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‘The Opioid Spoon Project’

Local artist spreads awareness about crisis

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The Spoon Project is aimed at highlighting the prevalence of the opioid epidemic. PHOTO: COURTESY THE OPIOID SPOON PROJECT

Artist Domenic Esposito launched The Opioid Spoon Project, an activist art nonprofit, just eight months ago — but it’s already receiving significant national attention. To be fair, it’s hard to ignore an 800-pound metal spoon that’s been suddenly dropped onto the campus of a pharmaceutical company. These “spoon drops” are just one of the actions the project is using to spread awareness about the opioid crisis and the involvement of the pharma industry.

“There’s a long list of perpetrators. The extent of the web of influence that pharmaceutical companies have in the U.S. is amazing,” says Esposito. “We’ve allowed them to manufacture opioids, to educate physicians and others about them and to affect policy.”

Esposito chose a spoon with a burnt middle to reflect the preparation for a dose and to draw a parallel between the pharmaceutical companies that make these drugs accessible and even desirable, jumpstarting the addiction pattern.

The project has not been an easy road. When Esposito dropped a spoon at Purdue Pharma’s headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, his cohort, gallerist Fernando Alvarez, was arrested. The spoon was impounded, and Esposito was taken to court to retrieve it. Purdue is a large manufacturer of OxyContin, a gateway drug for heroin use. In an example of the lax repercussions for pharma companies, Purdue paid a \$600 million dollar settlement in 2007 when their top three executives were charged with criminally misrepresenting the addictive effects of OxyContin. The fine was the extent of the penalty.

For the motivated artist, spreading awareness is worth the challenges. Esposito has a personal connection to the crisis — a family member who has struggled with addiction — but he finds that most people who aren’t directly linked to the issue aren’t aware of its magnitude.

“I underestimated just how difficult this would be, and how emotional,” he says. “They’re all pointing fingers at each other, but at the end of the day half-a-million people have died from this epidemic and no one has gone to jail.”

Up next on Esposito’s activist docket is the Honor Tour, a 15-city, 10-state tour of the Memorial Spoon. This particular spoon has been signed by hundreds of people affected by the opioid crisis. Esposito estimates there are 700 to 800 signatures and notes of support on the sculpture. The tour kicked off on Aug. 30 in Providence, where it will spend two weeks at Providence City Hall Plaza. On Sept. 15, it will make a one-day stop in Boston on Newbury Street for the Open Newbury Street event.

Once viewers are educated about the crisis, Esposito encourages them to get involved with local organizations working to benefit opioid victims, for example, Boston Bulldogs Running Club, a running group for substance abuse survivors and their families. He also says contacting elected representatives and urging them to make change on a governmental level is essential. Esposito notes, “If there’s the potential to go to jail, then they’re going to ask different questions.”