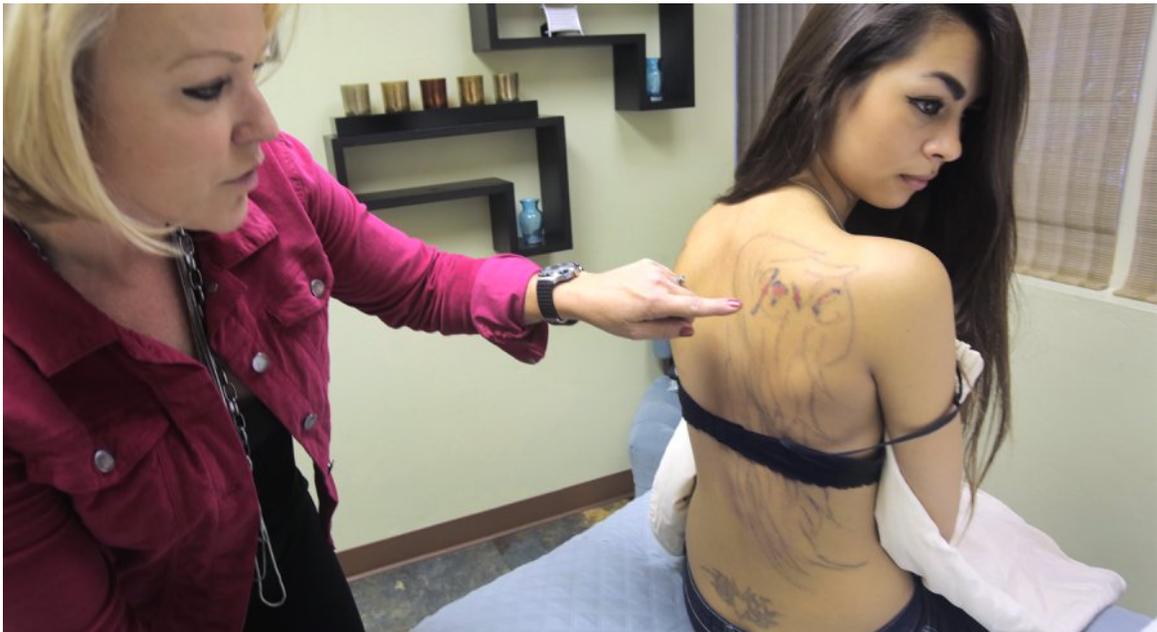


Volunteers erase scars from dark pasts

Change in Action offers free tattoo and scar removal for former sex workers, gang members

By Pam Kragen - Jan. 13, 2015

DEL MAR — You wouldn't know it to look at her today, but a quarter-century ago Ronda Petersen was a regular meth user.



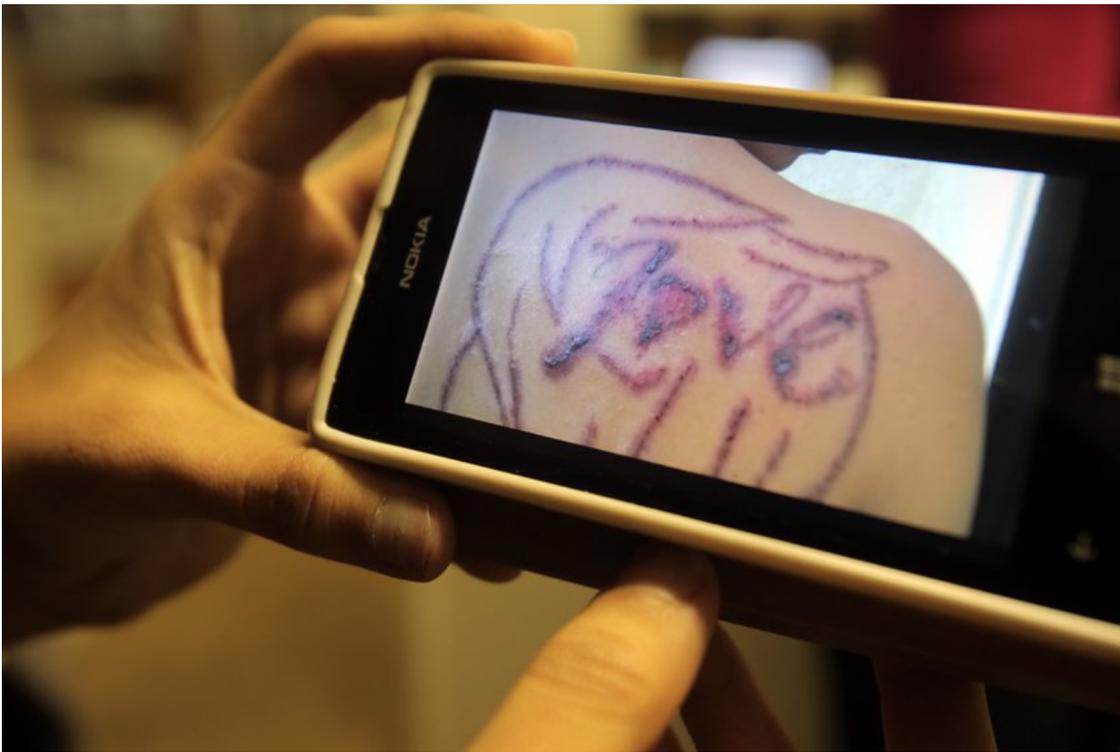
Anakaren Ruano, 19, has some of the tattoos that she is in the process of having removed examined by Ronda Petersen, founder of Change in Action and Director of Del Mar Aesthetic Clinic at the clinic Tuesday. Photo by Bill Wechter

In 1989, she walked away from drugs and made a new life for herself. While the San Diego native escaped her former lifestyle with only emotional scars, she's now helping others erase the physical scars that connect them with the darkest chapters of their lives.

Peterson, 47, is the founder of Change in Action, a 5-year-old nonprofit that offers free laser tattoo and scar removal to former sex workers, gang members, drug addicts and others. She runs the shoestring operation out of her office at Del Mar Aesthetic, where she is the director.

Most days, the clinic on Mango Drive serves upscale clients with Botox injections, fillers, peels and laser treatments. But one Saturday every six weeks, clinic owner Dr. Mary Anne Fuchs turns her exam rooms over to Petersen for up to 30 parolees and probationers, who are desperate to erase the stains of their past. Since the program began two years ago, Change in Action has provided more than \$80,000 in free services.

Petersen, who holds a degree in human services, said many Change in Action clients have turned their lives around but their tattoos hold them back from finding work, disassociating themselves from gangs and building self-esteem.



Anakaren Ruano, 19, with an image on her cell phone showing partially the extent of the tattoos she is having removed with the help of Change in Action. Photo by Bill Wechter

One of those clients is Vista resident Anakaren Ruano, a 19-year-old ex-meth addict who's halfway through a yearlong process to remove five unsightly tattoos that were applied when she was high on drugs.

“When it's done, I know I'll feel great,” said Ruano, a MiraCosta College student. “I won't ever have to explain to my future kids what I have on my skin and why.”

Petersen said her own story as a teenage drug user is no different from Ruano's or many others. She was self-destructive, trapped in an abusive relationship and her parents didn't see the signs. At age 22, she straightened out her life and dedicated herself to helping other domestic violence survivors.

After two internships as a victims advocate at the San Diego Family Justice Center, she started working on her degree. But because she was working full-time in sales, it took 21 years before she earned her college diploma.

In 2008, she left the corporate world to manage Del Mar Aesthetic because she liked its healing mission. When Fuchs became the medical spa's sole owner in 2009, they agreed to work together to aid the neediest members of society.

Fuchs spent 20 years as an emergency room doctor before she took a sabbatical in December to focus on Del Mar Aesthetic. Many of the patients who rolled through the hospital's doors were branded by injuries, scars and tattoos related to domestic violence, sex trafficking and gangs. When Petersen asked if she could run Change in Action from Del Mar Aesthetic, Fuchs said she loved the idea.

“I went into medicine to make a difference,” Fuchs said. “I was motivated by the greater good, and this was a way to make a bigger contribution to the have-nots. It was a gift to me when she asked if I would become involved.”

Working with the county's probation department, Petersen and Fuchs identify patients who would benefit from the clinic's tattoo and scar removal program. The clinic's three nurses — Laurie Pindel, Patti Abramson and Gina DeMers — volunteer their time to conduct the

treatments. In the two years Change in Action has been offering the service, Petersen said she's turned away only one client — a young woman who wanted some small, innocuous animal tattoos removed so she could join a religious organization.

Petersen said Change in Action can only serve a fraction of the need because she can only afford to rent the laser device for one day every six weeks. Her goal is to find grant money and donations to purchase a professional-grade laser. A used device would cost about \$55,000, but an anonymous patron has offered to match all donations, so she only needs to raise half that amount.



Ronda Petersen, founder of Change in Action and Director of Del Mar Aesthetic Clinic, left, and Dr. Mary Anne Fuchs, owner and medical director of the clinic, at the clinic Tuesday. Photo by Bill Wechter

The laser device identifies the pigment found in tattoos and uses blasts of concentrated heat to break up the ink, which is absorbed into the skin. Removing a professional-grade, multicolor tattoo can take up to two years of treatments while amateur tattoos (known as “in-garage” tattoos) may take a year or less.

Fuchs said she's seen women rescued from sex trafficking gangs with tattoos on their hips, arms, lower back and even their face that brand them as their pimp's property. One woman had "Bobby\$ Girl" on her arm. Another had a treasure chest tattoo, representing her monetary value. And some women had their pimp's name tattooed inside their lower lip. She and Petersen have also seen clients with scars from cutting, rope burns and intentional burns from curling irons and cigarettes.

Ruano's body is a road map of her painful journey to mental wholeness and sobriety. Her wrists and forearms are scarred from a suicide attempt and ritual cutting that began when she was 15 and depressed over family problems.

"I would cut myself and the blood would always wash away my pain for the day," she said.

Friends introduced her to pot, which she smoked every day because it helped her forget her problems and made her more outgoing. At 15, she got her first tattoo of a marijuana leaf on her hip. Within a year, she moved from pot to alcohol to ecstasy. Then, from the first moment she tried meth at a party, she was hooked. Over the next two years, she picked up seven more tattoos (including the word "Lust" on her shoulder), dropped out of school, cycled in and out of juvenile hall nine times and dropped to 90 pounds.

She hit rock-bottom at 17, when she emerged one morning from a two-week meth and cocaine bender that left her vomiting blood and sporting the huge black outline tattoo of a single angel wing (shakily applied by an equally high tattoo artist) covering half of her back. On Nov. 27, 2012, she entered a six-month rehab program and has been clean ever since. Today, she works as a math tutor at her alma mater, El Camino High School, and is studying criminology at MiraCosta College.

Although she's a role model for reform today, Ruano admits it wasn't easy "pushing the restart button" in her life. She had to move away from her old friends, she deactivated all her social media accounts and she applied to Change In Action to remove the tattoos that remind her of her past. After seven treatments, her tattoos are still

visible but only barely. With six more treatments, her skin should be clear.

Ruano said she's always dreamed of someday wearing a sleeveless dress on her wedding day and Change in Action is making it possible. "I hated my tattoos," she said. I didn't want to wake up every morning and remember the worst night of my life. Now I can wear that wedding dress I dreamed of. I don't have the groom yet, but I will have the back for it."

To donate to Change in Action, contact Petersen at rondampetersen@gmail.com or (619) 850-7264.

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See more at:

<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2015/jan/13/change-in-action-nonprofit-profile/#sthash.2VYVNNsA.dpuf>