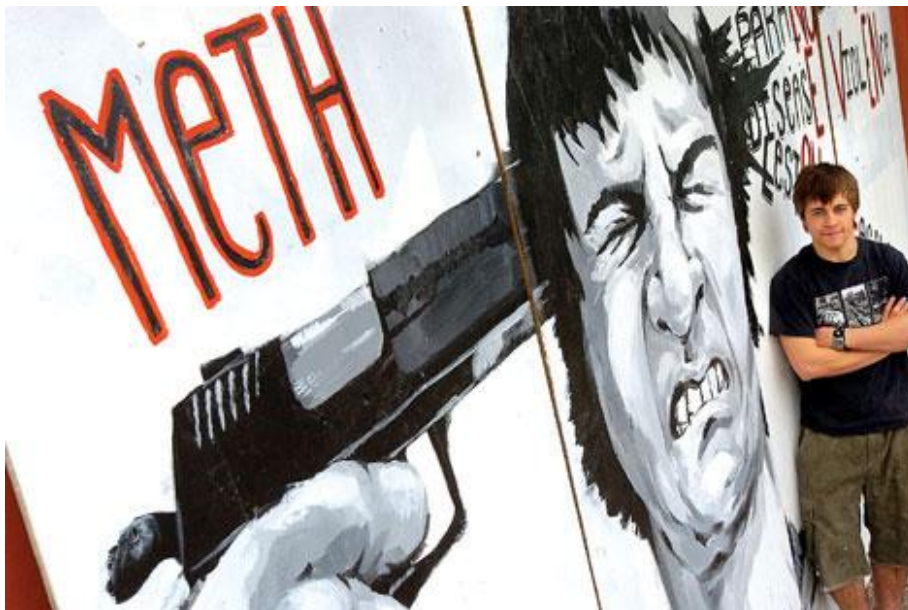




Powerful messages produced in print Book documents 'Paint the State' art campaign

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By: Nancy Kimball



Kalispell artist and Flathead High School student Kenny Yarus, 17, was part of a statewide effort that produced more than 660 pieces of public artwork as part of the Montana Meth Project's 2006 "Paint the State" project. The organization recently published a 56-page book featuring more than 100 images, including this one by Yarus, portraying the dangers of meth use. Jennifer DeMonte/Daily Inter Lake

When the Montana Meth Project started its Meth: Not Even Once campaign, the television and billboard images were graphic and disturbing.

That's the way Thomas Siebel — who, with his wife, has been funding the project since 2005 through the Thomas and Stacey Siebel Foundation — wants it.

Consequences of methamphetamine addiction are beyond disturbing. They have been devastating, particularly in Montana.

So when the foundation last summer launched Paint the State, a first-of-its-kind public art contest and statewide community action program, organizers likely expected some hard-hitting art from the teens who were encouraged to put the message out to their own communities.

They got it.

A newly published 56-page book documenting more than 100 of the 660 works created for Paint the State shows the wide range of formats teens used.

They plastered images on the sides of cows and sheep, a barn roof, sidewalk benches, wrecked vehicles, a grain silo, fences, teepees and more.

Their messages pulled no punches:

“Shattered by Meth.”

“Meth, the Kiss of Death.”

“Meth Eats the Heart and Soul.”

“It’s an Issue of Life or Meth.”

Each entry included the campaign’s theme: “Not Even Once.”

Kalispell teen Kenny Yarus, whose art is featured inside the book’s back cover, went big and bold with his billboard on the side of the Tire-Rama store.

“I knew how big a problem meth was in the community,” Yarus said.

He created a powerful billboard of a young man putting a gun to his head. The gun was labeled “Meth.” Exploding out the other side were consequences: Paranoia. Theft. Disease. Violence. Lesions. Ceaseless Desperation.

He highlighted letters to spell out the campaign’s theme, “Not Even Once.”

The billboard was too powerful for some, who asked police to have it removed after just a couple days on display at Tire-Rama. Yarus complied and stashed it in the back of his garage.

“Some people have family members who kill themselves, and I can understand it was hard for them,” Yarus said. “But I had a lot of people tell me it was an appropriate symbol to use. [Meth] is pretty destructive.”

The 17-year-old Flathead High School junior, who plans an art career after his 2008 high school graduation, won \$2,000 for his second-place finish in the Flathead County judging for the Paint the State campaign.

This spring, he is finishing up his participation with Leaders of Tomorrow, a United Way project to develop leadership lifestyles in Flathead Valley’s high school juniors.

He volunteers with other organizations, such as Discovery Developmental Center.

Wherever he has a platform, he said, he stands up against any drug use.

“They say that marijuana isn’t bad, but I know the social circles that can lead to” meth use, he said.

He said he’s watched it destroy classmates’ lives — they get addicted and drop out of school, or they get dismissed from school after falling into meth’s troubled web.

“But the horror stories are more with adults,” Yarus said. “They do bad things, then they have kids who get messed up on it.”

A recent conversation with Flathead District Court Judge Ted Lympus, he said, offered some encouraging news. The intensity of Montana Meth Project television ads, he said, and the state's ban on over-the-counter sales of medicines containing pseudoephedrine, a common ingredient for home-cooked meth, have had an impact.

"I do know that meth [use] has gone down," Yarus said, based on what he sees around school and town. "People think meth is just trashy. The general population of the school knows what meth does. People know it's just gross."

The Paint the State book captures the spirit of the project, with images of artwork and color photos of teens in action.

Commentary from artists and others touched by the project are included throughout.

"The number of teens that participated in this project, and the quality of the work they produced, really turned this into a true grassroots effort and one of the most successful public art projects ever executed," Montana Meth Project Chairman Mike Gullledge said.

"The fact that so many kids saw value in the 'Not Even Once' message, and came up with their own ways of conveying that sentiment to their peers, shows just how important the anti-meth issue is to teens in the state."

Montana artist Russell Chatham awarded the statewide grand prize last August to Alexa Audet, 16, of Broadwater County. Her winning mural is displayed in a two-page spread in the center of the book.

The book is available for a \$50 donation, which can be made online at <http://www.paintthestate.org/book.aspx> or by calling toll free 1-888-366-6384.