Tattooed Youth May Have Tough Time Getting Hired

Sam Kennedy

Sam Kennedy is a staff reporter for the Allentown Morning Call. This article was first published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 2012.

Ariel Rivera, home from college, thought she’d landed the perfect summer job — until the conversation turned to tattoos.

The 20-year-old Bethlehem resident with a big smile and a wholesome demeanor had made it to her second interview to be a ride operator at Dorney Park & Wildwater Kingdom, but was suddenly dismissed after mentioning that she had a tattoo on the back of her neck.

She promised to hide the image — a round biohazard symbol — underneath her thick brown hair, but it was no use. Dorney Park, she was told, has a policy: No tattoos on hands, head, face or neck. “I felt discriminated against,” said Ms. Rivera, a creative writing major at East Stroudsbury University. “I’ve never gotten in trouble. I don’t drink. I don’t do drugs — but I have a tattoo.”

Ms. Rivera, like many other young adults, found herself at the confluence of powerful trends, both cultural and economic.

Tattoos, once the domain of sailors and gangs, have gone mainstream. A quarter of Americans between ages 18 and 50 have body art, according to the Journal of American Academy of Dermatology.

At the same time, the service sector, which includes many professions that place a premium on appearance, is absorbing an ever-greater share of the U.S. economy. Nearly nine out of 10 U.S. jobs are in service-oriented businesses, ranging from fast food restaurants to health care companies.

Lehigh Valley Health Network and St. Luke’s University Health Network are the two biggest employers in the Lehigh valley, and both have tattoo policies, although they are not as restrictive as those of some companies. At a minimum, employees may be required to cover tattoos during work hours.

The Great Recession — which by some estimates has left half of recent college graduates either under-employed or unemployed — exacerbated the situation. The young adults who are most likely to be tattooed have less leverage over would-be employers.

So intense is competition on the job market, that tattoo removal has become something of a boom industry. Laser ink removal climbed 32 percent between 2011-12 nationwide, and the most common reason — cited by 40 percent of respondents — is “employment,” according to a survey published last week by The Patient’s Guide, an Internet clearinghouse of dermatological literature.

“I have people who are trying to start their careers,” said Paula Young, who launched the Dr. TattAway tattoo removal clinic in Bethlehem this year, “and that hula girl on their forearm just isn’t working anymore.”
At Dorney Park, spokeswoman Carrie Basta did not argue with Ms. Rivera’s account of rejection. It’s a black and white issue,” she said. “The South Whitehall Township amusement park’s appearance standards are similar to those of others in the industry, such as Disney and Six Flags, she said. She also noted that Dorny’s rules are posted on the company’s website.

Also banned are tongue splitting, earlobe expansion known as gauging, decorative dental grills and tooth filing, plus “any other type of body modification that intentionally causes an unnatural or unprofessional look.”

Such policies are not limited to large corporations, as Nikki Kucharek of Macungie found out a couple of years ago.

The massage therapist was at her third and final interview at a spa. She was sure she had landed the job, which she needed to pay off her student loans. But the final step in the process was to actually give a massage, for which she removed her sweater.

That’s when the interviewer caught sight of her tattoos. The 33-year-old Ms. Kucharek resident has a variety: a Dr. Seuss character, a bonsai tree and the names of her two children, to name a few. No sooner had Ms. Kucharek left, her cellphone rang. “We don’t think you’ll fit in,” she said she was told. A friend who worked there later told her why: the tattoos. “Racism — that’s what it felt like,” she said.

Facebook pages such as “Tattoo acceptance in the workplace,” with more than one million “likes,” hint at the collective angst of an elaborately embellished generation. With the angst, comes questions about legality.

“I’ve had other people come in and ask me about that,” said Mark Sigmon, a Bethlehem lawyer who handles civil rights cases. “Generally, you don’t have a right to a tattoo.”

Job applicants are free to say whatever they want on their bodies. But employers are just as free to form opinions about such speech, and to make their hiring decisions accordingly.

A Pennsylvania U.S. District Court judge reaffirmed this precedent last year after a Luzerne County man sued the state police for denying him a job as a liquor enforcement officer because of an arm tattoo. The military has similar rules. And while U.S. law bars discrimination based on race, national origin, gender, age and disability, tattoos don’t fit into any of those categories.

“No judge is going to buy that,” Mr. Sigmon said. “They don’t have a right to a discrimination claim [either].”

The only recourse, for some, is laser ink removal, a potentially expensive and time-consuming procedure. Ms. Young, of Dr. TattAway, described how it works:

Removal takes place over multiple sessions spaced six to eight weeks apart. At each session, a laser is used to blast the ink into smaller particles that can be absorbed by the body’s circulatory system. But not all inks are the same. Some, such as older inks and the color black, are usually made of organic materials that break down easily. Others, especially brighter colors, are likely to be synthetic and more resilient.
Cost varies, ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Prices are based on the number of sessions required to remove a tattoo; ink type is but one of the factors that determine the number of sessions.

“The laser penetrates the skin and it hunts out pigment,” said Ms. Young, a registered nurse who co-owns the business with her husband, a doctor. “This laser, it’s a sheer joy to see how it pulls ink out of their bodies.”

Of course, for every person who opts for removal, there are many others who would never consider it. They don’t think the problem is tattoos.

Both Ms. Rivera and Ms. Kucharek described their tattoos as integral.

“To me, my tattoos are part of who I am,” Ms. Kucharek said. “I started when I was 16. It shows my story on the outside of my skin.”

And both women referred to a basic principle they learned as children.

“You should not judge based on appearance,” Ms. Rivera said.

When Dorney sent her away without a job, it was only the start of a very bad day. Ms. Rivera came home to find out that one of her high school friends had died.

At first, Rivera thought she would commemorate her friend with a tattoo on her wrist. But she has since given that location second thought.

“I will still get it done,” she said. “It’s just a matter of where.”