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Tattoo Rescue

Scars, track marks, gang tats--if they're ruining your life, Eric Dean Spruth wants to cover them up.

By Laura Putre

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Gwennatta Davis left the Conservative Vice Lords long before she went to prison, but her gang tattoos got her beaten up there anyway. She was 15 when she got them: a five-point star and the letters CVL on her upper left arm, part of her initiation into the gang, which had operated near her home in North Lawndale since the 60s. At first, she says, "it was just fun hanging around them. It was just for kicks. I was just following the crowd, wanting to be like the other kids in the neighborhood." But initiation also involved having sex with several men and beating up a girl who'd recently strayed from the gang. For the next ten years, that's basically how life went. "The men controlled the women," she says. "You had to do whatever they said."

Davis, who's now 45, left the gang in the early 90s. She was doing heroin and in 1996 was convicted of drug possession and sent to Lincoln Correctional Center, where she spent the next four years. In prison some women from the Gangster Disciples confronted her about her tattoos. "I told them I wasn't gangbanging," she says, "but they didn't want to hear it. They attacked me, I fought back, and we all went to segregation for 30 days."

A mother of five and grandmother of five, Davis has struggled with addiction and her violent past ever since her release from Lincoln. Earlier this year, after yet another arrest for drug possession, she was placed in the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program at Cook County Jail, where women awaiting sentencing spend several hours a day receiving substance abuse and mental health counseling before returning to their families in the evening.

The program helped: by early June she had been clean for three months and was talking about going back to school. But she was still worried about her tattoos. Then she came across a notice on a bulletin board at the jail about an organization called Sacred Transformations, which covers up gang tattoos with new life-affirming designs for free. To participate, she had to fill out an application with a series of essay questions asking where she got her tattoos, how they've affected her, and where she is in her life today. Davis eagerly wrote three pages detailing her past and her desire to change. "If you can help me out, I will be most grateful," she wrote. "I really hate what I did."

Sacred Transformations operates out of South Side Tattoos, a studio at 85th and Stony Island. It's only been around since last summer but Eric Dean Spruth, the nonprofit's 41-year-old founder and sole tattoo artist, already has a yearlong waiting list. Spruth has a full-time job and an infant daughter, so he can only spare one night a week for the project. Still, it's possible to get bumped up the list if the situation is urgent--and that doesn't necessarily mean going to prison. "Say somebody wants to christen their baby," Spruth says, "and they've done everything they could to get to that line in the sand, with their sobriety, with their family." It's enough, he says, to call and say, "I don't want pictures of me with this gangbanger stuff on my arm."

Up until a couple years ago, Spruth had never done a tattoo. He has, however, devoted most of his adult life to helping people. A Chicago native with a master's in art therapy from the School of the Art Institute, he's spent the last 15 years working at Cook County Jail with some of the system's most troubled inmates. "Rather than some private hospital with 32 people on a unit, I'd rather be with 1,000," he says. His primary focus is inmates who are mentally ill or developmentally disabled, a specialization that stems in part from his own childhood. In third grade he was diagnosed with multiple learning disabilities, including dyslexia, and put in special education classes, where he remained all the way through high school.

Upon graduation Spruth enrolled at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, where he benefited from tutoring specifically designed for students with learning disabilities, and then he transferred to SAIC. While in college he volunteered at the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park, organizing a variety of programs that incorporated everything from papier-mache to playing air guitar to Led Zeppelin. After that he spent a year and a half as a volunteer and another year and a half as an employee at the Garden Center for the Handicapped in Burbank. Four of the center's 60 clients were his former high school classmates.

At the Garden Center Spruth started teaching his clients basic sleight-of-hand tricks he'd learned from his grandfather, Henry Kopeika, an optometrist and magician. "I was trying to think of things that would help me foster motivation for that population," he says. "The system is very good at offering a rubber stamp for a set of questions: who's the president, what's the date, do you want to hurt yourself. It's not very good at getting people to open up." Five years ago, under the auspices of the Society of American Magicians, Spruth launched a magic-therapy program, using his vacation time to travel to children's hospitals and mental health institutions around the world. It's taken him to South Africa, Italy, China, Egypt, India, Croatia, Jordan, and Israel, among other places.

After Spruth earned his master's from SAIC in 1992 he landed almost immediately at Cook County Jail, taking on extra projects for the inmates in his free time. Seven years ago he spearheaded the creation of two jail libraries. Four and a half years ago he organized a gardening class for the women's furlough program. Working with women who had gang symbols or pimps' names burned in their flesh had a profound impact on him. "These women are trying to get their lives together. They have children. And they're marked by these idiots," he says. "How are you supposed to get your life back together when you've got some idiot's name on you? How are your kids supposed to not think that's cool when they see you naked in the house or the shower? You smoke, your kids are gonna smoke no matter how bad you are. If you're involved in a bad relationship with a guy, your kids are going to follow that path, because you're the coolest person they've ever met."

Not long after he started the gardening program, Spruth was building an altar for a Day of the Dead ceremony in Humboldt Park when he says he had a vision of his grandfather. Though he'd been emaciated and weak at the time of his death, Kopeika appeared plump and vital. "He said to me, 'Eric, we all make marks in our lives,'" Spruth says. "'Some marks that we make other people will spend an entire lifetime trying to duplicate. Some marks we'll spend an entire lifetime trying to erase.' Then he looked me dead in the eye and said, 'I'm happy with the marks I've made in my life and I'm ready to move on.'" Spruth says he realized he couldn't erase people's marks, but as an artist he could "help them evolve in a more positive way."

Months later, after a visit to an AIDS hospital in Hong Kong, Spruth traveled to Thailand and purchased an expensive tattoo gun on the island of Phuket. When he got home he bought a 1969 GMC van from a guy in Connecticut and painted it in homage to the Mystery Machine from Scooby-Doo. He called the vehicle the Tattoo Machine. The Scooby gang means a lot to Spruth. "Any one of those people didn't have much to offer, but as a team they're unstoppable," he says. "Every episode ended with a very important message: 'If it wasn't for you meddling kids, my scheme would have worked.' That's what I made the van for. You've gotta make a move, you've gotta make a change, otherwise these monsters, be they the abominable snowman or the evil scientist guy, they'll be with you. You're the only thing they have to gain power from."

Spruth looked into a tattoo training program in Detroit, but tuition was \$8,000--more than he could afford. He slowly started trying to raise funds. Then one day as he was getting off work, he walked out to his van to find Darryl Acey, a Cook County deputy sheriff, waiting for him. The two men had never met. Acey, who works as a "proowler" at the jail, transporting inmates from one wing to another and providing any equipment or backup jail personnel might need, had noticed the van in the parking lot and was hoping to meet the owner. But it had been a rough day, and Spruth was in no mood to talk. "Generally I'm excited to engage people in conversations," he says, "At that particular moment I wasn't feeling very genuine. I just wanted to get away from 26th and California." But Acey wouldn't let him go.

"He says to me, 'I dig the van, I dig the van,'" Spruth says. "I'm like 'Thanks very much, dude.' And I get in the

car and he says, 'But I just got one question for you. Why'd you call it the Tattoo Machine?' I says, 'You got 11 minutes? I'm gonna tell you my story.'" When he finished, Acey asked Spruth if he knew who he was. "I looked at his name tag and said, 'You're Officer Acey, it's nice to meet you.' He said, 'No, I'm the owner of South Side Tattoos, and you just got your apprenticeship.'"

Two weeks later Spruth met the other artists at the shop. He spent the next year and a half training under them and now has free access to the shop and its equipment. "To this day, I get emotional just thinking about it," he says. "It's about being prepared for the moment, because the moment's going to come when you don't expect it."

Mike Burns just finished a 90-day stint in Cook County Jail for shoplifting. A 27-year-old manic-depressive army veteran, he was busted at a Jewel stealing shampoo and lotion, which he planned to sell on the street so he could come up with money for heroin. "I used to pick receipts off the ground to return to get the cash," he says. "I walked past Walgreens the other day thinking, I can't believe I did that. That was insane."

Burns says he's tried to commit suicide four times. Each time he tried to make it look like an accidental overdose—a way of fooling God. Off his medication and not thinking clearly, he went out of his way to get arrested, hoping he'd wind up in prison on a felony and be eligible for long-term mental health treatment. (He'd completely overlooked his army benefits.) Instead he wound up in jail on a misdemeanor. While incarcerated, he checked out books by the beats at the library and joined an existentialist discussion group led by two mental health practitioners. "Something clicked this time around," he says. "I'm feeling real positive about trying to come back into society. Other times I've tried a little, but something that's held me back is my presentation of myself." His left arm is dotted with more than a dozen purple track marks.

In the past Burns avoided looking for work, "because I knew when the time came to put a uniform on, I won't look like the ideal employee. I wouldn't want somebody that's all scarred up, that looks like they've been running around, hanging out doing the wrong thing, providing me with a service."

Now living in a halfway house, he was recently hired as a cook at a Hooters in Lansing, Indiana. He says he'd like to go to college and eventually become a high school English teacher but his track marks are holding him back. "I feel like half a person with the reminders of my past stuck upon my body," he says.

After several months on the Sacred Transformations waiting list, Burns recently sat down with Spruth for the first of 11 sessions. Burns came up with the design: a stylized dragon surrounded by blue and red flames that he says represent sobriety and the need to keep his spirit in alignment.

Typical generic cover-ups at South Side Tattoos—a black-and-gray rose motif or a grim reaper, for example—start at about \$200. For most customers, this dragon would have run close to \$2,700. "What I'm offering is a fairly complicated process," Spruth says, though he doesn't like to attach dollar amounts to his work. "It doesn't involve just showing up, picking some crap off the wall, and saying, 'This is my new thing.'"

Denise Colletti, who works with Spruth at the jail and helps his clients with their designs, says not only has she seen a lot of regrettable tattoos in her line of work—she's seen her share of regrettable cover-ups. "Many times the cover-up basically looks like a dark area, to blur out what was there," she says. Spruth doesn't want to make the mark go away—he wants to replace it with something beautiful. "One thing I don't encourage my clients to do is deny the past," he says. "Maya Angelou, she would never deny the fact that she was a prostitute—she wouldn't celebrate it, but she would never deny it. I would never encourage my clients to deny or forget the past, because the past is related somehow to who they are now. As Santa would say, there's room for everybody on the good list. It's just a matter of making a choice."

Clifford Oliver, a mental health counselor for the past 12 years at Cook County Jail, says the inmates he works with have needed a service like Sacred Transformations for quite a while. "You can say you're not in a gang, but if you're walking around with the symbol on you—especially if you're walking outside your community—someone may take a shot at you just for the symbol itself." And former gangbangers may be beaten by gang members for not getting the tattoos removed. "It's like another initiation just to get out," he says.

A guard at Cook County Jail who would give only his last name, Alvarez, says he sees men all the time with gang tattoos on their necks, faces, even foreheads. "There's no way they can hide it," he says. "If there's a gang war, there will be a problem. There's a lot of older guys that just want out. Some younger guys too—they've just had enough."

While Spruth estimates 60 percent of his clients are former gangbangers, he's covered up all sorts of things:

the names of long-gone lovers, birthmarks, moles, scars. "That's what Sacred Transformations is about," he says. "Taking something that's interrupting the highest quality of a person's life and not correcting it, but transforming it. Helping it become something else, ideally a daily reminder that you're you and no one's responsible for you except you. And it's your job to go out there every day and do something decent. Or stay out of the way. Don't mess with other people."

Admiring the beginnings of his new tattoo from all angles in a mirror, Mike Burns calls it an "everlasting symbol of what I've been through. Using heroin but smoking it is called chasing the dragon. To me it was like, I've caught the dragon and it's time to let him go. I feel this is completing the circle."

When Kimberly Upton was 14, some kids from the Four Corner Hustlers etched a large, crude image of a skull and crossbones onto her right upper arm. "It was a gang I thought I was gonna be with forever," she said. "I thought it was cool but today is a different day. I'm a different person. I can't go in to get a job with this tattoo on me."

For Upton, the tattoo is a reminder of the childhood she never had: she was sexually abused as a kid and grew up in a house where illegal drugs were used openly. After repeatedly running away, she left home for good at 14 and started selling drugs on the street. She crashed on people's couches or sometimes would get an adult to rent a room for her in a flophouse.

Though her allegiance to the Four Corner Hustlers was brief, she still gets asked about the tattoo all the time. "If I'm in the wrong neighborhood, people want to know what it is and then they look at me crazy," she said. Without even thinking about it, she often sits with her left hand covering the tattoo. "I do it all the time, because it's not me. I'm 30 years old, it's a different day, and I'm a new person."

Upton was part of a group of six furloughed women at Cook County Jail who met with Spruth in mid-June to talk about their problem tattoos. "I got mine done in a hallway on North Avenue and Central," she told the group.

"I got mine done at my kitchen table while my mama was at work," said Tyesha Jones.

"Tell me about it--right in the house, with old-fashioned india ink and a needle and some thread," said Doretha Streeter. She considered having her Four Corner Hustlers tattoo removed at a laser clinic near the jail, but it was too costly. Now she eagerly talks of getting her tattoo transformed. "It can just be a rose opening up," she said. "Something positive. Something beautiful."

Money isn't the only issue with tattoo removal--it also takes commitment. Laser surgery can require up to 12 sessions, and the sometimes excruciating pain can keep clients from finishing what they've started. "What would you rather have: half a gang mark or no gang mark?" Spruth asked the women. "How many people start a removal process and don't see it all the way through, and they're walking around with half of something?"

Kassandra Bennett got a Gangster Disciples pitchfork tattooed on her right wrist when she was 16. She wasn't even a member; she'd simply asked her brother for a tattoo of her name. Once she was branded, "everybody started looking at me differently," she said. "I stayed in a neighborhood around a whole bunch of Vice Lords. I used to have to run home from school every day."

Tyesha Jones got her Vice Lords tattoo when she was 12. Now 27, she's been out of the gang for seven years, but she's having a tough time explaining the tattoo to her increasingly curious sons, who are 13, 11, and 9. "My kids ask me, 'What is this?' Every time they see it, they ask about it," she said. "I'll be brushing them off because I don't want to explain. I don't want them to start gangbanging."

Jones spent most of her life in Henry Horner Homes, where buildings are affiliated with specific gangs. She and her family members, many of whom had similar tattoos, devised strategies to avoid running into neighbors from the Gangster Disciples. "I used to have to go in and out of the house at a certain time, because they were waiting outside," she said. "I couldn't go home in the daytime." Tired of all the dodging, she recently moved farther west, to a neighborhood where her tattoo isn't as dangerous. "I had to move for my kids," she says.

In early June, Gwennatta Davis was sentenced to 61 days at Dwight Correctional Center. She had just one week to get her tattoo covered. Superintendent Minerva Santiago of the Department of Women's Justice Services, which administers the furlough program, got in touch with Spruth to see if Davis could be moved to the top of his list. He agreed, on the condition that Davis would research iconography and come up with a meaningful design.

But Spruth never heard back from Davis. "I called her about 16 times and couldn't get through," he says. "I got someone else because I wanted to fill the night. I was ready for her to go. Permission was there for her to come all the way over from [her home in] Justice."

Davis isn't the first client to back out. In late May, Spruth was ready to work on a man who wanted the remains of a tattoo of a naked woman covered up with a lion and a lamb. He'd gotten the tattoo as a boy in Guatemala, but his mother, furious, immediately took him to a doctor, who tried to remove it with a Dremel tool. The pain was so severe that the mother made the doctor stop halfway through. The man had been living with a naked torso on his arm ever since. After Spruth met with him several times, the man stopped returning his calls.

But Spruth is philosophical about people not following through. "Sometimes you've got to get knocked down a couple times to really get up," he says. "Or you get partially up and you get knocked down. Sometimes you wait your whole life to do something, but it's typical that you have all kinds of obstacles or distractions. The challenge is to do what you're supposed to be doing with the limited life you have."

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): On the cover: Eric Dean Spruth photographed by Lloyd DeGrane.