

## Fighting for a cause

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The Daily Inter Lake  
January 5, 2009

Flathead native takes leadership role in Montana Meth Project

A few years ago, Tony Brockman couldn't name anyone who used methamphetamines.

Brockman, 22, grew up in the Flathead Valley. He graduated from Flathead High School in 2004. He assumed meth was something people did in Eastern Montana "because they were bored over there."

That assumption proved false in early 2007. He was interning with the state Legislature in Helena as part of his role in the University of Montana's student government. On the agenda at that Legislative session was a showing of the HBO documentary "Montana Meth."

The film's opening scene took place in the Flathead, Brockman said. People he'd gone to high school with were on screen talking candidly about their drug use.

Like others across the state, Brockman already was familiar with the Montana Meth Project. He'd seen the intense, graphic television commercials, which began in September 2005. He'd heard radio spots and seen billboards across the state. But until he saw his former classmates on screen, Brockman didn't realize how prevalent the drug really was.

"That's when it hit home for me," he said. "I said, 'I have to get involved. I know those kids.'"

For the rest of his time in Helena, Brockman promoted the documentary and started talking to people about the project.

Thomas Siebel, a Montana rancher and businessman, founded the project in February 2005. At the time, Montana ranked fifth in the nation for meth abuse.

The nonprofit project is based in Missoula, which was perfect for the UM student, who suddenly found himself passionately invested in the project's message.

Brockman has spoken to large groups, including the state Legislature and the state teachers' union, about

the Meth Project. He is collecting signatures for a petition to get \$2 million in funding for the project from the state.

He is also helping organize March Against Meth, a rally for high-school students in Helena in February.

It's an impressive commitment from someone who has never been personally affected by the drug. Brockman was a shy, clean-cut kid who never experimented with drugs in school.

"I never even thought about doing that stuff," he said. "I thought that kind of stuff didn't happen in the Flathead Valley. ...

"The valley is perceived to be a quieter place," he said. "I've learned since then it's certainly not. There are the same problems here in the Flathead that people face across the state and across the country. We just don't see them — or choose not to see them."

Brockman acknowledged that he is someone who cares deeply about important causes. In addition to the Meth Project, Brockman volunteers with the American Cancer Society and is a student senator with the Associated Students of the University of Montana. He has spent time with the state Legislature in Helena and has interned in Washington, D.C.

"I pretty much do not sleep," he said with a smile. "I'm a person who cares very much about how my generation is represented."

His generation, he explained, is facing many challenges previous generations have not grown up with.

"My generation is the first to have to deal with global terrorism, global climate change, huge debt," he said. "We don't need something as powerful as meth to derail us from the important issues."

The Meth Project seems to be helping fight that battle, he added. Since 2005, meth use among Montana high-school students has decreased by 45 percent. From fifth in the nation in 2005, Montana is now 40th in terms of meth use.

Eliminating the meth problem will ease taxpayers' burdens by as much as \$100 million over the next decade, Brockman added. In 2005, half of the inmates in the state prison system were there because of meth and half of all foster-care admissions were meth-related.

"By getting more people involved and educating more people, we'll be able to stop this from happening," Brockman said. "Little kids don't need to deal with it. ... It destroys lives so easily."

That's why Brockman has been helping with the Meth Project's petition campaign. If the legislature will allot \$2 million for the project, it will be able to have an even greater impact.

It's a huge investment," he said of the funding the project is requesting. "But it's definitely a smart

investment. If it can happen in the Flathead Valley, it can happen anywhere in the state and anywhere in the country."

The nonprofit initially was funded by a grant from the Siebel Foundation. Since 2005, businesses across the state have given money to the project.

"This next \$2 million will be able to do so much more to reduce first-time meth use in our state," Brockman said.

He and others from the project, along with hundreds of high-school students from across the state, will present the petition signatures to the Legislature in February. Students will be bused to Helena, have a rally at Helena High School "to get everyone pumped" and then they'll march to the Capitol.

"We will be taking the petition drive and will present stacks and stacks of petitions to the governor, the lieutenant governor and the Legislature," Brockman said. "We'll show them there's a need for this, for financial support."

His face lights up when he talks about the rally, and his enthusiasm for the project is evident in every word.

"I'm excited to be part of it, to help organize it, to just get others excited about it. We're not going to let this powerful drug beat us," he said.

"Soon Montana will be 50th in the nation for meth use. We're going to beat this very destructive drug."

After Brockman graduates from the University of Montana in the spring, he hopes to spend a couple of years in Washington, D.C. working for a senator or congressman. He will continue his involvement with the Meth Project for as long as he's in Montana.

The project has affiliates in Arizona, Idaho, Illinois and Arizona, and Brockman hopes someday to see affiliates in the remaining states.

"It affects every state just as it affects Montana," he said of meth. "Maybe in a couple of years I'll be able to get involved with the Virginia Meth Project. Wherever I am, hopefully there will be a meth project to get involved with."

On the Web: [www.montanameth.org](http://www.montanameth.org)



Flathead Valley native and University of Montana student Tony Brockman is committed to educating young people, educators and legislators about the dangers of meth use as part of his work with the Montana Meth Project. "I'm excited to be part of it, to help organize it, to just get others excited about it. We're not going to let this powerful drug beat us," he said.