

# Tattooed Hearts

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The heart is the only body organ popular with tattoo enthusiasts. You never see a tattoo of a kidney or a liver. Hearts, of course, are embedded with Valentine's Day but our February day of love is not as much of a boon for local tattoo shops as are some other holidays.

"Around Valentine's Day, business is up a little but not much," says Jacci Gresham, who proclaims that her street front tattoo parlor at 1041 N. Rampart St., (across from the French Quarter) is the longest running body ink shop in the state of Louisiana. The doors will have been open and the needles have been buzzing from about noon to about midnight daily for 32 years next month.

"At Mardi Gras there's a run on masks and beads. Around St. Patty's Day, four leaf clovers are popular. And we're busy all summer; summer is always good because people want to display their

artwork.

"Hearts with a banner and a name were common requests years ago. Not anymore. Everybody wants a fleur-de-lis. At least once a day though, I sneak in a heart for free as the base of my fleur-de-lis design. Usually special flourishes cost extra but I give away small free hearts as part of my design. Another place where a small heart can go is above the "I" instead of the dot if there is an "I" in the name like mine – Jacci. But these days most people with an "I" in their name want a star instead of a heart.

"Occasionally someone will want a realistic heart. I can do that. It looks just like what you see in the medical books with veins and valves and all of that.

"A couple of times a year someone gets a broken heart tattoo. I assume they're in mourning because a girlfriend, wife or husband left. If they want a broken heart, that's that. They never want a name to go along with it. Too painful I guess.

"Before Katrina I had another shop in the Lower 9th Ward. We had a name special there, and I always put a heart for the dot above any "I" for free. Mother's Day was big at that location. You know how our local boys love their mamas."

Gresham, 61 years old, was born in Flint, Michigan. She trained as a draftsman and had architectural aspirations. She drew plans and layouts for automobile dealerships before switching careers.

"General Motors had a big lay off in 1975. Ajit Singh and I decided to move to New Orleans. He was an Indian from England and knew tattooing. We both had worked at General Motors in Michigan. We opened this shop in '76. Ajit died in '99. We were a couple but we never married. Nobody gets married anymore," says Gresham.

"Ajit Singh taught me to tattoo right here in this room. At the time I was the only black female tattoo professional in the South. Back then women didn't tattoo. Several artists work here, not just me. We have a license for health purposes but there's no license for the artistic part," says Gresham, acknowledging that health concerns surround the tattoo industry.

"You gotta be honest and clean to stay in business as long as I have. 'Yeah it hurts,' I say. I am ethical. If a woman brings her child in here and wants me to tattoo her boyfriend's name on the child to upset the ex-husband, I won't do it."

Professionals like Gresham have never reused needles but tattoos and hepatitis C have an inseparable history. Hepatitis C is a potentially fatal disease that attacks the liver leading to cirrhosis and liver cancer with an incubation period measured in decades not months. It affects two percent of the U.S. population and most infected individuals have no idea they're carrying the potentially fatal virus.

Several years ago, a group of Texas physicians tested all their back pain patients for hepatitis C. A full one-third with commercial tattoos also had had hepatitis C. In contrast, less than four percent of patients with no tattoos had hepatitis C. They linked this increase prevalence in hepatitis C not to the needles but to the tattoo inks.

Most of the infections were associated with expensive tattoos that included colored ink. Yellow, orange and red pigments in tattoos were more likely to be associated with hepatitis C than all-black ink tattoos.

The problem wasn't reusing dirty needles – it was contaminated tattoo ink. The containers of black ink are cheap and rarely reused. The more expensive inks, on the other hand, are sometimes saved for reuse. The use of a new sterile needle for a tattoo makes no sense if it's dipped into a cross-contaminated ink supply.

Just because people who had received a tattoo in a commercial tattoo parlor were nine times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C than people who didn't have a tattoo doesn't mean that the tattoo caused the hepatitis. Hepatitis C affects people from all walks of life,

regardless of age, race, gender or sexual orientation.

A greater reason than contaminated ink for the high rate of hepatitis C among tattoo recipients has to do with other risky behaviors. Intravenous drug users have the highest hepatitis C rates but other forms of illicit drug use from steroid injections to sniffing cocaine can spread the virus.

Gresham says tattoos are generally safe. She gives each tattoo recipient an eight-point handout in English, with a Spanish translation, on taking care of the new tattoo in addition to a free bottle of Lubriderm (see box).

“Normally there are no ink allergies. I have been changing needles between customers since I started. But new tattoos can get infected. Sometimes the person rubs on too much lotion of some sort. We recommend Nutraderm but rubbing it in every five minutes is too much. It is important to follow directions. Some folks, though, just don’t take care of them.”