

This tattooed life

Written by Norm Stanton (2013) – as submitted to the 'This Life' column in the Weekend Australian)

Do you remember when the only people who noticeably sported tattoos, in our society at least, were Popeye and other sea-faring types?

I suspect many bikie gang members also had something emblazoned on their limbs or torso but who was going to get close enough to check it out?

Today, however, it's a different story. Although tattoos have been around for centuries they have undergone a resurgence in recent times.

Now tattoos are ubiquitous across all walks of life, not just footballers and musicians and servicemen are inked but also school students and dancers and swimmers.

I'm sure these days when a rugby league player is signed by a club the coach is not just interested in the player's stats but also the quality of his tats.

Well I decided this month to join them – despite being closer to 70 than 60! OK so it's not a Maori motif or a string of barbed wire or a Southern Cross, but it's something that's meaningful to me and I think that's partly what it's about for most of those who are adorned by body art.

I must say my dear wife had some misgivings. When I mentioned the idea I think she envisaged a set of numbers on my forearm which may have been mistaken for concentration camp identification or perhaps a permanent reminder of my mobile telephone number, which I often seem to forget.

To explain why I joined the ranks of the tattooed, I have to take you back 10 years to when our son Ian became a missing person. He just walked out of his flat in Bundanoon in the NSW Southern Highlands, leaving behind, keys, wallet, clothes and all personal possessions.

It was an agonising time for our family, trying our best to trace his whereabouts, working with police and other agencies, searching the broad, rugged

expanse of nearby Morton National Park, visiting refuges and shelters, putting up posters and trying to maintain our well-being.

We found out that Ian was one of around 30,000 people who are reported as missing across Australia each year and that each incident affects on average twelve people, all of whom respond in unique ways.

As the weeks morphed into months and then years, his four siblings and parents went through the rollercoaster ride of emotions, from guilt, anxiety, anger, despair, and overriding all, the sense of loss.

The coroner's inquest in 2007 was an especially difficult time. To receive the pronouncement that your son is deceased is devastating when you still hold out hope that he has just gone off somewhere and might return, even though one suspects the worst.

On one occasion, a few years after Ian went missing, I was walking through the bush in the grounds of a Buddhist Monastery near Bundanoon, a place which Ian had visited. Along the track I had a sudden sense of him speaking to me saying, "I'm still with you, Dad". My response was to collapse onto a log and sob my heart out.

The words have stayed with me ever since as a kind of mantra and I wanted to keep them with me in another way than just in my head.

A tattoo of the words seemed a logical way to do that, although it's taken me a year since his 32nd birthday to actually get it done! Now our son is not just in my head and heart but his presence is inscribed on my body.

So if you see a very tall young man, himself sporting a tattoo – a bomb on his left hand between thumb and forefinger – please ask him to get in touch with his family and tell him how much they love him... enough for his Dad to get himself a tattoo!

Contact details

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