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BEHIND THE MICROPHONE My name is meth

Addiction continues ruining lives

Jess Smith

Posted on October 2, 2009 at 3:34 p.m.
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FAYETTEVILLE — " I destroy home, I tear families apart I take your children, and that's just the start ..."

That is the beginning of a poem written by a young Indian girl who was in an Arizona jail for drug charges and was addicted to methamphetamine. She wrote the poem while in her cell. It tells the horrors of a meth addiction. While her writing showed she fully grasped the reality of using the drug, she was found dead less than a month after her release alongside a road on the reservation. She was the victim of a drug overdose.

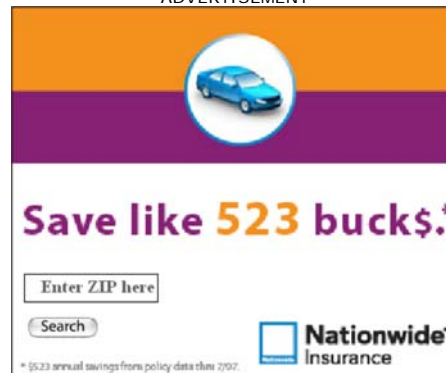
October is Methamphetamine Awareness Month. On Wednesday, Washington County Judge Marilyn Edwards issued a proclamation declaring October as Methamphetamine Awareness Month in Washington County. More than 100 people gathered in the University of Arkansas' Agri Park for the occasion. Several mayors of towns in Washington County as well as chiefs of police were present. Several schools were represented. Washington County Sheriff Tim Helder and his crew grilled chicken donated by Tyson Foods. [Full disclosure: I am president of Project Right Choice.]

Washington County Circuit Judge Stacey Zimmerman was the keynote speaker. She told the audience she deals with the effects of meth use on a daily basis. She recounted cases where young children were found to have traces of methamphetamine in the roots of their hair, the result of being in a home where a meth lab was operating.

Almost everyone there had a story to tell about a member of their family or a close friend who had been affected by methamphetamine. Some spoke of ruined lives, broken homes and of good people who had sunk to their lowest level. They would lie, cheat and steal to be able to get a meth rush.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency says methamphetamine is second only to alcohol and marijuana as the most used drug in many Midwestern and Western States. For years, Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma were near the top of states where the most meth labs were busted.

The so-called "mom and pop" meth labs have declined over the past four or five years after state legislatures passed laws restricting the sale of ingredients used to make methamphetamine. But with the decline of local drug labs, importation of crystal meth has

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grown. Most meth now comes from clandestine labs in Mexico and California. But the 4th Judicial District Drug Task Force says they are beginning to see a revival of the small methamphetamine labs in Northwest Arkansas. The meth makers are getting around a law that requires identification and signing when buying certain cold medicines (which include a major ingredient used to make meth) by having their customers buy small quantities of the over-the-counter medicine so as not to arouse suspicion.

A study by the University of Arkansas Sam Walton College of Business estimated that meth use costs Washington County businesses more than \$22 million a year. The study took into account lost production, absenteeism, health care costs, theft and worker turnover. But the real tragedy is what meth use does to individuals and families.

What are some of the long-term effects of meth addiction? The drug can cause functional and molecular changes in the brain. Chronic meth users exhibit symptoms that can include violent behavior, anxiety, confusion and insomnia. They can also display a number of psychotic features, including paranoia, auditory hallucinations, mood disturbances and delusions, such as the sensation of insects creeping on the skin. The paranoia can result in homicidal as well as suicidal thoughts.

There are some bright spots. Use of meth among high school teens has been declining over the past few years. Washington County Circuit Judge Mary Ann Gunn's drug court is one of the country's most successful. And there will soon be a start-up drug court for juveniles presided over by Judge Zimmerman. But the meth problem in Northwest Arkansas is real, and is taking a tragic human toll. As Judge Edwards challenged in her proclamation, all of us need to get involved in helping end the scourge of meth use.

The poem "My Name is Meth" ends this way:

"I can bring you more misery than words can tell,

Come take my hand, let me lead you to hell."

Jess Smith was a broadcast journalist for 47 years. He lives in Fayetteville.

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