In honor of last Friday’s debut of Stories on the Skin, FAU’s documentary on students with tattoos, I went on the hunt and found some cool students with equally cool stories behind their tattoos. There’s also a sweet Q&A with Stories on the Skin photographer Z. Koppisch, who walked me through her experiences, her own personal tattoos, what it was like taking an assistant professor and an associate dean to a tattoo expo, and her yoga routine.

Before we get into that, though, I figured I’d share my own story. On my right shoulder lies a tattoo I’ve been proud of for a bit over two years now. It consists of a blue jay, a pocket watch, and a banner that reads “scientific.” This tattoo is in memory of my grandpa. He was a wise, cheerful man who would collect pocket watches and literally couldn’t go 20 minutes without sneaking the word “scientific” into a sentence — nothing was cool or great, everything was scientific. When I was a little girl, he’d whistle at birds and try to get their attention, but only the blue jays would consistently answer. This tattoo is special to me because it gave me closure from his loss, and as cliché as it may seem, I know he always has my back.
Under the needle

Here's a look at the stories behind these students' tattoos.

Joe Dixon, grad student, chemistry: “I have a track foot here. I was involved in track for a big part of my life. There’s also a cross country symbol, a shield of faith because I strongly believe in faith, wings with my mom’s name inside, she passed not too long ago, 10 stars inside the wings for my five siblings and my mom had five miscarriages, so there are 10 total.”

Vince Ambrose, junior, exercise science: “My chest piece is Veni, Vidi, Vici, which means I came, I saw, I conquered. I got it because whatever I face, I want to conquer.”

Austin Gore, junior, public management: “This is my fraternity, it’s just that I’m proud of it and I wanted to show it off. It’s Phi Delta Theta, a social fraternity on campus. I just like the brotherhood that we have, and this tattoo is just representative of all that.”

Cody Casey, sophomore, pre-med: “This is a serotonin molecule — your brain produces serotonin when you’re happy, like, your serotonin levels rise when you’re really happy or doing something that makes you feel good, so it’s a constant reminder to stay happy — and I love science.”

Ryan Desutter, sophomore, biology: “It’s a triforce from The Legend of Zelda. I got it because it was a huge part of my childhood and I liked the storyline behind it, and what the picture stood for. It’s a representation of the values of a hero — bravery, courage, intelligence.”

Jenna Johnson, freshman, marine biology: “I drew it a while ago, I just like it because it’s a motivational tattoo. Stay strong in whatever you do.”

Samantha Kosartes, freshman, undecided: “I got it in memory for my grandma, I’m from the Bahamas and I’m going to finish it, so I’m going to do an island type thing with it with island colors. It’s not done yet, but I’m going to finish it soon.”

Marlie Marino, freshman, journalism: “It’s wings and initials for my friend McKenzie, she passed away from a brain tumor.”

Photos by Max Jackson
On Jan. 18, a new documentary, *Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU* premiered at the University Theatre. The documentary featured the participation of 1,500 students and counting, and one woman got to be there for it all — Z. Koppisch, a senior designer and photographer at the FAU Libraries, photographed students and their tattoos, and continued to become inspired by them. Here's what Koppisch had to say about her experience, her tattoos, and her hobbies in our exclusive interview:

*Photos by Christine Capozziello*

**How has *Stories on the Skin* inspired you?**

It has been like a chain of creative inspiration. The students were inspired by an occurrence in their lives, so they went and collaborated with a tattoo artist and got a tattoo. We were inspired by their stories and collaborated to create exhibitions, performances and a film. And now, my photographs have even inspired a high school student to create paintings of the photographic images from the project. And that’s what the creative process is all about, creating art from inspiration and collaboration.

**How’s the process been for you? Have you seen any crazy tattoos?**

I wouldn’t call any of the stories “crazy.” That’s what is so amazing about this project. 99 percent of the students I met have well thought-out meanings to their tattoos.

**Do you have examples?**

Several of the students had memorial tattoos. I also met a student named Danielle who had the word “truth” tattooed on the inside of her mouth. She felt she was lying too much and this was her way of helping herself. Someone in our crew asked, “Did it work?” and she replied yes.

**What else can you tell us about the making of this documentary? Any adventures?**

One of the most adventurous things that I did was to take Dr. Leader [Ph.D., assistant professor of art history in the Department of Visual Arts and Art History] and Rina Pellen [Associate Dean of FAU Libraries] to the South Florida Tattoo Convention at the beginning of the project. That was the first time they had ever been to such an event.

**Can you sum up your *Stories on the Skin* experience?**

This project has been my passion for the past three years. I — we — have worked a lot of hours, nights and weekends, to make this project come alive. I believe in this project so much that I got the *Stories on the Skin* artwork I created tattooed on my ankle.

**Permanent dedication’s pretty bold. So what clicked that you knew you had to get it?**

I’m very attached to the project and it means a lot to me.

**The fact that you do yoga caught our eye. Can you tell me anything about that?**

I do yoga at the nursing building twice a week. It relaxes me. Believe it or not, getting tattooed relaxes me. It’s what I do for myself. Some women get manicures — I’d rather get a tattoo.

**Do you have any other tattoos?**

Yes, most of them are Celtic imagery. I am an Irish-American.

**Tell us about your first?**

I was 23 when I got my first tattoo. It was a snake, but 15 years later, I had it re-colored and added flowers. I worked with the tattoo artist and asked him to pick out the flowers and for him to decide how they would be composed around the snake. Since I involved the artist, I think he really did a nice composition, since there was freedom to be creative and work with his own technique.

*Some women get manicures — I’d rather get a tattoo.*