

Underground tattoos and minors

I am a professional tattoo artist, and have owned my small town's first and only legitimate studio for the last eleven years. I have seen tattoos from other shops in the bay area, and there is some astounding work being done! Tattooing and body piercing done in the proper manner is a beautiful choice for adults to make.

Unfortunately, there are a handful of "artists" that are tattooing minors and others in situations that are illegal and dangerous. I have a 16 year old Goth boy that does shop chores for me that has "hate" and "ugly" tattooed on his knuckles, as well as lower half sleeves that are dark, malformed and partially scarred. These tattoos were done by a man that learned to "tattoo" in prison.

This boy has found that in a very yuppie town, no one will give him a job with those tattoos. As adults, many people choose to make the decision to modify their bodies in ways that would limit what they do, but these choices are best made by adults who have some real idea of what the "real" world is like to live in. I'm appalled that a grownup who has experienced himself how hard it is to get by with a bunch of bad jailhouse work would do that to a kid who's just starting out in life. He'll be able to outgrow the eyeliner and mascara if he ever wants to...that bad black ink is another thing entirely.

Then there's the guy who's still a teenager and fancies himself to be quite the artist as well. I'm seeing a whole different crowd of minors with work from this "artist", and if possible it's even a little less appealing than Mr. Prison's. His friends let him ink them out of some sense of loyalty or peer pressure.

California state law prohibits me from tattooing minors for any reason, even with parental consent, so the answer I have to give to distraught parents is "No, I can't do anything to fix that till they're 18." I have two teenagers myself, I can really see how distressing that would be for a parent.

Eventually, I'm afraid that the minor child of someone "important" will be harmed, or God forbid, contract a fatal illness from an untrained practitioner and body mod will be outlawed by our city council. (This is a town with about 71,000 residents, and one body mod studio.) Changing the law will do nothing to stop this, it will only affect the one place to safely be tattooed or pierced in the valley.

I talk to a lot of minors that are into piercing right now because their parents may consent to it. There's a whole crew that can't wait to turn 18 so they can get a tattoo from Paul and Andrew's mom. The best advice and council I have to offer them is don't cover your best real estate with bad tattoos...save it till you can become something spectacular.

As professionals and collectors, I think it's important not to support unsafe tattooing or piercing by untrained individuals. This is the only way to ensure that legally we can all have the right to modify ourselves to our heart's delight!

It is a joy for me to work with a freshly 18 year old client who sees a whole sleeve, or ribcage, or back piece before they start with one little thing after another. The difference in reactions that these kids get to their tattoos are very pronounced!

I just finished a back piece on a girl for her birthday that we started exactly two years ago (on her birthday as well) and people stop her in the store to ask if they can look closer. It is the planet earth about 5 inches in diameter, framed by green and blue alien hands designed by my son. We spent two years on it, layering different colors in different sessions. She has never been refused a job even if it shows in the gap between her pants and her shirt.

Another boy started a ribcage piece that has a hammerhead shark surrounded by water. I love both these pieces, not just because I did them, but because these young people are the ambassadors to the straight world that body mod can be stunningly beautiful and is not always the silly impulsive gesture of a person who's too young to make valid decisions about their life. No one will look at my Goth buddy and feel the same way, and that makes me sad.

The world of body modification has changed so much since we discovered that you could put two ear rings in one lobe back in 1975. At my daughter's elementary school, teachers have piercings and tattoos...The world is moving on and I want to safely guide our next generation into the joys of becoming art. If you have a teenager or know one, sit down with them and advise them not with the idea that body mod is bad and they shouldn't do it, but rather how wonderful it can be if done intelligently. As we say at the shop after someone's first tattoo..."One more of us, and one less of them!"

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