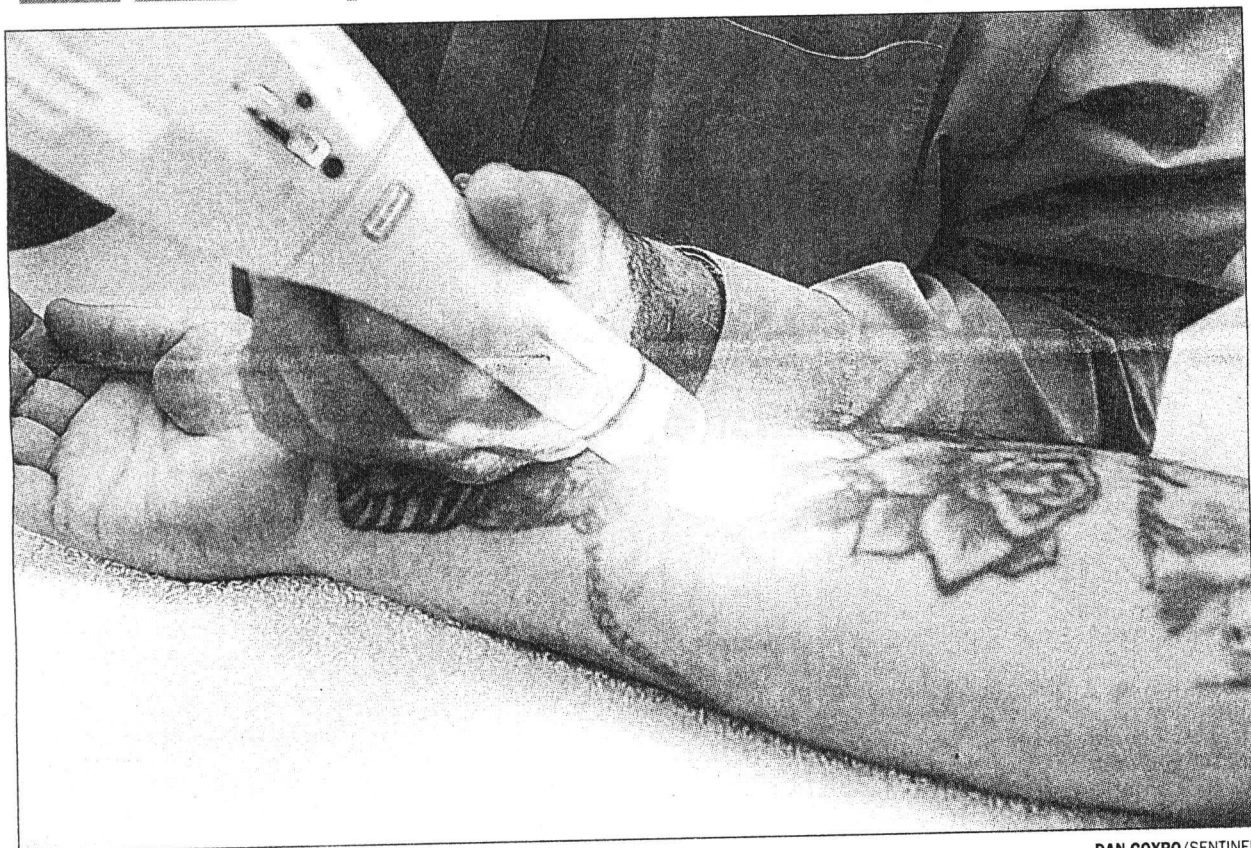


DISAPPEARING INK

Tattoo removal
program taken over
by Catholic Charities



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

In the tattoo removal process, a laser is used essentially to explode the ink in the skin.

Baby Piercing & Tattooing
by STEVEN BRATER
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SANTA CRUZ — Erasing the past is impossible, but erasing tattoos on a person's neck, arms or other noticeable place is — with patience, a laser and a lot of pain.

Ask Santana Cuen, a 32-year-old Gilroy woman who has been working to have a tattoo removed near her collar during sessions for the past eight months in Santa Cruz. Because she works at a medical clinic with elderly patients who often don't approve of tattoos, she said she has to wear high-necked shirts and makeup to cover the stars inked high on her chest.

Cuen gritted her teeth Thursday as Dr. Robert Ley zapped her with a laser.

"It feels like being stung, repeatedly, in different areas," she said. "When they say (removal) doesn't hurt as much as getting the tattoo, it's a lie. It's very painful, but it's well worth it. I'm grateful for the opportunity."

SEE TATTOO ON A2



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Santana Cuen, in the process of having the tattoo on her chest removed, travels from Gilroy for another treatment in Santa Cruz.

TATTOO

Continued from A1

Since 1997, Dominican Hospital has offered a tattoo removal service for people with gang tattoos and others who have had trouble finding work because of their ink.

Dermatologists and retired plastic surgeons do the work as volunteers, and each session typically costs patients \$20 — rather than \$150 or more at a normal clinic. The patients also must complete 20 hours of community service, submit a letter about why they want to participate and come in for an interview.

In July, Dominican Hospital leaders decided to cease funding for the program — in part because its office at the rehabilitation center on Frederick Street is slated to close in December.

Also this year, Catholic Charities Diocese of Monterey planned to close its tattoo removal program in Los Gatos because a doctor was leaving. Leaders from both programs did not want to leave several hundred clients with unfinished tattoo removals, so Catholic Charities merged the programs in July and now run it at a separate office behind the rehabilitation center at 610 Frederick St. in Santa Cruz.

Both programs have helped hundreds of people remove their ink for a variety of reasons, said Maria Runciman, director of the Catholic Charities' program.

MARKED DIFFERENCE

Some clients say they didn't want their children to see their tattoos. Other say

IF YOU GO

OPEN HOUSE

WHEN: 5:15 p.m. Sept. 25

WHERE: 610 Frederick St., Santa Cruz in the rear building marked Catholic Charities

DETAILS: Call 831-316-9121

tattoos on their hands held them back from jobs as dental assistants and even waiters.

Others are former gang members who got home-made tats in jail or prison. They want a clean slate.

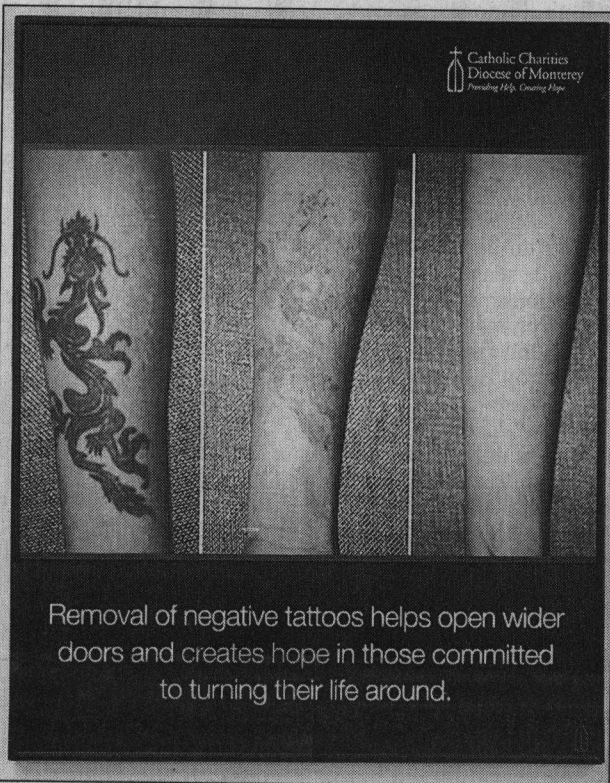
"When you apply for a job, they're going to assume things about you when you have tattoos," Runciman said. "Top it with a rap sheet, and that's it. If you have a felony, it's really hard to get a job," she said.

Catholic Charities' tattoo removal program has roughly eight doctors who see about 300 clients in various stages of tattoo removal. The doctor might see 15 clients in an afternoon with sessions that range from 15 to about 45 minutes.

Though it is already busy, leaders will have an open house on Sept. 25 at the Frederick Street office to recruit even more participants.

The program could use donations — in part because a machine that removes green ink recently broke and there are no plans yet to replace it. Some clients with green tattoos have been left with unfinished removals, doctors said.

Thursday, Dr. Ley — a retired plastic surgeon — donned orange sunglasses



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Catholic Charities poster shows the end result of their tattoo removal program.

before he zapped tattoos for a steady stream of clients at the office.

Ley has been volunteering there for more than eight years.

"I keep doing it because I'm helping people and providing a service," he said. "That's why I went into medicine in the first place."

A 27-year-old Santa Cruz man said he had ink from "gang tattoos, prison, stuff like that."

He didn't want his name used because it might jeopardize his future employment.

He got one tattoo in prison "with a pick and soot from a tennis ball," he said.

Ley stung the man's forearm with the laser as they both looked on wearing over-size orange sunglasses. The beam essentially fries and dulls the markings, which fade in time.

Generally, the heavier and darker the ink, the more sessions it takes to remove. It can take months or years.

"I've been working in restaurants for years, and they don't want tattoos exposed at high-end places," the man said.

"And I have two boys. I want to set a better example."

Follow Sentinel reporter Stephen Baxter at [Twitter.com/sbaxter_sc](https://twitter.com/sbaxter_sc)