Former addict warns youth about meth

▶ The 34-year-old man had his decline toward death made into a documentary.

By Jim Suhr
Associated Press

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo. — Wide-eyed and appearing catatonic, Shawn Bridges couldn't muster any talk from his hospital bed, his gaunt, tattooed body wracked by years of abusing the powerfully addictive witch's brew of chemicals that is methamphetamine.

The footage from the documentary the 34-year-old trucker commissioned about his slow, agonizing decline does the talking for him. And, he said he hopes the 29-minute film, shot by a southern Illinois television videographer, speaks volumes to children and others headed down a similar path to drug addiction.

By his family's account, Bridges already died twice, his heart so ravaged by meth over the years that it stopped and had to be shocked back into beating. "The bottom half of his heart is dead," his dad laments on camera.

As the documentary "No More Sunsets" shows, Bridges' life isn't much. Largely bedridden, his constant companions are the catheter that funnels the urine out of his body and the feeding tube sticking from his stomach.

When he does speak, it's in guttural slurs. "Ahmmmmmmm colllllllllllllllllllllllld," Shawn, dressed in boxer shorts and sweat socks, said recently from a hospital-style bed wedged into his father's living room. His dad hustled to blanket him.

"I'd say he's got a 34-year-old body on the outside with 70- to 80-year-old man on the inside," Jack Bridges says of his son. "You see what meth has done to my son and what my son has let it do to him.

"If the documentary helps just one person stay away from this terrible poison, it's worth it."

Bridges prays his son's story sways the young, including the 12 million people ages 12 and older the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says reported in a 2002 national survey that they had used meth at least once in their lifetimes.

According to federal estimates, roughly 28,000 people sought treatment for meth addiction across the country in 1993, accounting for nearly 2 percent of admissions for drug-abuse care, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. But just a decade later, the meth-related admissions numbered nearly 136,000 — more than 7 percent of the national total for drug-abuse treatment.

The man who shot and narrates the film calls it a cautionary tale.

"He's dying because of the decisions he's made," Chip Rossetti says in the film. "Long ago, he chose to give in to temptation. Long ago, he chose a life of drugs. But, he wasn't always that way."

Bridges' story is one of tragedy and torment.

Family members say he forever was haunted by the dreary day in 1976 when younger brother Jason, barely a year old, died in a car wreck. Shawn was just 4 and nowhere near the wreck but inexplicably blamed himself, wanting to trade places with his dead sibling, his father says.

Bridges' parents were lenient with Shawn, convinced their "wishy-washy" disciplining would ease the grieving, his father says. It backfired.

"We didn't realize we were making a little monster of him," Jack Bridges says.

By 16, Shawn was a high school dropout, a partier with little regard for authority. He struggled accepting his parents' divorce in 1996 and drifted in and out of relationships. Between failed marriages and a girlfriend, he fathered three daughters.

Jack Bridges insists he didn't suspect his son was doing drugs; if the boy was using, he artfully hid it. But Jonathan Bridges says in the documentary he witnessed his brother's addiction and how it tormented him.

Twice, Jonathan Bridges says, his brother tried to kill himself. When Shawn tried to hang himself from a tree, the rope snapped. When he purposely veered into an oncoming vehicle's path after a night of heavy partying, Jonathan was there to grab the wheel and avoid the wreck.

At 26, Shawn had a heart attack his father blames on meth, a concoction that can include such toxic chemicals as battery acid, drain cleaner and fertilizer. When pressed by his dad, Shawn admitted using the drug.

Several years ago, Shawn sought redemption from Buddy Walls, the former southern Illinois pastor to Shawn's grandparents. He told Walls of his struggles with drugs, talked of wanting to get clean from a drug he said made him feel bulletproof.

"He was really struggling," recalls Walls, now living in Springfield, Mo. "I told him, 'Get your heart right with the Lord.' I just wanted him to feel comfort from that, if nothing else. He was truly sorry for what he'd done."

Soon after that, what Shawn thought was pneumonia was diagnosed as congestive heart failure, his heart enlarged two or three times its normal size, his father says. The back of that vital muscle was stretched so thin doctors feared it would burst, Jack Bridges adds.

Shawn insisted to relatives he had quit using meth, famous for fatally damaging a chronic user's heart and other internal organs because it puts the body in overdrive for prolonged periods.

A little more than a year ago, Shawn was spitting up blood. When his heart quit, doctors brought him back. His weight continued diving because he couldn't keep food down.

His epiphany came months later, when he told Walls he'd like to find someone to videotape him going through his "nightmare, so the kids can see the pain I'm feeling."

"'I know I'm dying,'" Walls recalls Bridges saying. "But, he had a real desire to live to get his story out. "

Walls eventually contacted Rossetti, a videographer for WSIL-TV in Carterville, Ill. To Rossetti, the project wasn't "about just what drugs did to this guy. This is about what drugs did to his entire family and everyone he knows."

For now, the documentary — available for $20 from the Web site of Rossetti's production company — closes on the note that Shawn's fate is "yet to be determined." If he dies, that signoff will be updated.

Mike Townsend, who heads the Partnership for a Drug-Free America's programs to curb meth demand, said any impact by the documentary would hinge on whether teens or others could relate to Bridges and "see themselves in that world" someday.

Jonathan Bridges wouldn't wish that on anybody.

"It just really hurts seeing him the way he is," he says in the documentary, wiping away tears. "As soon as he knows he's done good, he'll be able to go home."

Rossetti Productions:
www.rossettiproductions.com
Partnership for a Drug-Free America:
www.drugfree.org/Meth

Photos by JAMES A. FINLEY / Associated Press

Shawn Bridges, 34, of Cape Girardeau, Mo., rests in his hospital bed. His gaunt body is wracked by years of abusing the powerfully addictive drug methamphetamine.

Jack Bridges, 53, attempts to console his son as he rests in a hospital bed in the living room of his father's home.

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