

Missoulian

Meth movie pulls no punches, airs at Wilma, on HBO

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Cheryl, a 10-year meth addict, tried to kill herself while on meth, slamming her car into a tree at 90 mph. She ended up in a wheelchair. Her story is part of the "Montana Meth" documentary that will be shown on HBO next month.

The Montana Meth Project's newest anti-meth bullet is an hourlong documentary that will play to a national audience next month on HBO.

Besides the Montana lawmakers who got a glimpse of "Montana Meth" last month, those attending the opening of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival this Thursday will be the first in the nation to view it. HBO has made it available free of charge.

The documentary ups the shock factor of the Montana Meth Project television, print, billboard and radio ads by a significant factor, showing Montana teens sticking needles in their arms and necks, pregnant meth addicts and a gruesome tooth extraction at the Women's Prison in Shelby.

"This was a difficult, ugly, cold film to make," said director Eames Yates, a former newsman and documentary filmmaker who spent the winter of 2005-2006 in every corner of the state with his crew. Yates spoke to the Missoulian by phone last week.

The film is entirely bankrolled by the Montana Meth Project, and provides no counterbalancing view to the "epidemic" status of methamphetamine widely reported by the media, though U.S. Department of Health and Human Services statistics and surveys of teenagers themselves indicate a seven-year slide in meth use. (www.drugabusestatistics.samhsa.gov).

Yates, who made HBO's 2003 "Crank: Made in America," one of the first documentaries about rural meth use, fully supports the Montana Meth Project's goals, calling billionaire Thomas Siebel's anti-drug push "a fantastic educational campaign against meth."

"Tom Siebel is one of the few people who puts his money where his mouth is," Yates said. Siebel served as the executive producer of "Montana Meth." Several states are now considering importing the Montana Meth Project ads, which have run in the media now for 16 months.

The film can be brutal. It takes you into the back alleys of Kalispell with teenagers injecting drugs in their necks and arms, and to the Crow Reservation, where tribal leaders discuss the "plague" of meth. The tooth-extraction scene is particularly gruesome.

Peg Shea, a former Missoula drug-prevention expert and the executive director of the Montana Meth Project, calls the film "heart-rendering, provocative and sad."

"This is what you work with and deal with when you work with individuals who are addicted to meth," said Shea. "It's really furthering our mission with a really explicit and genuinely reality-based perspective."

The portrait of methamphetamine in "Montana Meth" is clear: Do meth once, and you've begun a downward spiral that leads to addiction, joblessness, hopelessness, toothlessness, prison and death.

As Yates said: "It's just as deadly as playing Russian roulette."

It follows the story of Weasel, a 22-year-old Chippewa-Cree meth addict, who lives in a filthy basement apartment with his meth-addicted girlfriend.

"It's just pure evil, and I hate myself for just doing it right now, but that won't stop me from doing more," says Weasel, after taking a hit off his meth pipe. Weasel has been using meth since he was 11.

It trails Crystal, a 22-year-old Kalispell woman who injects meth into her neck and gets high with a group of Kalispell teenagers as young as 15.

"It's not just us punk teenagers," says Crystal. "A lot of people are doing this."

It takes the viewer to the Crow Indian Reservation, where tribal leaders and educators say meth is exacting a terrible toll on Crow culture.

"Meth is so easy to get on the reservation, and it's cheap," says Louella Johnson, a teacher at Lodge Grass Elementary School. "Young kids can get their hands on it. I'm afraid we're going to have a tribe full of zombies."

The Native perspective was necessary in any portrayal of meth in Montana, Yates said.

"There is no way you can go to a state like Montana and try to illuminate or depict the problem without taking into consideration the Native American population," he said. "I felt that the Indian nations, the tribes, are the real Montana."

In making the film, Yates got unprecedented access to Montana meth addicts. He did so by "pounding the pavement, knocking on doors," talking to teens involved in rehab programs, and "ingratiating myself with law enforcement, on every level."

That approach explains why there are no soft portrayals of meth use in "Montana Meth," and no discussion of actual meth trends in Montana and the United States, which many journalists have found to be at odds with horror stories about an "epidemic" regularly reported in the mainstream media.

Investigative reports by Jacob Sullum, author of "Saying Yes: In Defense of Drug Use," and a recent report by the Sentencing Project, a drug-policy advocacy group, have questioned the claims of anti-meth groups like the Montana Meth Project, calling the attention placed on the drug far out of perspective to its actual dangers, both in the media and in U.S. drug policy.

But in making "Montana Meth" and "Crank: Made in America," Yates is convinced the drug is highly addictive and every bit the plague it's reported to be.

"This is about young people who have yet to be corrupted, and yet are corrupted and wiped out just trying it once," he said. "And by trying it once, you're screwed. Therein lies the illumination of just how horrible this drug is."

See 'Montana Meth'

The world premiere of "Montana Meth" will be held at the Wilma Theatre this Thursday at 6:30 p.m., as the kickoff to the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. Admission is free on a first-come basis. A discussion will follow with filmmaker Eames Yates.