

fully comprehend the consequences of our actions. Even niece Ashley, now age 36 and the mother of two beautiful toddlers, says it was a "dumb decision."

But, young people have made worse choices, particularly with drugs, alcohol and sex, than having a tattoo. It's just that, the tattoo is there... forever. "You....really....need...to think...about it," cautions the officer, who has considered the painful and expensive process of having some of his removed.

Dave Winegardner has thought about it... a lot, ever since he was 12 years old. And in fact he too regrets some of his earlier tattoos that he has covered up with others. He echoes the police officer, saying, "Don't do anything that you might regret later on. That's the biggest thing that I tell people."

David has tattoos all up and down his arms, across his chest, on his back, even in his armpit. He is a tattoo artist, and, by the looks of it, a darn good one too. He owns and operates Sacred Art Tattoo in Locust Grove Town Center. And although he has seen tremendous changes in the art just over the past 10 years, he too feels the stigma and the stereotype. For example, sometimes he and his employees stand out in front of the shop having a smoke (they do not allow smoking inside). People walking down the sidewalk "will step off the curb and go around the cars in the parking lot instead of going past us," says David, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's immature. It's stupid," he protests. "I don't understand it. What the hell is it anybody's business what is on my body."

There are reverse stereotypes too. People will approach him thinking they can bond to him with references to drugs, alcohol, sex, gangs, bikers, and criminals. "I don't tolerate it," he snaps brusquely. "I don't tolerate any riff raff. I don't tolerate drug talk. I don't want to hear it. I don't want to talk about it. If you talk about it, you'll be asked to leave."

Just read the sign on his door: "If you are drunk, sick, on drugs, soliciting, pregnant, ghetto, sunburnt, dirty, stinky, looking for a deal, pushing drugs with an attitude, [complainin'] about something, want money or deposit back, bringing kids with you, tattoo at your house (a scratcher), broke, without ID, under 18, or otherwise annoying, COME BACK WHEN YOU'RE NOT."

Passing the above test with flying colors, we enter to have all our preconceived misconceptions of what a tattoo parlor should look like stripped away. No smoky den here with sultry ladies, mean dogs and questionable characters lurking in dark corners; this place is airy, bright, and spotlessly clean. "We have a code and a book that we're supposed to go by, what the shop is supposed to look like, rules and regulations we have to follow," says David as he works on an intricate Celtic cross on his brother-in-law's forearm.

On the wall is prominently displayed a current license from the Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation Board for Barbers and Cosmetology. "We keep up with code. We do everything we're supposed to do;



David Winegardner puts the finishing touches on a rosary and cross on Eva Malamphy's foot.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT



Sacred Art Tattoo is located next door to the rear entrance of Robertson's Tavern in Locust Grove Town Center. From left to right, Jacquie Morey, who is David's talented apprentice; David Winegardner, the owner; Courtney, his wife and assistant; Eva Malamphy, Courtney's best friend; and Joe Winegardner, David's brother and second tattoo artist.

PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

white floors, white ceilings. You're not allowed to tattoo on carpet or concrete because they are porous; they hold bacteria and diseases." David's even certified in CPR and in blood and airborne pathogens.

In fact this place looks a little bit like a doctor's office; it's just that the "doctor" is covered in tats. At the reception area, what looks like a white-haired grandmother is signing some forms for her granddaughter who is obviously under age. In the waiting room, Kecia Holmes sits on a sofa and flips through one of several design idea books. This will be her third tattoo. She consults with David's brother Joe, the other artist here.

Everything in this shop is custom. On a side table, a slide show of David's best work scrolls by on a picture frame. The walls sport prints by Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dali. Ah ha, we say to ourselves, there's an artist lurking about here somewhere.

For David, that artist awoke early. "When I was around 12, I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and

that's tattooing," he says. Making his first tattoo gun at home, "out of a Walkman," he etched a smiley face into his ankle. He won't show it today. "It's ugly."

As he grew older, "I started going to the tattoo shop every chance I could, trying to get them to let me come in as an apprentice." Finally, after quitting Chancellor High School, a Fredericksburg shop took him in full-time. But he had taken every art elective he possibly could before leaving. "I've always been into drawing and painting," he says. And that's why he calls his shop "Sacred Art" tattooing, because, well, in his words, "Tattooing is a sacred art form." He also has several sacred hearts tattooed on his body, but as far as we can tell, there is no connection here to this intensely catholic symbol. He refers instead to the heart motif being "a sacred love for tattooing."

On his arms is tattooed a rambling story of his life, complete with a tribute to 9-11. He holds his fists together to show matching birds and stars on the backs of his hands. Many tattoos are intensely symbolic and personal.

David admits he's something of a perfectionist. And so, after working in and leaving a variety of tattoo shops in the Fredericksburg area, he set up his own in Locust Grove about two years ago. He has five people helping him out: his brother, Joe, his wife Courtney, her best friend Eva Malamphy, Brian Lawson the part-time piercer, and an apprentice, 16-year-old Jacque Morey of Lake of the Woods.

"Her parents brought her in and let her become an apprentice and she's done excellent. She tattoos better at her level than I did after two years of tattooing. She has a natural gift for tattooing." He points to the quiet, serious and slightly shy teenager who has been watching his every move while he works.

"I tattoo because I like to tattoo," continues David. "The money isn't really an issue for me. If you do good tattoos and people want you to tattoo them, you'll always make money." That's because word of mouth is

the best advertisement. Sitting outside the shop is Herb Miller, a Lake of the Woods security guard. "He's the best guy I've ever done business with," Herb says of David. "I've done business with three other tattoo artists; he's the only one who has been this level of professional."

Recently, David was invited to show his stuff at tattoo conventions in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Conventions are the holy grail of tattooing. "That's what I have been tattooing my whole life for, is to tattoo at conventions and own my own shop," he says of his master plan. Several of his local clients made the trip to those conventions to be, well, canvases. "I really don't think that I tattoo as well as what people say I do," says David, trying to sound humble. But then he adds, "I'm very confident in what I do. I know I do a good job."

He lights one of many cigarettes. "Tattooing is a lifestyle. I've always wanted to do it, and I still do it, and I will always do it until the day I fall over in this chair. That's all I'll ever do."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Above, the sensation of being tattooed is similar to being scratched with a bramble. It is more irritating than unbearable. The machine sounds like an irritated bee. Right, the way it works is multiple needles rapidly drive the organic nontoxic dye through the surface of the skin. David Winegardner applies green shading to the shamrock in the middle of his brother in law's Celtic cross tattoo. Below, the sacred heart is a recurring theme at Sacred Art Tattoo in Locust Grove.

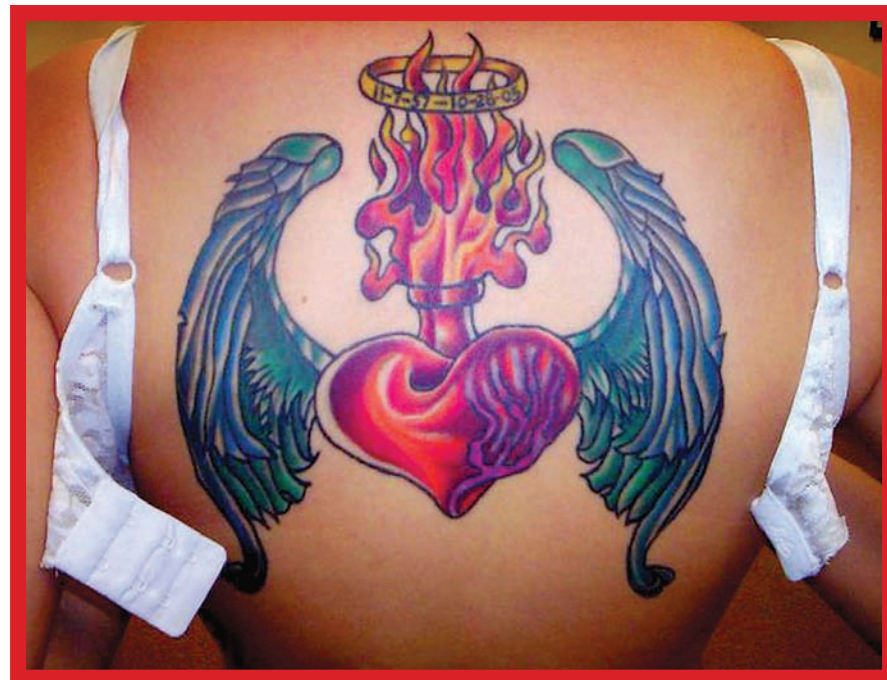


PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

tats

"Look, Mom at what I got,"

said our niece Ashley as she slipped the waistband of her jeans over her hip bone to reveal a flower tattoo. Her mother's eyes opened wide, a combination of shock and fury. This playful little demo was being purposefully played out in front of everybody, even her grandmother. There was nothing that Ashley's mother could do but seethe at her elder daughter's little "Gotcha!"

The occasion was Thanksgiving, a time when my in-laws traditionally gather at a beach house in North Carolina to eat, drink and be merry, to strengthen familial ties, and to pay homage to the Queen Bee, the aforementioned grandmother. This mini drama, where daughter taunted mother by publicly revealing that she had (gasp) a tattoo, happened 17 years ago. Today, everyone, even the grandmother, would barely lift an eyebrow before burrowing back into the sports section of the *Charlotte Observer*. Ho Hum, another tattoo.

The tattoo, the ancient art of indelibly marking the body by injecting pigment underneath the epidermis, is no longer shocking. Nor, for that matter, is body piercing. The sight of body art on not just the young but the middle-aged, the elderly, the professional set, both sexes, even children, is becoming more and more accepted and acceptable. It's not just for sailors and bikers anymore.

Just look at the police. There are several officers locally who sport visible tattoos, which is something of a "touchy issue" within the law enforcement community. One local law enforcement officer, who asked that his name not be used, is living proof that the stigma over tattoos endures. Does he regret having body art? He unhesitatingly blurts "yes," adding that he did it in his late teens and early 20s at a time when most of us don't

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PHOTOS BY SUSIE AUDIBERT



BY

So you think you want to have a tattoo?



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Above, Joe Winegardner goes over release forms with Kecia Holmes of Unionville, prior to her getting her third tattoo. Below, birds, crosses and stars match each other on the back's of David Winegardner's hands. Many tattoos are intensely symbolic and personal.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

So you've made the decision, be it whim or milestone, to get a tattoo. Treat it as a milestone, because it's a big decision. You don't want to do something you will regret later. Laser removal is expensive and even more painful than getting the tat in the first place.

"It's always something super-important to somebody because they're permanent," says David Winegardner, who has done many memorials to deceased loved ones on the skin of the living. "Regardless of whether you can have them removed, or covered by something else, they're permanent. And the thought of having that tattoo will always be there... always."

When you walk in the door at Sacred Art, which is the only licensed and inspected facility currently in Orange County, the first thing you must do is sign two release forms, one for the house and one for the state. You must produce a valid ID, and if you are younger than 18 years old, your parent or legal guardian must accompany you and produce a valid ID as well.

Next you must decide where and what you want tattooed. There are plenty of magazines and design books to look at but often clients will come in with a vague idea that David will flesh out on paper before final approval. When it's time to do the deed, David or his apprentice will disinfect all surfaces, insert new disposable needles in the tattoo machine, place a new sleeve on the electric cord that leads to the gun, and set up plastic thimble-fulls of organic non-toxic ink on a stainless steel work table that looks just like a dentist's tray.

David dons one of the many pairs of rubber gloves he'll use today and invites you to sit in what looks like a dentist's chair. "I'm real big on sterilization and being clean," he says reassuringly. He will then shave the area to be tattooed, wash it in anti-bacterial soap, and if necessary apply a surface stencil as a guideline.

"Nervous?" he asks me mischievously as I, the ever-intrepid reporter, must experience this for myself. But I'm not quite ready for ink; so he's doing what's called a dry line. No pigment, but plenty of needles.

They are arranged like bristles on an artist's brush, sometimes in a circle for doing outlining and sometimes flat for shading. They go in and out incredibly fast, inserting what is actually dye, not ink. The machine looks like a blunt fountain pen. It sounds like a bumble bee losing its temper.

The feeling is similar to being scratched by a bramble-not unbearable; more irritating than anything else. Outlining, which is deeper and more painful, is done first, followed by shading. What's left on my arm is a scratch about an inch long with a slight abrasion beside it. No



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Above, David Winegardner knew he wanted to be a tattoo artist ever since he made a tattoo machine out of a Walkman motor when he was 12.

big deal, but I wouldn't want to experience that for an hour...Which is how long it has taken to tattoo his brother-in-law's forearm with a Celtic cross and shamrock. As he works on this job, every now and then David will wipe away excess ink, and yes, a little bit of blood, with a disinfectant-soaked paper towel. He deftly turns the shamrock green, then shades the edges in yellow to simulate sunlight. The rule of thumb is to work from dark colors to light.

When he's done, he'll clean the area and apply a light dressing which can come off in a few hours. The dressing's purpose is to prevent the new tattoo from coming in contact with someone else. "We don't really ask you if you have diseases," says David adding, "We treat everyone as if they have AIDS, even family members, even close friends, anybody, it doesn't matter. We treat everyone the same. The biggest part about tattooing is to protect yourself at all times. And if you do that, you will always protect whoever you are tattooing."

Everybody I talked to had a different take on the sensation of being tattooed. One said elbows are the worst; another pointed to the ribcage right where you would be tickled. Herb Miller, the LOW security guard, says the fleshy area between the thumb and forefinger "wasn't exactly comfortable." And as Eva gets her

rosary and cross done around her ankle, she can't keep from involuntarily wiggling her foot.

David says some people want to "cheat through" the experience with some kind of pain numbing medication. But the pain is as much a part of the process as the indelibility of the tattoo. "If you're going to get a tattoo you should feel it," he insists.

And how much will your wallet feel it? The shop minimum at Sacred Art is \$50. Tats go up from there, depending on size and detail; they can be as much as \$1,000 or more. The Celtic cross on the brother-in-law's forearm cost about \$200.

Tattooing is an ancient art form. It comes from the Tahitian word, "tatu," and it is believed to have originated in Polynesia before spreading to the Ainu of Japan and the Maori of New Zealand. Even today, some Maoris will sign their name to a document by tracing their unique face tattoo on the paper.

In western cultures, the practice of tattooing in the military, particularly the Navy started as a way to identify the dead, particularly drowned bodies, which explains why tattoo parlors were typically located in ports. The Knights of St. John of Malta wore tattoos to identify themselves.

The tattooing machine was invented in 1891

based on an engraving device invented by Thomas Edison. It is basically an electromagnetic machine that can thrust and retract multiple tiny needles 80 to 150 times per second pushing pigment through the skin's surface and into the dermis.

Up until the mid-1960s, tattoos were pretty much limited to hearts and anchors on sailors' forearms. But, in this country anyway, it turned into an art form when Janis Joplin had a small heart tattooed on her left breast during the 1960s. Since then, the art has exploded. A recent study claims that 36 percent of Americans age 18 to 29, 24 percent of those 30 to 40, and 15 percent of those 41 to 51 have a tattoo! That's a lot of tats!

Tattoos have different uses and different meanings. The ones on Russian prisoners tell the coded story of their crime and incarceration. Same with Hispanic gang members, who cover their faces and heads with all manner of crosses, teardrops, and legal code section numbers just like graffiti. David says prison tattooists use homemade machines just like he did as a kid, usually from a portable tape player. Another interesting sideline to tattooing is what's called permanent makeup, where women (and some men) can get eyebrows, blush, lip liner... forever.

"Tattoos have come a long, long way since I first got into doing it, a long way," says David Winegardner. "Nowadays these young kids do better stuff and are more creative with tattooing than someone like me whose been doing it for 10 years."

His most nervous tattoo was his own father. "It was weird," he rolls his eyes. "He had one, but I fixed it. It was horrible." He has also tattooed newly inducted Marines, fresh out of boot camp, with the letters USMC. "They don't even know what they're getting into when they go over there, no idea, and I've talked to them about people I've tattooed who went over there and didn't come back."

David guarantees his work "100 percent." He'll even fix up a tattoo that you lost to road rash in a motorcycle accident. He's particularly proud of a job he did on a burn victim whom he "sleeved," using the scarring to enhance the three dimensionality of his work. "I used the texture as the art." He pauses and adds, "You never stop learning."

David Winegardner looks at his arms. He tells a story about purposefully holding doors open for people just to see what their reaction is. "I look at it like people are just jealous. The way I look shouldn't matter. It's the same thing as whether or not you're black or white or Mexican or anything else. Tattoos are just different colors."



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Below, a stickler for cleanliness, Winegardner disinfects surfaces and replaces needles for each tattoo he does. He goes through boxes of latex gloves and cases of paper towels per month.