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## When Tattoos Hurt Job Prospects

By [Corey Kilgannon](#)



Photos: Corey Kilgannon/The New York Times Dana McGlynn got a wrist tattoo covered with help from Strive, an advocacy group in East Harlem that offers lessons in covering up tattoos to help get a job.

The dismal job market is especially tough on the men and women who turn to [Strive](#), an advocacy group in East Harlem that offers job training. Many of these job-seekers have prison in their past, or gangs or other aspects of street life which can make it tough to get a job.

Strive offers something of an employment makeover: interview etiquette is taught, and do-rags and sneakers are replaced by suits and ties. One vestige of street life that is trickier to shed is the tattoo.

Whether gotten during wilder years as a badge of badness, or simply as a mere decorative design, tattoos do not go over well in the interview room, said Angel Garrido, who runs a monthlong job-readiness workshop at Strive, situated in an office building on East 123rd Street.

Mr. Garrido told his students on Tuesday that people in the program have been routinely rejected from jobs because they have tattoos in visible places on necks and faces and hands that even a fresh new white-collar shirt cannot conceal.

To many bosses, red ink on the skin means “gang colors,” he said. Tattoos in general can leave a potential employer with the impression that “I’m hiring someone who’s been in prison or who was a criminal or who is a criminal,” Mr. Garrido said, adding that on an interview, “The less you have that knocks you out of the box, the better chance you have.”



Frank Rivera and his tattoo.

So Strive officials have added to the curriculum a lesson in how to cover up conspicuous tattoos with makeup. A makeup artist, Melanie Swanson, volunteered to give a tutorial in camouflaging the distracting skin art on Tuesday afternoon. She spread out an array of powders and lotions and began listening to many of the 35 people in the class stand, give their names, and testify about how their tattoos have damned them in job interviews.

One man said he was humiliated when a potential employer asked for the stories behind all 10 of his 10 tattoos. Then Shauntee Linnen, a 29-year-old woman from East Harlem, showed the tattoo on her left wrist bearing her sister's name, Valerie, in an ornate script. She said a military recruiter recently took photographs of the tattoo, and several others, and "put them in my file."

"I told him I got it for my sister, and I guess they thought the red ink meant I was in a gang," she said.

Carlos Quintana, 35, of the Bronx said that he went for a job interview recently at a moving company and the boss spied the inscription on his left hand, "LV Shay," which Mr. Quintana said meant "love Shay," his son's name.

"The boss was happy when he shook my hand, but then he saw the tattoo and his mood changed and he said, 'O.K., we'll call you,'" Mr. Quintana recalled. "He never did."

Frank Rivera, a 33-year-old man from East Harlem who is looking for work, has the inscription "Frank White" — "my street name," he explained — on the right side of his neck just above the collar line. He said it blew his chances at an interview at a video store eight months ago.

"They said, 'What can you do to hide that, because we don't want our customers to be scared, or see us in some kind of way, so you got to find a way to keep it covered or you can't have the job,'" he recalled.

He said that tattoos were traditionally a way of marking prisoners in some countries. He said he often covered the tattoo on his right forearm. Then he called on Ms. Swanson, who spread out her makeup supplies.

"It saddens me to hear there is such stigma and prejudice around tattoos," said Ms. Swanson, who said she had done makeup for notables ranging from Queen Latifah and Whitney Houston to Jeanine F. Pirro, the former Westchester district attorney, for television appearances. Ms. Swanson also works as a real estate agent in Manhattan, for Century 21 New York Metro.

She scanned the class for a subject and chose Dana McGlynn, 30, a Yonkers woman who said she had "maybe 15 or 20" tattoos on her body. She has a large rendering of her lucky number, 7, on her right wrist, and her unlucky number, 13, on her left wrist.

"So it balances, you know," she explained. Ms. Swanson spent more than 15 minutes applying makeup to hide the "13" tattoo.

“Yes it is a procedure, but if it’s worth having a job, then it’s worth doing it,” Ms. Swanson told the class.

Strive, which is financed by New York State and contributions from private foundations, has been flooded in recent months with people seeking jobs, said its chief executive, [Eric D. Treworgy](#).

“We have people with bachelor’s degrees living in homeless shelters coming to us saying, ‘I need help getting a job,’ ” he said.

Ms. Swanson helped Mr. Rivera cover his neck tattoo to match his skin tone. One student quipped that Mr. Rivera could now return for the video store job. Mr. Rivera laughed and said, ‘Yeah, I’ll say, ‘Remember I was here eight months ago?’ ” He said that recently a woman he knew pointed out a help wanted sign in a store window.

“She said, ‘You should go in and ask,’ ” he recalled. “I told her, ‘You’re looking at the little sign, but I’m looking at the big sign above it that says, ‘Going out of business, everything must go.’ ”