my passions give me the fuel I need to get a lot done, I guess," said Langford, a 57-year-old Calhoun native. The University of Georgia graduate is now in charge of battling a worsening methamphetamine epidemic. He was asked to head

Georgia's effort by longtime friend Lee Shaw, a scion of Shaw Industries, a flooring manufacturer headquartered in Dalton.

Q. How did you, and before you Lee Shaw, get involved in the meth battle?

A. Lee was invited by [former state] Attorney General Thurbert Baker to come to a meeting of business leaders in 2008 to hear about the meth problem. He was not sure why he was invited and he expected to politely bow out of participation. But he was horrified to learn about the seriousness of the problem and its impact on families and communities. Lee committed to help out, and he soon was the logical choice to be chairman and chief sponsor of the Georgia Meth Project, which is part of a very large national effort.

Q. How did you become the "logical choice"?

A. Lee convinced me that the meth problem is urgent. It affects people but it also affects businesses and the state's economy. He runs several companies as part of his family duties, so he needed somebody to focus on this full time. He convinced me the problem needed a leader.

Q. So what exactly is the Georgia Meth Project?

A. It is a large-scale prevention program aimed at significantly reducing first-time meth use through public service messaging, public policy and community outreach.

Q. Where does the money come from?

A. Contributions of private individuals, corporations and foundations.

Q. What is being done in Georgia?



A. We have put up billboards, saturated airwaves, used TV ads that can be hard to watch. They are graphic but realistic depictions of meth use and addiction. We need to raise \$18 million to pay for our campaign, most from business and private foundations. Ads cost a lot of money, but if they keep people from trying meth, they will pay off. My job is to tell the story in order to raise the funds we need.

Q. I didn't realize that meth was such a big problem.

A. It is. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, Atlanta is a strategic hub for methamphetamine and other drug trafficking by Mexican drug cartels. The widespread use of methamphetamine has had a devastating impact on Georgia's economy and communities.

Q. What is the impact?

A. Meth abuse costs Georgia an estimated \$1.3 billion annually, including expenses related to law enforcement, family and social services, treatment, and lost productivity. Forty-two percent of child endangerment cases in Georgia involve meth, and 43 percent of federal convictions in Georgia are meth related.

Q. What's the genesis of the Georgia Meth Project?

A. Our effort is modeled after the Montana Meth Project that started out there in 2005. It's credited with reducing adult meth use in that state by 70 percent. Six other states have similar programs. Now Georgia does, the first Southern state to have such a program. We got a small amount of money from the Seibel Foundation, which has paid \$26 million for research, development and production of TV ads and billboards used in a number of states.

Q. Let's change the subject. What's another passion?

A. I run the Coosawattee Foundation. We help preserve archaeology sites, and we conduct public education projects. My motivation is protecting the past, protecting our culture, doing public education. And being able to go out physically and do archaeology myself. I love getting out in the dirt. That's what we try to do.

The Sunday Conversation is edited for length and clarity.