

First Time

COLOR HIM ADVENTUROUS

With mom's blessing, teen gets his first tattoo

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This is the eighth in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region.

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Brandi Fitzgerald has had more tattoos than birthdays.

Her right arm is crawling with vines, hearts, a skull, a severed foot. Her name is permanently etched in graffiti across her stomach, and she has a full set of angel's wings down her back. There's a wristband of skulls on one wrist and a butterfly on the side of her neck.

Overall, the 22-year-old has more than 30 tattoos. So when Mario Garza, her co-worker at Needle Masters Tattoo Studio on Reynolds Road, suggested one recent Saturday that she add some new art to her body's canvas, she just shrugged.

"Would I do it?" she said. "Yeah. You only live once. It's only skin."

That's when Ryan Collins, 16, walked in the door. He was with his mom and he wanted a tattoo.

It would be his first - a kind of status symbol. He plays basketball and a lot of basketball players are doing it these days, though Ryan would be the first among his friends.

"They'll probably be jealous," he said.

He was following the precedent set by his mom, Christine Kern, of West Toledo. A Jeep worker, she got a tattoo of a cross with two roses 10 years ago when she turned 30.

"Mine's there," she said, pointing to her behind. "I said yes [to Ryan] because if I didn't I'd be a hypocrite."

Ryan was thinking of a similar design, a cross to reflect his Irish-Catholic heritage, but he didn't have a particular image in mind. Lucky for him, possibilities covered the walls of the studio and filled several books lining one wall.

And there weren't just crosses. There were aliens, fairies, scantily clad women, monkeys, clowns, roses, Jesuses, gargoyles, and birds. There was even Spock from Star Trek and a teddy bear holding a gun in one hand and a knife in the other.

Taking in this tattoo landscape, Christine tried to offer suggestions. In the process, though, she made the motherly mistake of calling one of the designs "pretty."

"Pretty?" her son responded.

"I like that one. It reminds me of mine," she said. "I think that's pretty ... I mean, cool."

Christine made sure she was here for several reasons. She wanted to ensure that her son got his tattoo in a reputable, certified studio.

"I'd rather have him with me than with his buddies," she said. Ryan was in the area for the summer before returning to his dad in South Carolina.



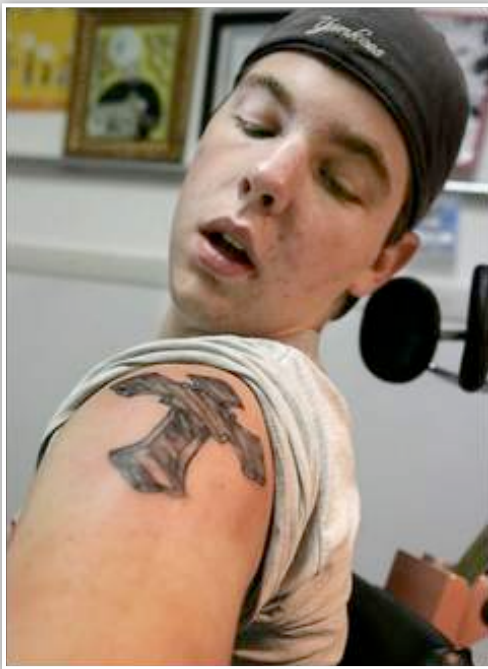
Ryan Collins, 16, gets his first tattoo from artist Mario Garza as his mother, Christine Kern, watches. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

Legally, she had to be here. Because Ryan is under 18, he had to show his birth certificate and driver's license, as well as a legal guardian's, in order to get the tattoo. This was unexpected, and the pair had to make a trip back to his mom's house to pick up the necessary items.

This gave Mario some time to reflect on the tattoo business and the customers he meets. He sees all kinds in the studio: teachers coming in on a dare, kids before a night of partying, a fireman hoping to get a tattoo over a nasty scar. And, of course, himself.

There's a teardrop tattooed under one eye and amor, the Spanish word for love, under the other. Mario's right fingers spell out "STAY" and his left add "REAL." His body is covered in more than 30 tattoos, some of which he did himself as part of the apprenticing process.

He talked about the diseases that can be spread by unhygienic tattooing - hepatitis and other blood-borne illnesses - and how important it is for the studio to be inspected by the Toledo-Lucas County Health Department every month.



Ryan looks at his new tattoo. (THE BLADE/
DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

Once Ryan returned and all the paperwork was filled out, the young man stood waiting in the lobby with his Yankees baseball cap on backwards, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot, saying little.

"You're not gonna cry are you?" his mom teased.

Ryan had quizzed her feverishly about what it would be like as they neared the tattoo studio. What does it feel like to have a tattoo machine shove a needle up and down like a sewing machine into your skin, injecting ink just below the surface?

She told him she'd seen him absorb more painful shots playing football. Brandi, a tattoo apprentice, tried to help, too. "Have you ever had a sunburn?" she asked. "Could you handle it? It's like that."

"It burns?"

"Yeah."

As Mario (Age: 24. Years Tattooing: 6. Hobbies: Rapping) prepared to get things started in his small work area, he advised Ryan to stay relaxed. Tensing up just brings the nerves to the surface and makes things more painful. He put on some black gloves and asked Ryan to stand up so he could shave his arm and apply the pattern. Everything was going well, except ...

"You want your left arm, right?" said Christine, observing from the hall. "That's your right arm."

With that small point corrected, Ryan sat in a chair and Mario got to work. You wouldn't have known by examining Ryan's face. It was emotionless and unchanging as he sat there quietly, looking down, not reacting to the poking or the buzz of the tattoo machine, a pen-like device connected to a tube of ink.

Mario, an artist sketching his design into human flesh, used it like a pencil to make the outline of the four-inch cross, leaving smudges of ink and a little blood and he dabbed at it with a treated paper towel every few seconds. Then he did the interior, giving it a marbled appearance. The whole process took maybe 25 minutes.

When it was over, Ryan stood up and walked over to a nearby mirror. The skin around the tattoo was red, but everything met with his approval.

"I think it looks fine," he said.

Brandi then bandaged the area while reviewing the 10 Commandments of tattoo aftercare: Keep it out of the sun. Try not to sleep on it. Don't pick at it. And she instructed him how to wash it and apply ointment so it wouldn't get infected.

This is where Ryan's adventure ended ... for the time being.

See, Mario expects that he - or another tattoo artist - will see Ryan again. They always come back.

"When kids come here and get one this young, they are gonna come back and get something bigger," he said. "I've never seen somebody get one tattoo and say that's it."

Ryan said he has no plans to add on, but allowed for the possibility in the future. But his mom, she can already see the future.

"It looks nice," she said. "I see some vines coming on there ..." She stopped herself. "I better shut up."

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