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Skin Deep

By Ashley Veintimilla

They say beauty is more than skin deep, but that does not mean we should discount skin altogether. Skin plays an integral role in shaping personality and character since the way people choose to clothe, decorate or care for their skin can tell a story about who they are.

The theme of this issue is “Skin Deep” because the stories explore attitudes toward skin that create various life circumstances. For example, one article discusses burlesque dancers who participate in the revealing art form because they say it makes them feel less self-conscious and more comfortable in their own skin. In another, more intense story, readers learn what life is like for people who view their skin as a coping device, so they participate in self-injury.

Because the appearance and health of skin undoubtedly play a major role in everyone’s lives, the way some people choose to treat their skin can seem either fascinating or shocking, depending on how unusual the circumstances are. If you really want to read an outrageous account—try checking out the article about body suspension, which requires participants to “hang out,” or dangle above ground from hooks pierced through their skin.

As you are about to find out, there are tons of ways to think about skin, and the wide range of stories in this “Skin Deep” issue are a testament to that fact.

Thanks for reading.

Jaimie Fife
Editor-in-Chief

P.S. Your epidermis is showing.
Although she knows she stands out from the roughly 200 or so college students in her introductory psychology course, Western freshman Meron Sheriff is proud as she walks into her classroom at Western, I am normally the only one wearing a scarf. That is why I am very careful about the image I present of myself.

Sheriff says her mother’s religious teachings inspired her and her sister to not only follow Islamic dress traditions, but also practice the Islamic religion. She says Islam teaches that a woman who conceals her body shape and is less likely to be raped or attract negative male attention, such as inappropriate sexual remarks.

“Concealing ourselves is a way of hiding our beauty and being more modest,” Sheriff says. “It’s really a way of protecting ourselves.”

Sheriff says some Muslim women also choose to cover their faces, but the decision to do so is personal and not mandated by Muslim religion.

Iman Salam, a Muslim woman who has lived in Bellingham for six years, says most people are used to seeing images in the media of Muslim women wearing all black with their faces covered. She says nowhere in the Islamic religion is there a written requirement for women to cover their faces and wear all black. The way the media portrays Muslim women only contributes to negative stereotypes about Islam. She says when people see images of Muslim women dressed that way, it suggests they are all oppressed and forced to cover their faces.

Salam says if Americans were to travel to Palestine where her parents are from, they would encounter women dressed similar to the way Muslim women in the U.S. dress — without their faces completely covered.

Like most Muslim women, Salam keeps her hair covered in the presence of men except for her husband, father or brothers. In her home or around other women, she usually does not wear a hijab because its main purpose is for modesty when she is in public. In the Islamic faith, having your hair uncovered is a sign of femininity and is something that should be reserved for your husband, her says.

Salam says she chooses to wear a hijab because of her religious faith, but she also wears clothing such as pants and long-sleeved shirts from stores such as Gap and Old Navy. She says many common women's stores regularly sell the type of scarf that is used for a hijab, helping to mainstream a collection of more than 100 scarves in nearly every color of the rainbow.

Salam’s hijab is as much a part of her everyday life as whatever shirt she might decide to wear. She coordinates the scarves she puts on every morning with the rest of her outfit. Still, she says the hijab’s main purpose is not just to look pretty.

Salam says her religious faith is so important, she chooses to wear a hijab. As a Muslim woman, she feels compelled to follow the Islamic dress as part of the public testament to her beliefs, even though some Americans might not think a woman with visible hair is immodest, she says. As a mother of two young sons, she says it is important for her to provide a religious example as a parent.

“I will teach my daughters [about hijab] the same way my mother taught me—by example,” Salam says. “Little girls want to copy their moms, whether it’s wearing lipstick or carrying their purses around. But if my daughters choose not to wear it, I won’t say anything to them, as long as they believe inGod.”

Salam says Muslim females usually begin wearing the hijab in their early teen years to signify their transition into womanhood. Wearing one is a public statement that a young Muslim female is growing up. She says her 6-year-old daughter loves to wear a scarf covering her head. But as a parent, Salam is cautious about letting her daughter go out in public wearing a hijab because she is wary of negative stereotypes people sometimes associate with it.

“People might say, ‘look at those Muslims, they are so oppressed,’ when that is not the case,” Salam says. “I don’t want to be the hijab to make her feel different than many women in Bellingham because the city’s population is not very diverse.

She says she experienced much more cultural diversity in high school than she does at Western because of the larger Islamic population in Seattle. However, she says that the smaller Islamic population does not bother her because she has never felt socially out of place at Western. Still, she sometimes has to answer questions about why she chooses to cover her hair when many Americans don’t view hair as a potential sexual threat.

Kayla Britt, Associated Students vice president for diversity, says she also has to regularly answer questions about ethnic diversity on campus. She says students are often curious about why Western lacks diversity. While the university works to promote diversity through its clubs and scholarships, there is no one solution to creating a more diverse campus, she says. In her experience, students constantly talk about how Seattle is more diverse than Bellingham, making a lot of students feel out of place, she says.

“No one should have to be an ambassador for their own ethnicity,” Britt says.

Although she feels Western is progressively in accepting people of different ethnicities, Britt says students on campus should work to foster positive cultural relationships by refusing to discriminate against students who are culturally different.

“I haven’t seen any negative reactions or blatant acts of discrimination,” Britt says. “While we are a very tolerant campus, I can’t go far so as to say we are accepting that happens more on an individual level.”

As a young Muslim woman, Sheriff says she feels it is important to contribute to Western’s multiculturalism. Through her membership in Western’s Muslim Student Association, she works to maintain connections with other students of her faith, as well as form new connections with people who do not know about her culture. She says the association hosts public meetings on campus and in the Bellingham community where Muslim students gather to pray and socialize. The association is also involved in other humanitarian efforts, such as holding fundraisers to help victims in Gaza. She says outreach is part of her Muslim identity.

For Sheriff and other Muslim women, wearing a scarf over their hair affects their social presence because most people know the covering is for cultural and religious reasons.

“What I like about covering is that you become appreciated for what you say and do rather than what you look like,” Ali says. “Definitely, there are many young women who, once they put on the scarf on, lose many friends, which is unfortunate because doing that doesn’t change the person inside.”

All who converted to Islam 40 years ago, says it is important for young Muslims to be proud of their cultural identity and attribute any negative comments they receive about their dress to ignorance.

In the years she has been practicing the religion, Ali says she has encountered prejudice in many different forms, from verbal insults to rude stares. Many years ago, as she was walking down an empty city sidewalk wearing her hijab, she says that a car full of men drove by her, screaming at her to go home to her own country. Instead of stopping to cry, she strolled to herself and walked away from her and cared around a corner, she thought to herself, “if only I knew I was born in Iowa.”
It started with what looks like a tiny cat scratch. Emily Merker goes into the bathroom, takes her father’s electric razor and scrapes the side of the blade against her inner arm, making a small vertical incision in her skin. At only 9 years old, she intends for the fresh scratch to look as if she brushed her arm against a brick wall by accident. She does not plan for the endorphin-releasing cut to spiral into an addicting coping habit that would last seven years.

Merker is one of two million people in the U.S. who struggle with self-injury, or intentional infliction of harm to one’s body. Self-injury comes in several forms, the most common of which are cutting, hitting or burning of the skin. While the numbers of cutting cases vary among students, psychologists estimate between 8 and 10 percent of college students have intentionally injured themselves. The pressures associated with school, family or internal issues can become too difficult for some to bear.

Now 20 years old and 11 months free of self-injury, Merker looks back on her days of cutting as a cry for help. And, she has the scars to prove it.

“It was such a dark place,” Merker says. “So, it’s kind of nice to know that I’m able to get myself out of that mentality, I can do anything.”

Merker is setting in Seattle’s King Street Station with her father waiting for her train home to Portland. She rests her feet on top of a black suitcase, her short brown hair falling in ringlets against her face. As she sheds the layers of her blue pea coat, she pushes up the sleeves of her red hoodie, exposing overlapping scars running up and down her forearms. Raising the right pant leg of her blue jeans, she reveals her darkest scar, a 2-inch cut above her ankle that led her to stop cutting.

“As I matured, I realized this is the norm for a lot of people that ache,” Merker says. 

Story by Jillian Vasquez
Photos by Mark Malijan
Emily Merker sits outside in Portland, Oregon, on March 7, 2006.

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On an early Sunday afternoon, the weight room at the Wade King Student Recreation Center is filled with sweaty men and heavy weights. Among the 20 men wearing cut-off T-shirts, one blonde-haired woman with pigtail braids stands out. The muscles in her forearms and biceps become rock hard and swollen as she lifts two 35-pound dumbbells to her chest. Unlike the men in the room who make grunting noises as they lift dumbbells, the woman remains silent. Her bright red skin and protruding veins speak otherwise. Western senior Stephanie Singer looks as though she wants to scream.

From the outside, Singer looks like an average 21-year-old college student. She sees herself as a feminine woman and even likes the color pink, but her peers have classified her as masculine because they believe her sport is, she says. Singer is a female bodybuilder.

“[Being a bodybuilder] doesn’t mean I’m any different on the inside,” Singer says. “I’m still a girl.”

While male and female bodybuilders are viewed differently by society, some of the problems they face remain the same. The wear and tear bodybuilders impose on their skin can produce negative side effects such as stretch marks, body acne and infections.

Still, as a female bodybuilder, Singer’s issues stem differently by society, some of the problems they face remain the same. The wear and tear bodybuilders impose on their skin can produce negative side effects such as stretch marks, body acne and infections.

Singer says excessive tanning is necessary for competitions. “If you’re pale, you just look washed out [on stage],” Singer says. “This darker you are the more awkward you look. But, you see all the definition, it’s a desired look.”

Bodybuilders also worry about the appearance of hair. If any hair is present anywhere besides the head—even the slightest peach fuzz on the body—then the bodybuilder looks as hairy as a grizzly bear to judges, Singer says. She used to wax every inch of her body before competitions, but now she shaves, she says. “I got two Brazilians, and that’s it,” she says. “I don’t want to go back.”

During competitions, bodybuilders also use oils, which sometimes contain chemicals, to make the skin shine. The chemicals invite the possibility of infection, allergic reaction, breakouts or rashes, Howe says. Anything products slathered on the skin can cause a reaction, whether its sun block, lotion or body oils, he says.

“[Bodybuilders] are cramming more in the package,” Howe says. Since she works out seven days a week, twice daily, Singer does not give her skin a lot of time to form scar tissue. She does morning cardio and early afternoon weight lifting for about one to two hours per workout.

“It’s not really a sport anymore,” she says. “It’s a lifestyle.”

Back at the weight room about 30 minutes later, the room is less crowded. Singer stares straight into the mirror on the north wall of the room. She spreads circular weights on both sides and lifts it up to her chin. Her teeth clench and beads of sweat trickle from her forehead, washing over her smooth, tan skin. She is getting ready to compete—with or without the approval of others.
At sunrise, Blake Williams is standing on a beach in Hawaii facing the Pacific Ocean. In his bare chest, two large, silver hooks sit in his freshly pierced skin.

Parachute cord loops through each hook and extend up to a pulley system hanging from a dark brown limb of a Kiawe tree. Slowly, Williams starts to bounce; his multicolored sarong flowing back and forth. His body moves in rhythm with the beat of the Djembe drum. As he sways from side to side, his skin becomes accustomed to the pull of the hooks. His limbs are relaxed. His mind is at peace.

A friend pulls on the cord and Williams’ feet begin to rise off the ground. As his toes brush against the surface of the sand, he tilts his head back, allowing his long, blond dreadlocks to dangle in the air. Another pull on the cord and Williams’ body lifts off the ground. His arms fall down at his sides; the palms of his hands face the sky. The skin on his chest separates from the muscle tissue below and stretches up toward the tree limb.

“As intense as it seems, when I was in that state of mind, relaxing, it was very peaceful,” Williams says.

Maxx Sundquist’s eyes widen as she is fully suspended off the ground from six hooks in her stomach, on March 19, 2009. Jen Morgensen, bottom, helps Sundquist control her breathing as Kristan Mackintosh watches on and provides moral support.

Story by Alex Burrows
Photos by Mark Malijan

Hooked on a Feeling
Williams, a 23-year-old Bellingham resident, tried body suspension for the first time in June 2008. The weekend before his 23rd birthday, he traveled to a local beach in Maui where he lived to attempt what he had only seen on Ripley's Believe It or Not.

Body suspension is a process in which hooks are first pierced into various points in human skin. The hooks are then used to raise the body off the ground with rope or cord, causing the skin to stretch to support the weight. Although suspension is rooted in ritualistic practices, the practice can be physically harmful to participants. Risks include damaging muscle tissue, tearing the skin and spreading infections or diseases. Still, people continue to engage in body suspension because of its mind-altering effects.

PURE Cirkus, a Seattle based organization that performs suspensions, started as a body-based art theater group five years ago. In the beginning, the group focused on body modification and suspension during performances. In order to reach out to other audiences, PURE’s act evolved to include various types of circus routines, including juggling and fire performance. Still, suspension is a major part of their show.

Jen Morgensen helps run the suspension crew for PURE, working to keep participants safe. She warns participants of the many dangers involved in suspension, especially if those overseeing the suspension are not trained to the latest standards and qualifications. Hitting muscle tissue during the piercing process is a possible injury that is not deadly but takes time to heal. Morgensen also says the skin near the piercing can tear if the hooks are not placed in the correct spot. Coming into contact with diseases and infection is another issue that can be avoided by correctly sterilizing all tools used to perform the piercing, she says.

As Williams' suspension was different from those Morgensen oversees, he was still cautious. Williams’ friends who helped stage the suspension are professional tattoo artists and piercers who have been suspended before. The hooks Williams used are specialty hooks that were sterilized and packaged for body suspension.

With his safety ensured, Williams was free to get lost in the journey his mind was taking during the suspension. He was aware of what was happening around him and the people he was with. However, his mind was in a different place.

“I taught me how to let go. I was relaxed and outside of myself,” Williams says.

As a side effect of being suspended, Williams experienced air bubbles that formed under his skin. Because the skin separates from the body during suspension, air often settles between the flesh and muscle tissue. Following the suspension, Williams was able to pop the air pockets like bubble wrap. After a few days, the air naturally dissipated through the skin and the bubbles disappear. Despite the air bubbles and extreme nature of suspension, Williams’ accomplishment encouraged him to try suspension again.

“If it’s a very incredible experience and definitely something I would try again if the opportunity arises,” Williams says.

Williams is able to describe the final moments of his suspension like they were yesterday.

As he is lowered to the ground, relief rushes through his body. The cords that held him in mid-air are loose beside him. Blood drips from the piercing on the right side of his chest. Although the skin surrounding the large, silver hooks is red and inflamed, Williams manages to smile with accomplishment.

“As intense as it seems, when I was in that state of mind, relaxing, it was very peaceful.”
As Western graduate student Harmanjit Dillon hurries to get ready for the evening, her plans are unexpectedly interrupted when she notices a trickle of blood running down her leg. Standing on a towel in front of her bathroom sink, she struggles to maintain composure. The trickle has turned into a steady stream and the blood is now oozing from what appears to be a deep gash in her skin.

Out of desperation, Dillon gets her roommate's attention. Her roommate is shocked and frantic as she scrambles to search the Internet for ways to stop Dhillon's bleeding. Her pajama pants and towel now lay blood-soaked on the floor.

Dillon explains that she accidentally shaved off a patch of dry skin when she was shaving. Thinking her psoriasis was controlled enough to run a razor across her legs, she carved off an area of her skin affected by the condition.

Finally, after 15, frightening minutes, the bleeding stops on its own.

According to the National Institute of Health, as many as 7.5 million Americans have psoriasis. Dermatologist Dr. Bruce Bowden says it is a chronic, genetic, autoimmune disease that appears on various parts of the body. When a person has psoriasis, the immune system sends out faulty signals to the skin causing it to overreact to injury. When someone with psoriasis is injured and their skin excretes substances normally, their immune system attacks the area, which causes the growth cycle of their skin cells to speed up. As a result, red patches covered with a silvery, white buildup of dead skin cells form on the skin.

Mayberry says the condition is generally worse in the knees, scalp and elbows since those parts of the body are especially prone to injury. He says most people with psoriasis do not know they have a genetic vulnerability to the condition and are astonished when patches of dry skin appear. However, two-thirds of people with psoriasis have a family history of the disease, he says.

Western senior Colby Mayberry says he first noticed the noticeable symptom was a red, flaky patch of skin the size of a CD on his leg. But as he got older, the psoriasis patches became smaller and spread all over his body, he says.

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While stretched out on a towel like any other person at the beach, children occasionally walk up and ask her what she has on her skin. Price says psoriasis is a difficult condition to explain to people, especially children, who sometimes mistake it for chickenpox. She is usually left at a loss for words.

“It’s uncomfortable when people ask about it all the time,” Price says. “People give weird looks and think it’s contagious.”

Although psoriasis is a life-long, incurable condition, the symptoms can be treated and maintained with regular treatments and medication. Psoriasis is still a mysterious condition to doctors and until a cure is found, people living with psoriasis must face their condition one spot at a time.

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As the sound of techno music pulses, Yaari sways her hips from side to side. She brushes off the strap on her right shoulder, turns, and brushes off the strap on her left shoulder. The audience begins to shout as she exposes more skin. Suddenly, Yaari slips the straps back on, leaving the audience hooked on her every move.

Yaari, the 24-year-old founder of the new Bellingham burlesque troupe Harlequins of Temptation (HOT), proudly remembers her first performance as a burlesque dancer. She says she continues dancing burlesque because it provides an escape from her depression and anxiety. Since being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she has been forced to endure a series of psychiatric screenings and hospital stays.

"I needed focus in my life," Yaari says. "Burlesque is my gateway drug to a life less ordinary."

Burlesque is a form of theatrical entertainment that includes comic skits, parody, music, costumes, witty satire and striptease acts. Beginning in Europe during the 19th century, Burlesque originated as an outlet for working-class entertainers to mock high society and politics. In the U.S., burlesque has become commonly associated with striptease and skin is its most powerful element.

"The inside of the thighs, wrists, neckline and bosom are covered in such a way that reveals nothing, but teases the audience in such a way that they want more," Yaari says. "It's about revealing parts of the body that are enticing and suggestive."

Showing skin gives the dancer control over her body and the audience, Yaari says. The less skin the dancer shows, the more the audience is left to imagine, which in turn makes the show more provocative. She says she feels a calming sense of control when participating in burlesque because of her ability to express many of her inner emotions with dance, music and the manipulation of what she decides to show.

"Some people make coffee in the morning. I'd rather take off (some of) my clothes on stage because it gives me energy," Yaari says. "[Burlesque] calms my spirit and helps me with my confidence."

After leaving a mental hospital for the sixth time in 2007, Yaari realized she needed an anchor in her life. She saw a Bellingham Roller Bettie performance in June of that same year, which included burlesque elements, and was inspired to try burlesque herself.

A few years later, Yaari founded HOT in January 2009. The troupe's motto is "We like to tease, we want to please and we love to keep you begging for more." She says the group's name is fitting because harlequins are jesters who provide entertainment and comedy.

"Burlesque feeds me the healing power of laughter," Yaari says. Yaari credits burlesque as her savior, but for Western junior Julia McLean, 23, burlesque offers a new sense of confidence.

"There's never been any other part of my life where I've felt I could be comfortable in my body," McLean says. "I appreciate the bodies of the women close to me, even though none of our bodies are perfect by any means."

McLean was in a one-time burlesque performance with eight of her female friends at Rumors Cabaret Nightclub in April 2006. Weeks prior to the Rumors performance, the women practiced in McLean's apartment. Amongst the practicing performers in the living room, music lyrics lie scattered around and stacked near the edges of the couches. Half-empty glasses of wine sit on the

Story by Andrea Davis-Gonzalez
Photos by Damon Call
Nick, a singer for the Bellingham burlesque troop, Harlequins of Temptation, solos an act at the Fairhaven Pub in Bellingham WA on February 24th.

Happy Hour teases the crowd during a performance at the Fairhaven Pub in Bellingham WA on February 24th, by the Harlequins of Temptation burlesque troop, based in Bellingham, WA.
“Burlesque is my gateway drug to a life less ordinary.”

In the center of the room, eight women swivel their hips, shimmy their shoulders and shake their derrieres to songs such as “Dance while the Sky Crashes Down” by Jason Webley and “Big Spender” by Peggy Lee.

“I was working nights at the time, so I’d come home most nights to tippy toes singing country songs, making props and costumes, working on dances and generally making mayhem,” McLean says. “I’d kick off my shoes, get a glass of wine and sing with them or sometimes I’d sit on the couch and watch.”

On the night of the Rumors performance, Western alumna Kendra Peterson dances in three-inch pink heels and thigh-high, striped nylons held by garter belts. Her fire-engine red lips are moving to the music of the live band. Her sea-blue eye shadow and false eyelashes gleam beneath the spotlight.

In a following act, two audience members hold up a rod draped with purple curtains. A woman stands in front of the curtain facing the audience in a black fedora hat that rests on her blonde, Marilyn Monroe wig. She is wearing black heels and a black skirt that reaches the middle of her thighs. A set of hands appear from two slits in the curtain and slowly undress her. The hands untie the lace of her black corset and slide off her elbow-length black gloves.

Before the performance, McLean says she did not have the confidence to show off her body in public because she thought she was overweight. She says she was worried at first that the audience would be turned off by her appearance. In reality, the audience enjoyed her dancing. Being part of a sexy performance reduced her feelings of self-consciousness, she says. Because of burlesque, McLean says she feels more comfortable in her own skin.

Peterson says social norms limit how much skin is appropriate to show, and burlesque challenges these boundaries.

“Sexuality, especially for women, is pretty restricted by social norms,” Peterson says. “To discover a more assertive or even edgy side to your sexuality is frightening, especially knowing that it is not necessarily condoned in your community. Burlesque dancing provides a safe, creative venue to express your sexuality.”

McLean agrees that burlesque allows her and her friends to confront social norms about what an ideal woman should look like. She says burlesque tests women’s limits.

Peterson says she felt nervous the day before the Rumors performance. But as show time approached and the performance started, her anxiety disappeared and she was ready to show some skin, she says.

Yaari says feeling nervous at some point before a performance is natural. She says the art of leaving the audience wanting more makes her feel like she has accomplished her duty as a performer.

“I push the boundaries of an audience,” Yaari says. “My goal when I’m performing is to knock everyone’s socks off.”

In anticipation, the audience watching Yaari’s first burlesque performance once again sees her slip the straps off both her shoulders. Next, she pulls one arm out from the right strap and the other out from the left strap. Grabbing the top of her dress, she shimmy’s the garment down to her hips. Suddenly, the music ends and Yaari pulls her dress back up to her shoulders before walking offstage. The audience breaks into applause, and the room gets louder as they request a second and third performance.

When the performance is over, Yaari says she knows burlesque is something she wants to pursue for as long as she can entertain an audience. Since burlesque accepts all body types and does not have any requirements, Yaari can continue dancing for many years to come.

Story by Cassandra Gallagher

In a cramped hospital room with fluorescent lights, 17-year-old Aurora Ortiz lifts her arm, revealing an intricate web of dark ink etched into her fair skin.

“What. what do you mean a scar? There’s going to be a scar?” she asks the nurse sitting beside her.

“It depends on the skin,” says Carol Cairone, Registered Nurse (RN) for the Providence Saint Peter Hospital in Olympia. She points to a faint tattoo scar on Ortiz’s skin.

“It would be no worse than this [scar],” she says. “It won’t be like a scar from stitches.”

Ortiz nods as she waits for Cairone to remove the old tattoo that connects her to a troubled past. With an emerald green sweatshirt folded in her lap, Ortiz is patient and frightened. The tattoo Cairone will remove spans most of her forearm, so the procedure might last longer than the usual five to seven minutes it takes to remove a gang tattoo.

Nearby, Anthony Degollado, another former gang member and participant in the Olympia-based Ink Out Youth Violence Program, waits for his turn. Although his tattoos are not as large as Ortiz’s, he has eight small symbols covering his knuckles, arms and wrists. He says the symbols on his knuckles and bones are the most painful to remove.

“It’s like having hot needles in your skin as a rubber band is being snapped on [the tattoo] over and over again.”

This is not Degollado’s first tattoo removal experience. The process...
takes several procedures that are just as agonizing each time, he says. Still, getting rid of the tattoos is an important step for him since they link him to his former life as a gang member. He says he was 6 years old when he received his first gang tattoo and 15 when he decided to abandon his “gang lifestyle.” Rhonda Ayers, Coordinator of Ink Out, says she has been working with Degollado, now 18, since he was in the 7th grade.

Ink Out is affiliated with the Community Youth Services, a program that works to provide a stable environment for young people formerly involved in gangs. Ink Out goes one step further than the services by helping participants remove gang tattoos from their skin.

When Ink Out was founded in 1998, the program had nothing to do with tattoo removal and only admitted participants under the age of 25. Ayers says. Today, Ink Out will remove gang tattoos from anyone willing to fully commit themselves to a crime- and gang-free lifestyle.

Ayers says the program switched to all-ages because it became so popular. She also says Ink Out started removing tattoos after one participant tried to burn off his gang markings. The incident was a tipping point for the program.

“A new realized the impact labeling had on people [involved in gangs] and how it stopped them from reaching their full potential,” Ayers says. Ink Out participants must submit recommendations from friends, parole officers, teachers or other mentors to be eligible. Unfortunately, many young adults in the program do not have support, friends or family outside of their gang and criminal backgrounds, Ayers says. Many of the participants don’t know how to live any other way, she says.

Experts estimate that 28,500 youth gangs existed when Ink Out was founded, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice. Since then, the national gang average has decreased to 26,500 recorded groups. Meanwhile, gang activity in Washington has increased for the last two years, says Deputy Keith Linderman from the Whatcom County Sheriff’s Office.

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A purple beam emanates from a laser used to remove a South Siders tattoo on the forearm of Aurora Ortiz, on March 13, 2009. The laser directs pulses of energy toward the skin, which break up the ink particles. Calore says, some pigments such as green and purple require more energy to break up, and are harder than others to remove.

Laser tattoo removal can have negative side effects on the skin, such as textural changes, scarring and skin discoloration, according to a study from the Department of Dermatology at the New York University School of Medicine. Some people may also experience allergic reactions to the laser, the study says.

Calore says the gang tattoos she usually sees are homemade. Amateur tattooists often use black India ink, which is thinner than professional ink. She also says the needle work on homemade tattoos tends to be uneven and the ink is usually not injected very deep into the skin. As a result, it can take more sessions to completely remove a professional tattoo, while amateur art requires fewer visits.

Ayers says the cost of removing gang tattoos is still high even though they are easier to remove. She says a single gang tattoo removal can cost anywhere from $2,000 to $4,000, depending on the size of the tattoo and craftsmanship of the tattooist. The volunteer-based program would not be able to provide the free service to participants without the help of doctors, she says. The program also relies on participants, who are required to do several hours of volunteer work to offset the cost of services and to help them transition back into the community.

Occasionally, some people quit the program before they are finished. Still, Ayers says some participation in Ink Out is better than none.

Linderman says community programs that work to keep young adults out of gangs, such as Ink Out, are important. Because of funding shortages, police officers need community support to properly deal with gangs, he says.

Since gangs tend to act like tight-knit families who take care of each other, the pseudo-supportive environment draws young people in, especially those with unstable families, Linderman says. Gang-families turn to crime and violence, which can result in assaults or even homicides, when members decide to attack rival gangs and affiliates, he says. Among gang-families, there is pressure to be the strongest and the most influential, so fights often erupt between them to prove their worth, he says.

As young adults become more involved in gang-families, they are more likely to outwardly show their gang status through clothes and amateur tattoos, Linderman says. Ink Out helps erase the unhealthy networks former gang members cultivated on the streets.

Back in the Providence hospital room, Ortiz’s tattoo removal session is almost over. Stepping out of the small, sterile space, she raises her arm in order to keep it elevated. In the process, she reveals a patch of inflamed skin and a series of red dots, which show where her tattoo once was.

A few minutes later, Degollado emerges from his removal session—his hands shaking with pain and excitement. “It’s like having hot needles in your skin as a rubber band is being snapped on [the tattoo] over and over again.”

Anthony Degollado, marks for gang activity, undergoes laser tattoo procedure, on March 13, 2009.
KLIPSUN is the Lummi word meaning “beautiful sunset.”