Florida Atlantic University students think about their ink. by Colleen Dougher

Earlier this year, David Ulloa heard from a friend that people on Florida Atlantic University’s Boca Raton campus were shooting photos and video of students willing to share the stories behind their tattoos. Curious, the criminal justice and sociology major went to check it out. After learning about the project Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU, Ulloa rolled up his left sleeve for photographer Z. McCarthy-Koppisch and talked about his tattoo of a blue rose and a needle filled with a green substance. The image, he explained, represents the 18 years’ worth of treatments, including chemotherapy and intravenous immunoglobulin, he received for a lung condition caused by an exaggerated immune response to a particular fungus.

“Needles were something I was always around, something I grew not to fear anymore,” Ulloa says. “The green resembles the toxin that was in my body, but also how something good could still come out of it, which is [symbolized] by the blue rose.”

Lauren Jimenez shared the story of the tattoo on her thigh that depicts a timepiece and flower. “I’d been in a very time-consuming, difficult and borderline-abusive relationship, so time is a really interesting concept to me because I spent all this time with someone who really didn’t deserve it,” she says. “But I’m a stronger person for it now.” The tattoo reminds her to move on, rather than become overwhelmed by things she can’t change.

Ulloa and Jimenez are just two of 1,147 FAU students who provided information about their tattoos via video, photographs, stories or an anonymous survey. The survey, launched last fall, was the first phase of Stories on the Skin, which now includes a photographic exhibition and an
in late 2009, Jaffe, who recently retired but continues working on projects, teamed with Karen Leader, assistant professor of art history in FAU’s Department of Visual Arts and Art History, and McCarthy-Koppisch, a senior designer for FAU Libraries, to create a project around tattooed students. Leader designed a 70-question survey titled “Tell Us What You Think About Ink” that included basic questions about the subject’s tattoos, gender, class, race and religion. The survey also asked the respondents if their tattoos make them feel special, discriminated against or regretful. Of the 671 respondents with tattoos, the top reason students cited for getting them was to commemorate a life event. This past November, Leader, McCarthy-Koppisch and Jonas McCaffrey, a student majoring in film and media studies, hit the main thoroughfare of the Boca Raton campus with a sign that read, “Show us your tattoos!” Their goal was to document students’ tattoos and the stories behind them. Leader asked questions, Jonas videotaped and McCarthy-Koppisch photographed, but in a way that focused more on the tattoos than the tattooed. “We didn’t want [the photographs] to be about the student,” McCarthy-Koppisch says. “We wanted it to be about the story.”

But the photographs, initially shot over the course of six months for archival purposes, evolved into Student Body Art, the exhibition part of Stories on the Skin, which opened May 21 at FAU’s S.E. Wimberly Library. “I knew [McCarthy-Koppisch] was an artist and a graduate of our program,” Leader says. “I wanted her to have an artistic role. So when she proposed a photographic exhibition, I said, yes, but that we needed to do more photo shopt and she needed to be more than a documentarian. So she started conceptualizing the photographs in the university setting, picking up bicycles, water bottles, soda machines and textbooks. The work now has this whole flavor of this being part of the university. These tattoo and their stories and the bodies are part of this culture.”

McCarthy-Koppisch says Stories on the Skin reveals much about FAU students and how perceptions of tattoos have changed over the years. “Twenty years ago, it was taboo to have a tattoo up and down your arm, and now, it’s more acceptable,” she says. “But not totally accepted.”

“I have tattoos all over my body,” she adds. “But you don’t see them in my business world because if I were to walk into a meeting with donors who are giving us a lot of money, they would look at me, even though I’m the artist here, like, ‘Hey, look at that girl with all the tattoos.’”

Sole del Real, a graphic design student and one of McCarthy-Koppisch’s photographic subjects, says tattoo subculture “needs to be more out there” and hopes Stories on the Skin will help change negative views of it. She sees the work that covers about 25 percent of her body as her permanent collection. “Instead of having it up at my house, I just have it on my body,” she says.

Her collection includes a replica of an Audrey Kawasaki painting (Hakachu no Shi) and a lyric from the Incubus song “Paper Shoes” (“pain will roll off like water on feathers”). She carefully considers each selection, explaining, “Ultimately, it’s a bigger decision than getting married, because you can’t just get divorced, you can’t just erase it.”

Del Real is one of 12 students who submitted a written story about her tattoos and related experiences for the project. The plan, Leader says, is to workshop the stories into a series of vignettes and hold a poetry slam or coffeehouse-type performance. The event will be filmed and featured in a movie that also will include archival photographs and earlier video footage.

Leader has taken what could have been strictly an academic study of tattoos and established what she calls a “student-based creative project.”

“I’m an an historian,” she says, “but the project involves writing poetry, dramatic writing, directing, and I’m just the liaison.”

“This year we collected 30 percent of the stories, and next year we will collect 70 percent. I think that will be enough to start thinking about what we want to do with it.”

Student Body Art will be on display through Aug. 10 at S.E. Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, in Boca Raton. Visit storiesontheskin.org.

Contact Colleen Dougher at cdougher@citylinkmagazine.com.