

Interview with Sterling Braswell **Author of “American Meth: A History of the Methamphetamine Epidemic in America”**

Reader Views would like to welcome Sterling R. Braswell, author of “American Meth: A History of the Methamphetamine Epidemic in America.” Sterling is talking with Juanita Watson, the Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thank you for talking with us today Sterling. Please tell us about your book and what readers can expect from reading “American Meth: A History of the Methamphetamine Epidemic in America.”

Sterling: I think readers will be shocked to find out the history of this drug and epidemic. They may also take comfort in the personal story, if they have experienced meth abuse in their own lives. They are not alone.

Juanita: What inspired you to write this historical look at methamphetamine?

Sterling: I didn’t start out to write a book, I was keeping a journal of the sordid details of a nasty divorce. I could not find any good information, so I did a lot of research, a lot of interviews with medical professionals, law enforcement, and substance abuse counselors. I decided I should document this for others people to learn about the drug as well

Juanita: Where did the manufacture and use of methamphetamine start?

Sterling: There are conflicting stories now about the actual time. But from my research, it looks like amphetamine was first synthesized in the late 1880’s. Methamphetamine probably first synthesized in the 19 teens, around the time of WWI. More information is available today than was five years ago. But those are pretty good timeframes.

Juanita: What is the physical/physiological effect of methamphetamine on the human body?

Sterling: Physically, very debilitating, especially for chronic or heavy users. Damage to dopamine receptors in the brain. Side effects from the physical abuse of this drug can be even worse; lack of taking care of oneself, meth mouth (caused by lack of dental hygiene and improper diet, not as many popular articles would say, by chemical reaction with the drug itself).

Juanita: What about its psychological effects?

Sterling: Paranoia, itching and crawling sensation, either real or imagined, on the skin. I think I said it best in the book “they begin to live and behave like frightened wild animals.”

Juanita: How has the use of methamphetamine progressed from its original applications to how it has become the national epidemic that it is today?

Sterling: Originally, it was thought that meth could control certain physical ailments, for example, Parkinson’s Disease. Also it could be used to control weight, and it could be used to assist people with certain mental/medical conditions. Before long term affects were known, the drug gave the user/patient a feeling of well-being and confidence. But with any drug that has the positive side affects, the potential for abuse is high. After being spread throughout the US, originally by the Hell’s Angels, it became clear to certain people that the ingredients to make methamphetamine were easily obtainable, and that only a high school knowledge of chemistry was required to manufacture it. With the advent of the internet, and rapid sharing of communications, the recipes and knowledge spread quickly, to where today we do have an epidemic on our hands.

Juanita: People from all walks of life are using methamphetamine. Why do you think it has affected such a wide range of people?

Sterling: Early on, it was known as the ‘poor man’s cocaine,’ but as it spread throughout the US, it began showing up across all socio-economic boundaries. As casual cocaine users began to realize that methamphetamine could be stronger and offer a better high than cocaine, it became more prevalent throughout the population.

Juanita: What are some tell tale signs of methamphetamine abuse?

Sterling: Erratic behavior, skin sores, and after extended use, poor diet and oral hygiene. Note that like other drugs, early use may not be apparent to people. Over time however, as paranoia and addiction come into place, the strange behavior and poor overall physical health become obvious.

Juanita: It is common knowledge that methamphetamine is very dangerous to make. Why is this and how can one spot a methamphetamine lab?

Sterling: Using battery acid, ammonia, and other combinations of other household products to turn ephedrine or pseudo ephedrine into methamphetamine is dangerous. The chemicals have to be cooked on heat, and with no supervision or standard lab procedures, the chemical reactions can cause explosions. Also, cooking is generally done on portable gas stoves, which are inherently dangerous when not ventilated or used properly. A person that will risk manufacturing the drug probably does not have the same idea of safety as a ‘normal person’, and that person may be high on the drug and thus exhibiting the erratic behavior mentioned earlier.

The smell generating by a working meth lab is a strong ammonia or chemical smell. In many cases, people have equated the smell to stale pet urine, especially after an enclosed location is used for multiple cooking sessions. Also, witnessing a lot of waste products, from ammonia, acids, and even spent hypodermic needles would indicate the presence of a meth lab.

Juanita: Are there particular areas of the country where methamphetamine abuse is significantly higher than others?

Sterling: Originally California was the hot spot. However, it spread rapidly into the Midwest and Pacwest. Although not covered specifically in the book, when the US curtailed raw materials coming from Mexico to California, the smaller home grown labs moved out across the country. Open spaces away from big cities and population centers give the cook the best chance of avoiding being caught. This is certainly what happened on my ranch in Central Texas.

Juanita: You had a deeply personal experience with a family member that was involved with methamphetamine. Your book conveys this but can you give us some insight into how this experience has effected or changed you?

Sterling: To be honest, this almost destroyed me. Not only because of the death threats while this was happening, but the emotional baggage and depression from the divorce dragging on for two years. As one doctor told me, a divorce like this, when it involves substance abuse of this nature, destroys one's body, mind, and soul, not to mention finances. But a few years later, I have rebuilt my life; the book was hard to write but good therapy. As for personal change, I look at many things differently when it concerns substance abuse of any kind, whether it is with friends, family or coworkers. I believe this made me much more aware of events that I never knew were happening around me.

Juanita: Sterling, why do you think it is critically important for people to acquaint themselves with the history of methamphetamine?

Sterling: I think the history of the drug is important so that people will understand the implications of how this drug can destroy a person. Would we have had WWII if Hitler hadn't been a meth addict? Probably. Would Charles Manson have ordered the killing of innocent people in Los Angeles had he not been addicted to meth? Maybe. But people need to realize how dangerous this drug can be to the common person, and how it can make a common person do things that rational people would not do. Also, people should be aware that this drug just did not appear overnight in the 1990's. It had a quiet growing affect on the population, and suddenly, with the world wide web sharing of recipes for manufacture, the idea of meth spread rapidly across the US. It is also spreading around the world, and has been for a long time. But that is a subject for further research.

Juanita: How can readers contact you and/or find out more about "American Meth"?

Sterling: You can check out my website/blog at www.americanmeth.com. Also, many readers have contacted me via email, and you can reach me via email at sterlinb@streetgang.org.

Juanita: Thank you for talking with us today Sterling. You have written a very relevant book for our time. The Meth epidemic is on the rise and we may all have the chance of it some way touching our lives in the future. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers?

Sterling: Educate yourselves, and be aware of the warning signs of methamphetamine abuse. If you suspect it's happening in or near your life, seek information in the form of books, videos, and the world wide web. And ask for help with your situation. Drug Counselors and Doctors are much more aware of this problem than five or even two years ago, and there are programs that can help you if you find yourself confronted with meth.

Thank You for your time.