'Crystal Darkness'

A documentary about Oklahoma’s meth problem has the community talking about the drug and how to combat it.

By JOSH NEWTON

TAHLEQUAH DAILY PRESS — As methamphetamine threatens to tear apart more and more families, Oklahomans are banding together to stop what some consider America’s biggest social problem.

Local TV stations presented a 30-minute documentary Tuesday night titled “Crystal Darkness: Meth’s Deadly Assault on our Youth.” Childhelp Crystal Darkness Co-chairs Wes Lane and Oklahoma First Lady Kim Henry say Oklahomans have never before been as mobilized to fight a single issue.

Henry called meth “a drug like no other drug we’ve seen.” Others involved in the fight against meth – including former addicts, family members of addicts, law enforcement officials and rehabilitation officials – repeatedly affirmed there is no “one time” for meth use: It’s a very addictive drug.

“One of the things about methamphetamine I’ve seen is that it rips the soul out of a person,” said Jim Schmit, program director for Clay Crossing, which provides treatment for drug and alcohol addicts. “When you look in their eyes, it’s not there.”

An undercover agent with the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics told viewers how dangerous the meth world is.

“I consider it to be like the dark side,” he said.

Cherokee County residents visited a number of local watch parties Tuesday night for the documentary showing, including three locations at NSU; one at Kid Connections Inc.; and one at Hope House of Cherokee County. Cherokee Nation also sponsored watch parties within its 14-county jurisdiction.

“We felt that because the age population we see is often affected by meth – families, or personally – this would be a great community event,” said Libby Rogers, nurse practitioner at NSU.

As with other watch parties around the state, the floor was opened for questions and conversation about meth following the documentary. Rogers led one discussion, while a student who had a personal experience with meth led another, and a representative of the OBN led the third.

“We want to stress the ability [of students] to protect themselves, prevent and report meth addiction,” said Rogers. “We want to raise awareness.”

Hope House Director Laura Garner invited Cherokee County sheriff’s investigator Becky Thompson to lead the watch party for the agency’s former clients.

“This issue can also lead to homelessness,” said Garner. “We want to bring out the local aspect of meth, like what to look for. Hopefully, if we save just one, this would all be worth it. We can lead them to the water and hope they soak it in.”
At Kid Connections, Lana McClain, of Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare service, talked with those in attendance.

“The forms of meth are always changing,” she said.

She talked about paranoia – one of the effects of meth – and how many users, prior to the documentary, had been worried the 2-1-1 phone number offered as an assistance line was really a “trap” to help catch meth users and send them to jail.

“Victoria,” a former meth user, talked on the documentary about trying meth for the first time at age 12. “I had to fight to survive, and I thought the only way to survive was to get high,” she said.

She said that in the world of meth and drugs, “you really have no friends.” She explained she had been raped by a man she thought she could trust, whom she had once looked up to.

One man talked about a mom who was so high on meth, she fell asleep on a couch and never heard her baby’s scream after its walker had become trapped on a floor furnace. The baby burned to death, and the mother never awoke.

The drug was described in many terms, like “evil” or the “greatest hometown terrorist.” Officials talked of how meth has become “an American Indian problem.”

One man related how he thought, while on meth, that he was living, but “I was actually dying.”

Meth initially brings on an intense rush, a “high” that can last many hours, keeping users awake for days at a time. Dopamine creates an intense pleasure, but also destroys the brain’s pleasure receptors. As they shut down, users become addicted, thinking more meth will help bring back that pleasure, but it ultimately leads to depression and despair, among a host of deadly health problems.

Meth is an addictive central nervous system stimulant that can take the form of crystals or powder in white, yellow brown or pink hues. Short-term effects include high agitation and violence, wakefulness and insomnia, decreased appetite, irritability, anxiety, nervousness and convulsions. Long-term effects may be increased tolerance, hallucinations, delusions of parasites or insects crawling under the skin, stroke or heart attack.

Addicts have often cut themselves, believing they had bugs or insects beneath their skin.

One man talked of being 50 years old, but having the body of an 80-year-old. Others talked of how the meth world was connected to forms of prostitution, and how far addicts will go, and what things they will do, for their next hit.

A mom talked about her son’s last words to her: “I can’t go on. I love you.” He then used a phone cord to hang himself before anyone could get to him.

Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson encouraged parents to take initiatives in fighting meth and keeping it away from children. He said parents should be able to spot indications of meth use and know how to intervene.

Others urged parents not to be afraid to look in their children’s’ rooms or cars, and to pay attention when he or she is hiding text messages, having hygiene issues, dropping weight or losing appetites.

There was also a push for more churches and organizations to take a place in the war and promise to fight it all the way. “It can be done,” Henry said.

And viewers also learned how, if they are addicted to meth, they can seek help via the service known as 2-1-1.

“Meth is absolutely treatable,” one person said before urging people to make the effort and seek help. “There’s no such thing as just one time.”
If you need assistance in breaking a meth addiction, call Oklahoma’s 2-1-1 service, or call the Meth Hotline at 888-METH-AID. To learn more about the Crystal Darkness program, log on to www.crystaldarknessoklahoma.org.

Clay Crossing Program Director Jim Schmit talks about the dark side of methamphetamine during Tuesday night’s “Crystal Darkness” documentary.