# Tattooed: Body art goes mainstream

by Tim Keel in the May 15, 2007 issue

Driving through the midtown section of Kansas City, you might not be surprised to see a sign for Whispering Danny's Exile Tattoo Parlor. After all, it's a transitional neighborhood where you might expect to see tattoo shops. What might be surprising, however, is that some of Danny Kobsantsev's clients are middle-aged university professors.

Kobsantsev, who goes by the name Whispering Danny (an acknowledgment of the tracheotomy that gave him his quiet, gravelly voice), says that he is currently "inking" professors in the fields of logic, mathematics, journalism and statistics—hardly the edgy crowd usually associated with tattoos. According to Kobsantsev, there is no usual crowd anymore. His parlor draws clients from all over the city and from all walks of life. People come for tattoos for all kinds of reasons.

Over the eight years that his shop has been in business Kobsantsev has had a steady stream of clients that keep him and the shop's three other artists busy 10 to14 hours a day. However, he does acknowledge that tattooing seems to be taking on an unprecedented level of cultural significance. When he opened his shop in the late 1990s, the entire metropolitan area of Kansas City had only three or four tattoo parlors. Now the city claims over 200 such shops, with as many as four or five artists working in each. That kind of growth demonstrates how a once-fringe practice has become mainstream.

A 2003 Harris poll found that 16 percent of Americans have at least one tattoo. A June 2005 survey conducted by the American Society of Dermatological Surgery reported that the number is now as high as 24 percent—roughly one in four. Among Americans age 18 to 29, that number jumps to 36 percent.

Perhaps part of the mainstreaming of the tattoo subculture can be attributed to television. Athletes and entertainers with tattoos are ubiquitous. Cable television has given rise to lots of niche programs on heretofore fringe topics, and tattooing is one of them. The Discovery Channel and the Learning Channel each has a popular show that follows the ups and downs of life in a tattoo parlor (one called *Inked*, the other

*Miami Ink*). These shows allow people who might never enter the tattoo world to take a front-row seat in the safety and comfort of their living rooms.

And apparently many are not content to simply view this world at a distance. They take the step of going under the needle themselves.

What motivates a person to go through the painful experience of being tattooed? Certainly novelty has a great deal to do with it. People sometimes make impulsive decisions that they later regret. A quarter of Americans who get a tattoo will later have it surgically removed. What is at stake for the others?

It is more than an exercise in novelty, according to Kobsantsev. People who come to see him are usually very purposeful. Often a tattoo is a way of declaring something to the world. To be sure, there are those who get a tattoo as a form of rebellion or as an act of machismo. But just as often tattoos function in more substantial ways—as a means of remembering or commemorating something significant or transformative in one's life; as a sort of talisman to gain power; as a way of exercising and expressing control over one's body after suffering some kind of assault or trauma; or even as a kind of visual timeline charting significant events. Tattoos have become a means of expressing oneself and one's story in a dramatic way.

The way that tattoos function as a sort of personal timeline is nothing new. During World War I and World War II many soldiers and sailors received tattoos in every port they stopped in. Such tattoos marked them as men and told the story of their service. In this and many other ways tattoos have served as a rite of passage. In fact, while there are some who get tattoos for the simple fun of it, Kobsantsev confirms that for most clients, tattoos are a way of marking often hidden realities in a visible way—which is just the way rites of passage functioned in the past.

Twenty-first-century American culture lacks significant rites of passage. Premodern cultures have always relied on different rites to help people navigate transitions and to provide meaning for life passages, whether a coming of age, the achievement of mastery in a chosen vocation, a new commitment or the loss of a loved one. Often rites of passage involve some kind of mark that involves pain and in some way sets the person apart as different. In the same way, tattoos make a declaration about personal identity.

Tattooing is a phenomenon that has increasingly included Christians. Perhaps it is not surprising that for most Christians the decision to get a tattoo is one that is filled

with purposeful symbolism. Christianity is a sacramental religion that employs different rituals to outwardly mark an inward transformation. Baptism is an obvious example. That many Christians have made the decision to have traditional symbols like crosses, doves and trinitarian iconography tattooed on themselves as a sign of commitment or act of devotion follows a kind of incarnational logic. Throughout history Christians have used the tools and signs of the surrounding culture and consecrated them for sacred purposes.

Some Christians opt for very explicit religious tattoos. Verses of scripture, many in the original Greek or Hebrew languages and scripts, can be a means of connecting themselves to their ancient faith.

Responding to a question on this topic placed in an online forum, one man described his decision to get a trinitarian fish symbol tattooed on his chest. He said it would be “a daily, visual reminder of the oneness and threeness of God, and how he is always present, just like the ‘tat.’ The tattoo is also a lifelong commitment, and as I commit my life to him, this image will be on my skin for the rest of my life.”

In the same forum a woman stated that her tattoos are “a way of letting what is going on in the inside seep to the surface.” She went on to say that she spent most of her life trying to blend into the background so as not to be noticed. Her first tattoo was a way of showing something of what was going on inside of her: it was a “teeny tiny pink rosebud” hidden away on her back. As she became more outgoing, she got a tattoo of red roses on her ankle. Most recently she added an orchid that covers up the original little rosebud. She says she did this “because I don’t need [the original one] anymore. I am not afraid of letting people see who I am.” Such a transformation of the woman’s internal landscape testifies to the growth and development that Christians believe flow from a life entrusted to the love of God.

But not all Christians who get tattooed are seeking to express such weighty sentiments. One woman who has a tattoo of a cross on her back spoke of the appeal of doing something different. “Most people don’t know I have [a tattoo] until I tell them. I’m a fairly conservative-looking person, so part of me loves the shock factor associated with my tattoo’s revelation. However, it is well hidden and isn’t something I emphasize. For me, it’s a simple reminder not to judge a book by its cover. I plan to get another—strategically placed, of course.”

It is good to be reminded not to judge a book by its cover or make assumptions about people on the basis of their outward appearance. Given the growing

phenomenon of tattooing and the wide and expanding demographic of those who get tattoos, chances are someone around us is declaring something significant about themselves—in plain view or just below the surface.