

Criminals Do not “Own” Tattoos



A memorial tattoo on Meza's arm. Photo By Samantha Meza.

Tattoos are the door into a person's mind and soul. Unique to the individuals, tattoos can symbolize more than interests or loved ones; they represent a person's story.

In the past, people only believed that tattoos belonged to criminals. Due to their “scary” look and sometimes “killer” meaning. Recently, people have begun to break those stereotypes and instead own this craft and transform it into something more than “regretful ink.”

Samantha Meza is a Los Angeles local who started her tattoo journey very young. She currently has seven tattoos, and the majority were done by herself using the stick-and-poke method. Ever since she was little, Meza knew that one day, she wanted to express herself by getting tattoos.

“When I was a kid, I would always get in trouble for drawing on myself with pens and markers. So, when the tattoos started coming, my family already expected it but would say they preferred it if I didn't.”

“Oh well,” said Meza.

While there is still a lingering stigma that comes with having tattoos, Meza counters them with satire. “There are tons of stereotypes that come with having tattoos. My personal favorite is ‘only thugs and gang members get tattoos.’ Yes, grandma, I’m a thug with my flower tattoos.”

Employees with tattoos are often forced to hide their tattoos due to an official company policy or because it's considered more “professional.” “I do feel in some professional settings it's best I keep my tattoos covered. That could just be the stigma still lingering with me.”

“I once applied for a job as a substitute teacher for North High School in Torrance, Calif. And they refused to hire me because of the r13 on my hand. When applying for jobs I always put a Band-Aid over the r13 because of the negative connotation,” said John Lujan.

Lujan has approximately 11 tattoos, spanning his arms and back. He embarked on his tattoo journey at 18, with the artwork primarily done by friends. The majority of his tattoos hold significant meanings, closely tied to the Barrio he was raised in. As mentioned, Lujan's r13 tattoo is a symbol of his neighborhood, which is predominantly Mexican American.



A tattoo on the back of Meza's arm. Photo By Samantha Meza.

There are many factors to be considered when debating whether to get a tattoo or not. When it comes down to it, family opinion tends to be the biggest one.

Annie Hernandez-Ball started getting tattoos when she turned 18. Once she got her first tattoo, she had to learn to navigate the pushback and negative feedback she would receive from her family. "My dad and my mom are more traditional and very against it. They both told me I shouldn't have gotten any tattoos and that it was going to affect everything in my life," Hernandez-Ball said.

There is little faith that once you get a tattoo, you can still have a successful life. Society determines based on your appearance if you can have a good job, create a family, and be financially stable. "People assume that I grew up a certain way or my family is a certain way, like poor, from a bad neighborhood, that my family is uneducated, or that I'm uneducated."

Furthermore, not only do societal perceptions play a role, but officers and other authority figures, make judgments based on a person's race and their tattoos. "There's definitely a stereotype of the type of tattoos I have, as they are considered prison tattoos and gang member tattoos. I received a lot of negativity from police officers who didn't understand [I could be] a vice president at a bank and a college graduate," said John Lujan.

Lujan, Meza, and Hernandez-Ball being Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, find themselves stereotypically characterized by certain negative traits. Among Hispanics, 35% have tattoos, and three out of ten Americans perceive tattoos more negatively than positively.

In the past, society has left people feeling uncomfortable doing as they wish with their bodies. There is shame, disgust, and hostility being used to belittle individuals who choose to represent themselves differently from the “average” person.

The new generation has become more accepting of individuals with tattoos. One-third of Americans are tattooed which has steadily increased throughout the decades. People are now pushing for individuals to express themselves in any way they deem fit.