

'I WANT THEM WITH ME ALL THE TIME'

More parents getting tattoos as tributes to their children



Elisa Petersen/QUAD-CITY TIMES

Wind, an artist at O'Tool's Design tattoo shop, works on Chris Olson on Wednesday. Olson had the name of his 6-year-old son, Nate, tattooed on his forearm.

Several artists say shows like 'LA Ink' popularizing practice

By Kay Luna
QUAD-CITY TIMES

He winces, biting his lower lip and trying not to squirm.

"This hurts," Danny O'Malley said as the tattoo needle, with its relentless "zap-zap-zap" sound, sinks into his skin.

But the pain is worth it, the 31-year-old Bettendorf man added, gazing down at his lower leg. It now carries a permanent, lifelike portrait of his 5-year-old daughter, Jayde, with a banner above it that reads, "Daddy's Little Girl."

"Your kids are with you your whole life," he said. "I have tattoos for my sons, too."

Forget the birthstones and charm bracelets. More and more parents of all backgrounds are honoring their children in ink, and many want their children's portraits etched into their skin, said Ron O'Tool, the owner of O'Tool Design in Rock Island.

Others ask for their children's names or initials, or symbolic images such as rattles, teddy bears and baby footprints.

O'Tool's shop alone does five or six tattoos like that per week, while several other Quad-City-area tattoo business owners and managers said they also are seeing an increase in such requests.



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Danny O'Malley of Bettendorf gets a portrait of his daughter, Jayde, tattooed on his calf at All-Kat's Tatts Tattoo Shop in Silvis, Ill.

TATTOOS

Continued from Page A1

But they say the trend toward child-related body art is not new. As far back as the 1800s, people who lost their children in death memorialized them through tattoos, said Jack Fulcher, a tattoo artist and the owner of Rites of Passage in Moline and Davenport.

Tattoos overall — particularly those that honor children — seem to be gaining in popularity, though. And several area tattoo artists say they credit, at least in part, some new reality TV shows, such as “LA Ink,” which is on cable network TLC, with the change.

“I could kiss the producers of those shows because it has brought tattooing into a more artistic, mainstream point of view than a back-alley sort of thing,” said Ali Darnell, a tattoo artist and the owner of Ali-Kat’s Tatts in Silvis, Ill.

No, she doesn’t watch the shows. But a lot of other people do, and they say so when they walk into a tattoo shop for the first time, asking about a certain design.

“Parents will see those shows and think, ‘If I can get a portrait of my son or daughter, I’ll do it,’” O’Toole said. “Some just want their names or maybe a flower for each kid, and they’ll use their birthstone colors for each flower.”

Even the “older crowd” is finding tattoos more acceptable, said Ian Dwier, the



Chris Olson examines the first installment of a tattoo with his son Nate's name at O'Toole's Design on Wednesday. Olson plans on returning to add a fishing rod and other elements that represent his 6-year-old son's hobbies.

Elisa Peterson
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manager of the Scorpion's Den in Davenport.

Another trend: People are asking for tattoos with their children's names written in a foreign language, especially Asian lettering, said Dan Bruce, the owner of Epic Tattoos in Davenport.

For 18-year-old Allison Clark, of Davenport, the perfect tattoo is having her 2-year-old daughter's name, Destiny Nikole, written (in purple and pink cursive English) on the back of her neck.

Clark said she chose to tattoo her neck so she can cover it up with her hair when she's at work.

“I feel like it's always having her with me,” she said. “Anybody who can look at the back of my neck can ask, ‘Who's Destiny Nikole?’ You can tell them who your kid is.”

She also has honored her nephew with a tattoo on her

wrist, which features his name and date of birth.

“You get to just blab on about them,” she said.

A child's name — in any language — is the safest bet as far as name tattoos go. Fulcher, at Rites of Passage, said he always tries to talk people out of getting tattoos with the name of their spouse or lover because doing that is like the “kiss of death” for a relationship.

“I get between three and five removals a week, and normally it's a name of a loved one, like an expected groom or bride or an ex-lover,” he said, adding that his shop does laser tattoo removal.

Children will always be with you; lovers might not, several tattoo artists said.

That's how 35-year-old Jimmy Johnson sees it. The divorced father said his two daughters, ages 10 and 11, are

deciding which symbols he should use in tattoos he's having done for them.

He plans to get them someday soon on his left arm, “which is supposed to be closer to your heart.” His right arm is full of tattoos that he says represent lessons learned in life and things he has loved.

Now, the burly guy jokes that he could end up with girly butterflies and ladybugs on his other arm — and that would be OK, if they're for his girls.

“Your kids will always be your kids,” said Johnson, the office manager at O'Toole's Design. “It's a pride thing. It's a love thing. I want them with me all the time, and no one will ever, ever be able to take that away from me.”

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