

Erasing the Past, Rewriting the Future

A tattoo removal program in downtown Portland extends far beyond body ink

written by Corinne Whiting

WHILE SOME ORGANIZATIONS aspire to leave their mark, Outside In's tattoo removal program has the reverse aim. Located in downtown Portland, Project Erase has helped thousands of people get rid of body ink that serves as a painful reminder of their past. The main objective—to remove tattoos in the safest and most comfortable way possible.

“(An example of) tattoos that we might remove include visible gang-related symbols that could be a barrier to both successful employment as well as a risk to personal safety,” program coordinator Caroline Jackson said, “a tattoo that a victim of domestic violence was forced to get by their abuser or that directly triggers the trauma from past abuse, tattoos representative of past addiction whose removal provides a significant step toward recovery, (and) hate symbols that represent an ideology the client no longer subscribes to and hopes to move on from.”

The service is reserved for those living below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and the fees follow a sliding scale, which ranges from \$25 to \$55 per treatment, depending on income and family size. The affordability can be credited to a dedicated team of doctors and nurse practitioners who volunteer their time. Clients are never required to discuss their personal journey or reasons behind the removal.

Clients, who are anonymous, have had positive experiences with the program. “Removing the tattoos was the last stop on my recovery from traumatic circumstances that led up to them,” one said. “It’s not just erasing tattoos, it’s closing the book on the trauma that came with them.” Another commented, “Thanks to Project Erase, removing my facial tattoos has meant that I can seek upward mobility in my career without being immediately judged. ... I feel like I can start my life over now, and this is infinitely valuable to me.”

Initially conceived by the Oregon Psychiatric Association, the program has experienced much growth since Outside In



A client undergoes a tattoo removal session.

took it on in 2002. The once-small operation now enjoys an expanded team and improved equipment. The team uses a Quanta Q+C laser to remove tattoos—and a chiller for pain management. Jackson said it can take anywhere from five to fifteen treatments, depending on a person's immune system, the depth and thickness of the ink and whether the work was done with a professional tattoo gun or by an alternative method. Sessions are scheduled six to eight weeks apart to give the immune system time to remove the ink particles.

Jackson first volunteered at Outside In before jumping at the chance to join the program about a year ago. She raves about the clients she meets through an all-inclusive project that “doesn’t have a lot of barriers.” She always chats with first-time clients—over the phone or in person. And if folks don’t have internet access to complete the online application, they can mail in a paper version or call in.

“I think the common thread is that so many clients are in a place of trying to move forward, which is really inspiring,” Jackson said. “I’m really inspired by people’s growth and determination.” ■

“Removing the tattoos was the last stop on my recovery from traumatic circumstances that led up to them. It’s not just erasing tattoos, it’s closing the book on the trauma that came with them.”

— a Project Erase client