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Red Ribbon Week: Georgia Meth Project doesn't beat around bush

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The ad has the tempo of a slasher scene, with its own “Psycho” shower.

The low key intro begins with a teen girl talking to a friend on the phone. She gets in the shower and wets her hair.

Then she looks down.

Blood is swirling around the drain. As she turns, her eyes widen and she screams.

Behind her is an apparition, hollow-eyed and filthy, teeth decayed and face splotched with sores. It’s her, months later, a meth addict.

“Don’t do it,” says the spectral methhead. “Don’t do it.”

The words "Not even once" flash on the screen.

This television ad is brought to you by the Georgia Meth Project, which pays solely for air time, the commercial produced years ago.

Among the methamphetamine effects it illustrates is this:

America has come far from the once-iconic egg-frying “this is your brain on drugs” TV campaign, the message moving from late-night public service announcements to prime-time advertising slots.

And like meth itself, such ads take a lot of work to make, and cost money.

Each costs from $400,000 to $800,000 to produce, and $20,000 to $40,000 for one play on prime-time TV, 7 p.m. to 1 a.m., $1.2 million every three months to air during shows such as “Dancing With the Stars,” “Desperate Housewives” and “The Biggest Loser.”

The aim is to have 80 percent of teens see one of the ads four times a week. The target audience ages are 12-17, then 18-24, then parents of any age.

Ninety-five percent of the Georgia Meth Project’s annual $6 million budget goes into air time. The only ads it pays to produce are radio spots in which Georgia teens tell of their meth addiction.

Meth campaign research showed the way to convey the meaning was not to have some authority figure fry an egg and say, “This is your brain on drugs,” but have young survivors talk to peers.

The Georgia Meth Project took a lot of effort and a lot of money. But meth takes more.

Based on 2005 data, a study published in 2009 showed that meth cost Georgia $1.3 billion a year in law enforcement, lab cleanup, health care, foster care, incarceration and prosecution. It cost the country $23 billion a year.

Meth in many ways is a poor man's drug, made from what he can buy at a store with a recipe, and cook up in a trailer out in the woods.

Like much of the drug, the campaign against it was born in the country.

But the man who birthed it was rich, a champion salesman in technology and multimedia.

Tom Siebel started as a salesman and became vice president of Oracle USA. Later he was chief executive of Gain Technology, a multimedia software company. Then he started Siebel Systems. Then he bought a ranch in Montana. Then he learned about meth.

"He made four or five billion dollars, went to Montana, bought him a big ranch ... and he thought there was something wrong with some of his ranch hands, couldn't quite put his finger on it, felt the same way about the little town," said Jim Langford, Georgia Meth Project executive director.

"He had Saturday morning breakfast with the sheriff, and that's where he got this information. The sheriff said, 'Yeah, we got a meth problem in this town, and in the state.' And Tom really got interested in that."

Siebel thought about the drug and its consequences. Notoriously addictive, meth causes so much collateral damage that to encircle and attack all its consequences at once would require a massive mobilization of resources.

But if no one used meth to begin with, no one would be addicted.

Siebel first invested $25 million in baseline research. The Montana Meth Project was launched in 2005.

Montana is still the Wild West. Its largest cities are comparable to Columbus. Meth's nickname, "crank," comes from bikers storing it in their crank cases in the 1960s and '70s. Out West, its outlaw origin fit right in. And high in the mountains of Montana, few get electricity, much less TV.

But they have battery-powered radios.

Ads extolling the dangers of meth bloomed like wildflowers in the spring. On the radio, Montana teens talked about robbing their parents to buy meth, about getting siblings addicted, about doing anything to keep doing the drug.

And in the end they were left with guilt and regret, not so much for what they lost, but what they took from others.

Four years later, a study gauged the impact of the first meth project targeting first-time use in Montana, the first state to try this.

Among teens, meth use dropped 63 percent. The cost dropped from $300 million to $200 million.

"Meth continues to place a significant economic burden on our state," read the report from the state attorney general and federal Centers for Disease Control.

Langford came home in 1997.

"I ran technology companies for 20 years. I was with Coca-Cola in South America, and I went back to Harvard, to the business school, and came back to Georgia," said the Georgia Meth Project executive director.

He grew up in Calhoun. His father was a longtime legislator, his mother a community activist. He had a Harvard MBA and had started his own technology companies.

His father, Beverly Langford, served four terms each in the Georgia House and Senate.

The Langfords were close to former governor and President Jimmy Carter. Jim Langford's older sister married Carter's son, Jack.

Jim Langford learned about running regional political campaigns in the '70s when Carter was elected president. His mother was active in public service, building parks and other amenities.

Through his parents' influence, Jim Langford developed an interest in conservation, preserving natural resources and historic sites.

Coming home, he started working with Lee Shaw, who owned land next to the Etowah Indian mounds, once home to a native culture that was thriving when Spanish explorers first arrived in the 1550s.

"Lee and I got to know each other real well, 10 or 12 years ago, when I was back up there," Langford said.

Langford headed Georgia's Trust for Public Land and started a nonprofit called the "Million Mile Greenway," helping communities with nature trails.

By the time he came home, Langford had been gone from Calhoun a quarter-century, and life in Gordon County had changed.

He noticed old family farms going up on the market, not because of a sour economy, but because longtime landowners' descendants had sacrificed all they had for meth.

"When we moved back to Calhoun in '97, I looked around and went, 'Man, there's something strange going on here in this community; something's not quite right,'" he recalled.

The problem hit closer to home when a child from the Langfords' extended family came into their care, a 2-year-old girl whose parents were jailed for meth.

"The mother had been a user; the father had been a dealer," he said. "He was black and she was white. The father's grandmother had kept me as a child."

When the girl's grandparents said they already were overwhelmed with other children, Langford's wife and mother took the child in. "We thought it would be 90 days until her parents got something worked out," he said. "We had her for five years. She is finally now with a grandparent."

When in 2008 Lee Shaw asked Langford to head a Georgia Meth Project based on the Montana model, Langford didn't believe he had time.

He had devoted himself to preservation. "I was doing more conservation work in preserving archaeology sites — that's a big part of my background — and doing public education programs in archaeology."

He gave Shaw 30 minutes to explain the program, and in 20 minutes heard the striking statistics of meth's effect on crime, health costs and foster care.

Then he learned Siebel was involved.

From his background, he knew about Siebel. He had been a shareholder in Siebel Systems. Langford agreed to head the Georgia Meth Project, and became the state project's executive director Jan. 1, 2009. His experience with political campaigns helped.

“It’s very entrepreneurial and you’ve got to move fast,” he said. “This is a lot like a political campaign. It’s more like a three- or four-year political campaign instead of a one-year political campaign: You’ve got to go out and you’ve got to raise money; you’ve got to tell a compelling story; you’ve got a sense of urgency. You’re going to have to spend money on advertising.”

But the advantage to using the Montana template was that Georgia didn’t have to spend money making ads. The ads were made.

“That’s a big deal, so the donors know that their money’s not going into somebody’s pocket in Hollywood,” he said. “That money’s already been spent, and we know the ads work. The money goes directly into the air time.”

Plus Shaw’s family foundation supplies office space, so donors know their money’s not going to overhead.

The Georgia Meth Project’s now recruiting and training volunteers for grassroots work, as the campaign goes on.

What will Georgians see next?

“What they’ll see next is the continuation of these ads through December, all the same ads that you’ve been seeing rotating around,” Langford said.

“In March of next year, it will be a whole series of new ads…. What they’ll see right now that’s beginning to happen are these community events. It means people setting up a booth at a Friday night football game, for example.”

Booths will have banners and teen volunteers in T-shirts handing kids black “Not Even Once” bracelets, and applying water-based tattoos with the same slogan.

“Remember our target market is 12- to 17-year-olds. They’re not going to listen to me, a 57-year-old. They’re not going to listen to a high school principal. They’re not going to listen to a high school teacher. They will listen to parents, more than you think, and they’ll listen to other teens.”

And unlike viewing an old egg-frying anti-drug ad, they’ll get a hefty dose of reality, explicitly.

“We want these stories to be real. There’s great attention to detail in these ads, so some smart-aleck 18-year-old can’t say to a 14-year-old, ‘No, no, no, that’s not what really happens. That’s not how you use this drug,’” Langford said. “The folks at Siebel are pretty good about saying, ‘Don’t say things that aren’t true. Don’t exaggerate claims.’”

So where is Georgia now, in its war on meth?

“I think it’s a raging battle,” Langford said. “My wife teaches sixth grade in public school, and every once in a while, a kid will come to school smelling, as they say, like cat urine, which is this strong smell of the manufacturing of the drug, and they’ll have to bring that child in and see if he or she is OK, and do something with them for their own safety. There’s still a lot of that going on.”