

Job-seekers losing tattoos to find employment

Chris Guajardo, 24, of Troy Hill shows his tattoo before his first laser tattoo removal treatment at The Skin Center in Shadyside.



JASMINE GOLDBRAND | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Chris Guajardo believes two little words have kept him from living out his dream of joining the Marine Corps.

He seemed on his way to basic training after breezing through a series of preliminary background checks and passing a battery of pre-enlistment health screenings in 2007.

Just before the final leg of testing at a medical entrance processing center, he got into an argument with his girlfriend. In a fit of anger, he had the words “Confie Nadie” — Spanish for “trust no one” — tattooed on his right forearm, the same one he’d use to salute a superior officer.

He couldn’t explain away the ink and he was denied entry into the military. That led him Wednesday to an examination table at The Skin Center Medical Spa in Shadyside.

This month, the business is offering free laser tattoo removal at its three Pittsburgh

locations to recruits trying to get into the military. He believes getting rid of the marking will better his chances of finally being admitted.

“I want to be a part of something special — the elite, the proud,” said Guajardo, 24 of Troy Hill. “I don’t want this to be in the way anymore.”

Guajardo sat calmly with a pair of metal light-reflecting goggles on his face as nurse Adrienne Ashtari scanned a powerful hand-held laser across his arm. With each stroke, the laser crackled and the tattoo seemed to disappear, letter by letter.

Thousands of would-be servicemen and women are rejected each year from enlisting in the nation’s volunteer military a variety of reasons that range from them not being able to meet physical demands to active criminal records.

Tattoos also can be a deal-breaker.

Each military branch has slightly different rules when it come to tattoos, but the Marine Corps’ standard — which

prohibits body art that is visible outside of uniform or deemed racist, sexist or otherwise offensive — is considered among the strictest. Tattoos on the head and face are not allowed, except for permanent makeup, such as permanent eyeliner or lip liner.

“He’s hit all the wickets, but he had to stop because of this,” said John Dott, a former Marine gunnery sergeant and recruiter, of Guajardo. “When you have someone like this who wants to get involved so badly...that’s something the Marines want to see.”

Neither the Department of Defense nor any branch specifically tracks how many recruits are denied entry into the military because of tattoos.

Doug Long was inspired to become a Marine after watching his older brother serve in the branch for four years. He thought he could get an exemption or waiver for the tribal tattoo on his neck when he tried to sign up for the Marines, but has so far been unsuccessful.

“Once they saw it...they wouldn’t even let me fill out the paperwork,” said Long, 24, of Swissvale.

He has tried pleading his case to different recruiters in Ross, Greensburg and other places, but has gotten nowhere.

Long completed his fourth round of laser surgery just last week to remove the 3-inch-by-8-inch image. It’s noticeably lighter than it was when he got it after his 21st birthday, but he expects he’ll need to have another five sessions or so before it’s gone.

“It’s on my neck so (the procedure) can hurt pretty bad. But I want to get in,” Long said. “It’s what I was meant to do. I’m willing to sacrifice what I need to to be where I want to be.”

The cost of tattoo removal is far greater than the initial inkwork.

Continued on reverse

At the Skin Center in Shadyside, each procedure can run anywhere from \$200 to several thousand dollars, depending on the size, color and complexity of the tattoo.

Only a white tracing of Guajardo's tattoo remained after the 10-minute procedure. But he's not done.

Guajardo will need four to six follow-up laser procedures during the next couple months before the design is "significantly lightened," and about a dozen until it has been erased completely, Ashtari said.

"I'm willing to try anything at this point," said Guajardo, who works security at a Downtown hotel. "It's going to take a while to go away completely, but hopefully they see that I'm committed to service."

Tattoo removal becoming popular...and more possible.

The popularity of tattoos has created a counter-trend of removal services for a growing number of the regretful.

Technology has improved over the last decade that can now remove difficult greens and blues, providing first-ever opportunities for people who want to erase old memories, amateurish work, even misspelled words.

The removals can take as many as 15 painful treatments, four to six weeks apart, and sometimes costing 10 times the price of the original tattoo. In some cases, removal can discolor the skin and leave scars and blotches.

A new generation of lasers is making removal easier and more effective. But it is still costly, time-consuming and painful.

Doctors pay as much as \$225,000 for the latest tattoo-removal equipment, including state-of-the-art, Q-switched YAG lasers that can now successfully treat a broader range of tattoo pigments.

Some tattoos — particularly large ones on darker skin done professionally with

more than black ink — may be tough, even impossible to remove.

The darker the skin, the greater the risk of discoloration from laser tattoo removal, and it can take several months, possibly years,

before the area fades closer to a person's true skin tone.

Small, amateur drawings in black ink on fair skin are easier.

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Adrienne Ashtari, R.N., gives Chris Guajardo, 24, of Troy Hill his first of several laser tattoo removal treatments at The Skin Center in Shadyside. Guajardo is having the tattoo removed so he can join the Marines.