

Regional News

Former meth user shares story at conference

By MICHAEL MOORE of the Missoulian
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Marcy Brakefield was the sort of kid the Montana Meth Project aims to reach.

Brakefield, now 24, got her start with drugs in the eighth grade and had graduated to meth by the 10th.

Even so, she was a smart kid who made good grades and played sports in Kalispell. Her parents were heavily involved in her life, but still didn't grasp the depths of their daughter's problem.

"I just really feel like if I had heard this message, it would have hit home with me," said Brakefield, who spoke Thursday at the statewide teachers conference in Missoula. "I think in our household, it would have made a difference."

Unfortunately for Brakefield, the Montana Meth Project didn't come along until later, when in 2005 it started a series of sometimes-shocking ads about the dangers of methamphetamine.

So Brakefield learned the hard way - she got busted at age 17 and was sent off to rehab for 15 months. She stayed clean for a few months, then started running around with her old crowd. She spent the next six months on meth, lying to her parents about her use.

"I was a good liar," she said.

Finally, though, Brakefield's parents offered her an ultimatum - either go back to treatment or they'd help her move somewhere where she could start over.

She chose the latter, moving to Bismarck, N.D., where she has remained clean, graduated college and gone to work in a treatment facility for drug-dependent kids like herself.

Peg Shea, the meth project's executive director, loves those stories.

"I do feel like we are making a difference," she told a roomful of teachers gathered for the MEA-MFT state educators' conference.

The numbers back her up. When the meth project first started its highly visible campaign in September 2005, Montana ranked fifth in methamphetamine abuse. Today, Montana is 39th.

In 2008, teen meth use is down 45 percent from 2005, adult use is down by a whopping 72 percent and meth-related crime has decreased by 62 percent.

Obviously, the meth project isn't responsible for all that success, but it did a lot to get the ball rolling.

"We brought the issue to the common citizen's home," Shea said.

For most of its young life, the meth project has survived on the financial largess of founder Tom Siebel, the high-tech billionaire who owns two Montana ranches.

But Shea said the notion was that the project would eventually establish its own funding. The project has already received some state money, and Shea said a major push will be under way in the 2009 Legislature to secure a \$2 million allocation for the next two years.

That would supplement the more than \$1 million the meth project has raised privately, including the recent gift of \$75,000 from the Burlington Northern railroad, Shea said.

To that end, the project is organizing a petition drive targeted to the Legislature, as well as a March Against Meth on Feb. 16 that will draw students from around the state. And Shea said the project will once again run its Paint the State campaign, an art contest last run in 2006.

"We're asking the state to step up," Shea said.