

Impulse eraser

The reason for that tattoo may have faded, but it will take a laser to zap it out completely

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Thursday, September 21, 2006

Lying flat on her stomach, Somer Stanton, 24, braces herself as the licensed professional wields a tool that will modify her body, holding it close to the skin on her upper back. She's about to get something done that she's wanted since age 16.

She's getting her tattoo removed.

Before she joined the armed forces four years ago, the Fort Myers resident and some friends took a trip to a tattoo parlor — where customers are more often veteran human canvasses than first-timers — to get “ink” with their birth years and Zodiac signs in Chinese lettering.

The price? \$40.

The day after she got it, she didn't want it anymore.

“I thought, ‘What have I done?’” says the U.S. Army Reserve soldier and mother.

Later, she found out that what she thought said “Leo” actually said “Dragon.”

She was stuck with a symbol that meant nothing to her. It was supposed to identify her, make her unique. But she didn't think it through, she now says, and it cost her.

Only recently was she able to get it removed. Because of the cost, she waited until she really needed it. Before she could wear the low-cut dress she chose for her wedding, scheduled for March 3 of next year, the tattoo had to go, Stanton says.

The price? \$1,800. Maybe more.

At about \$300 per treatment, Stanton has already gone through four of the prescribed six sessions. But because the ink goes so deep into her skin, she might have to hand over more money if she wants the rebel relic of her teenage years gone from her life completely.

Trends die out, but a tattoo is forever — in theory. Once-popular Chinese characters inciting visions of world peace, now outed as fake translations, are bein the bodies of many born-again hippies. And according to a May Fox News report, the next tattoo to see its demise may be the lower-back tattoo — known affectionately as the “tramp stamp.”

The American Society for Dermatologic Surgery recorded 54,866 tattoo removals in 2005, making up 6 percent of all laser surgeries. With the development of laser-removal technologies and changes in tattoo trends, dermatologists are prospering from the procedure.

Chase Dermatology (formerly Naples Center for Dermatology and Cosmetic Surgery), is one of only two centers in the area equipped with a laser that zaps ink from the skin. Sara Ritacca, director of cosmetics at the center, says the lasers are so expensive that they only rent them every other Thursday.

Customers are not advised to get treatments one right after the other. A wait period from several weeks to several months is recommended so that the skin can heal from contact with the laser, which leaves the skin looking like it's been badly sunburned.

Every other Thursday morning, the lasers arrive by truck from Aesthetic Lasers, a laser distributor on the East coast of Florida. Truckers load them into the building, and the lasers are used non-stop throughout the day until they're picked up in the evening.

A tattoo drawn by a professional artist requires about six to eight laser treatments before all evidence of a tattoo disappears, Ritacca says.

Although they may have made a mistake the first time, the disgruntled tattoo bearers who wait self-consciously outside Dr. Andrew Jaffe's office are confident that removing them is the right thing.

"A lot of times they are embarrassed, have to hide it for work, or want to get rid of something trivial they did at a younger age," Ritacca says. "Or it's something that reminds them of their past."

Kim Andrews, 39, got a pair of intertwined hearts on her right ankle, a design that matched the one her then-boyfriend had done at the same time. That was 10 years ago. The Estero native is now married to another man, and her ex is no longer in her life.

"It doesn't suit my lifestyle anymore," Andrews explained.

A sudden impulse to get a tattoo is what responsible tattoo artists should warn against, says a Naples tattoo artist, known only as Jimbo to his customers and co-workers.

Jimbo, who says he is the only licensed tattoo artist in Naples, sometimes asks walk-ins three times — "Are you sure you want this?" — before starting to work on their bodies.

"If I think someone's not sure, I will ask them over and over," says Jimbo. "I ask them whether they've thought about the long-term consequences."

To impress the permanence of putting a tattoo on the client, he then applies a stencil, a simplified version of what they'll wear for the rest of their life, and lets it sink in that it won't just rub off.

"People get mad at me, but they won't watch out for themselves," Jimbo says.

Every once in awhile, the name of an ex-significant other brings people to his business, Body Branding Tattoo Emporium on Davis Boulevard near Airport-Pulling Road, seeking help.

"We call it 'the name game,'" Jimbo says. "Usually what happens is when a relationship is going down hill, someone will get a tattoo. Of course, it's not long before things fall apart, and then they want it removed. We live in a 'right now' society."

Jimbo has had enough people ask him about removals that he has considered equipping his studio with a laser. Currently, he refers patients to a dermatologist.

Using a laser called Medlite IV, Jaffee, the dermatologist, spends five minutes on each patient and treats about 10 patients a day. Before the process begins, an assistant injects anesthesia into the area around the tattoo. It's not going to hurt much — as long as she can take the feeling of a rubberband popping against her skin, once per second.

Jaffe walks toward the laser that will take the pigmentation out of the design on Stanton's back. Before he turns the laser on, he hands Stanton tanning booth sunglasses to shield her eyes and grabs a pair of goggles for himself.

The door to the operating room closes and Dr. Jaffe turns on the Medlite IV, which falls into one of three types of lasers that can clear the body's color palette.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A steady stream of noise comes from the machine as microscopic particles of color explode in the pigmented skin cells from contact with the laser. Hard snapping sounds like the push of a stapler form the backbeat of the medical musical — the rhythm of the laser hitting the skin. Stanton stays still, arms crossed and face-down in the padded operating chair.

On impact, the Medlite IV chars the skin, forming a light gray crust that covers the Chinese characters on her back. The laser's light flashes in rapid pulses, once per second.

When it's over, the room is quiet, and Stanton opens her eyes. One of Jaffe's assistants puts gauze over the spot and provides after-care instructions.

If not treated properly by the physician, redness, inflammation or lightening of the natural skin color can result, says Jaffe.

"We increase the intensity of treatment incrementally to minimize risk," Jaffe says.

After an exchange of words about her tattoo with the assistants, Stanton gets up slowly, grasps the handle of the stroller carrying her baby, and saunters out until her next appointment.

With the Medlite IV, dark ink is the easiest to remove, and green the most difficult, says Ritacca. Certain colors of cells absorb light at different wavelengths that the laser emits. Wavelengths 532 and 1064 cancel out red and black, respectively, causing the pigments to explode, and significantly erase many other colors.

A dark green, however, may come out a light teal, says laser consultant Michael Matute.

"There's only one kind of laser that removes green, and that's really the only thing it does," Matute says.

The now-broken particles of color in Stanton's pigment cells are eventually reabsorbed into the body, processed in the liver, and excreted.

Stanton says she didn't see much of a difference after her first treatment. The tattoo was still there, for all she was concerned. But by the third time she visited Jaffe's office, it was noticeably fading.

Will she ever get a tattoo again?

"Heavens, no," is her response.

Bruce Ripley, promoter for the annual Tattoo Fest convention in Tampa, says he can't pinpoint why people get tattoos in the first place. But one thing is for sure, he says: They can be addicting.

"First you've got one little spot filled up, then you want a little bit more," says Ripley, who has four tattoos of wolves — gifts from the artists at the convention.

When asked for his tattoo count, Jimbo, the Naples tattoo artist, simply replies that he's got "one big one." Name a part of his body, and he's likely to have a tattoo there.

A traditional "Mom" tattoo on his left bicep was his first, at 13 years old. Though it was a testament to his mother, Vera, she wasn't too pleased.

Vera still doesn't approve of his tattooing, Jimbo says, though she'll often come and admire his artwork. As for kids these days, Jimbo doesn't tattoo anyone under the age of 18. They might get a good job, he says, and

their tattoo will be a barrier.

"I was that rebel kid," Jimbo says with a wise smirk. "Lucky for me, I ended up in this business."

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