

More than skin deep

by Gillian - Thursday, March 17, 2016

<http://3storymagazine.com/veronica-stice/>

In a profession that's been all about men, we meet a female tattoo artist who's turning the tide - and boosting women's body confidence while she's at it. By Gillian Drummond. *Photos by Danni Valdez. Makeup by Rich Makeup Artistry by Taylor Laurie*

Veronica Stice. Photo by [Danni Valdez](#). Makeup by Rich Makeup Artistry by Taylor Laurie

It's a fine thing to find your calling in life, and even better when you discover it young. Veronica Stice was 18 when she found hers.

She was living in the tiny town of Grinnell, Iowa (population 9,200) and had a love of art and a fascination for tattoos. After getting her first tattoo – a burst of sunflowers across her shoulders - she fell headfirst for tattoos and the tattoo life.

Veronica is an all or nothing person. And so it was with tattoos. “I jumped in 100%,” says Veronica, whose petite frame is now mostly covered in ink. She graduated from high school and got a job at a tattoo shop as a receptionist (and cleaner, and errand runner) but really what she wanted was to be a tattooist. That, and live the life she saw the tattoo artists there living. “I just saw how much money these guys were making and nobody told these dudes what to do. They got to do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted. As an 18-year-old it was like ‘All these dudes do is have fun’.”

Some of Veronica's tattoo work. Photo courtesy of Veronica Stice.

Crucially, though, they were “dudes”. She paid her dues as a receptionist, even putting up with their military-camp-like pranks: her shoes being hidden, her car being ‘stolen’, her body being sprayed with rubbing alcohol. And all the time she was drawing tattoo ideas at the front desk and bugging the owner to teach her the trade. He refused. “It came down to him saying girls can’t be tattooers. I lost my job over it,” says Veronica.

On the drive home she called her dad in Tucson. She moved out here a month later, the rejection making her all the more determined. “I knew I could do it and I’m kind of stubborn. Success is the best revenge,” she says.

Within two weeks of moving she had a job at what was then Inkaholics Anonymous, now The Painted Lady tattoo shop on East Speedway. Even then she had to bide her time until she got to tattoo. Her first was an anchor she created herself and inked onto the side of her boss’s knee. And it was bad. “It was awful but I had got to the point where I was so frustrated by how the apprenticeship was going. I walked in one day and said ‘I’m doing this today. I’m tired of this. I need to make money’.”

Seven years later things have changed immeasurably, both for Veronica and the whole tattoo industry. Tats are big, cool, in vogue. They're no longer associated with bikers and jailbirds but also the hipster, the sorority girl, the middle-aged mother, the otherwise average Joe. Tattoo shops take in [more than \\$2.3 billion in revenue a year](#) in the USA. A survey last year found that [40% of households have someone with a tattoo](#). The number of female tattoo artists has risen sharply, with some of them creating their own brand. (Witness the reality TV star [Kat Von D](#), now owner of a line of beauty products at Sephora.)

Black Rose Tattoos on 6th Avenue has mostly women on its staff. Photo courtesy of Veronica Stice.

Veronica, now 25, is manager of [Black Rose Tattoos](#) on 6th Avenue in downtown Tucson. She works with an almost exclusively female staff (five other women plus the male owner, Mac McKay). She has more than 1500 followers on Instagram and people come from as far away as Australia just to be tattooed by her. She charges \$120 an hour and is making enough money to be able to travel for six months of the year, when she couch-surfs through Canada and the U.S. to visit friends and to freelance at other tattoo stores.

She is carving out a niche for creating elaborate and feminine lace-like tattoos the likes of which she doesn't see elsewhere. She's also deliberately making her shop female-friendly. "I think it gives us the opportunity to offer women a whole other level of comfort. Some people think [tattooing] is kind of skeezy, kind of back alley."

Veronica tracing a tattoo design. Photo by [Danni Valdez](#). Makeup by Rich Makeup Artistry by Taylor Laurie

Tattooing women is way different from tattooing men, she says. “It’s something I don’t think a lot of male tattooers consider. Women are soft and round and very curvy and tattoos should flatter that. It should look like it belongs on you.” And they can be a body image boost, she says. You don’t like a part of your body? “Slap a tattoo over it and you fall in love with it.”

She has also used them to hide physical scars – covering up scar tissue and, in one case, helping to conceal third degree burns. “It makes them fall in love with their body and that’s huge. If I can give that to somebody it really really makes me happy,” she says.

Tattoo regrets? She’s had a few of her own. Her least favorite tat is a washed-out-looking portrait of Twiggy on her inner right arm. But mostly she is in love with her work, both on her own skin (and before you ask, yes, she has tattooed herself) and her clients’. Right now she’s working on a piece for a client who wants a revolutionary war theme with a sinking ship, naval officers, the lot. “It’s like a classic oil painting. I don’t like the more abstract stuff. I feel like tattoos should look like tattoos,” she says.

Veronica used a tattoo to cover up this woman's burn scars. Photo courtesy of Veronica Stice.

Black Rose on 6th relaunches this week after a refurbishment, having added bright paint, laminate floors and an extended tattooing area (see below for details of the open house event taking place this weekend.) Veronica's station consists of a heavy-duty tool chest full of sterile one-time-use needles, ink, dentist bibs for laying out her gear, a pillow and chair for the client, and of course the little machine that does all the work. Hand-held and consisting of electromagnetic coils, her tattoo gun turns its needles (there are several on the end, not just one) at 87 cycles a second. She could have opted for a quieter rotary machine but "I like the noise this makes".

She talks of the Black Rose crew as her family. They're also each other's guinea pigs for body art. Tattooers like to practice on fleshy fruit like grapefruit and bananas, sometimes pig ears if they can get them. But many times it's friends, family members and colleagues. There's nothing like drawing on human skin, says Veronica, and her loved ones are not bothered if she messes up. "And you put the word free in front of the word tattoo and people don't care."

Veronica with her signature bright lipstick, and showing off a neck tattoo. Photo courtesy of Veronica Stice.

Photo by Danni Valdez. Makeup by Rich Makeup Artistry by Taylor Laurie

At 25 she seems too young to be complaining about aches and pains, but tattooing can be tough labor. She works up to 12 hours a day, sometimes on one client, and it involves gripping a constantly vibrating machine. “My hands hurt almost all the time. My neck hurts. My feet hurt,” she says, adding: “I’m an all or nothing kind of person. I have given myself to tattooing and it’s given me nothing but amazing things.”

With the extreme rise in the popularity of tattoos, does she fear that being inked is losing its edge? “I don’t really care about that,” she shrugs. “I think everybody should have a tattoo. It looks cool and it makes you feel good about yourself.”

She does have some rules though:

1. Don’t go too small. Her shop gets many requests for small tats – especially from female college students. “I think they’re maybe afraid to commit to a full-size tattoo.” Veronica says bigger tattoos will

age better and are just way more fun. “What’s the point in having one if people can’t see it?”

2. She won’t do tattoos on the hand or neck, unless it’s a regular customer and they’re heavily inked already. “Why does an 18-year-old kid need a neck tattoo? I don’t want to be the cause of someone hating themselves.”

3. She won’t tattoo someone who’s been drinking or displays bad behavior. “If you’re just walking off the street and you’re being a drunk asshole, I will refuse you. It really is about how you carry yourself.”

4. Good hydration and sunscreen are the golden rules when living in the desert. The same goes for tattoos. Drink plenty of water and keep the area moisturized and your tats will love you for it.

* **Find Black Rose Tattooers at 47 S. 6th Avenue and 421 N. 4th Avenue in Tucson, also 699 E. Fry Blvd, Sierra Vista. More at blackrosetattoers.com. Black Rose on S. 6th will have an open house this Saturday evening, March 21st, to celebrate its refurbishment.**