

These tattoos aren't meant to stand out, they're done to heal



Dinah Katt receives a touch-up by Lorna Poulos at Lasting Lines Inc. in Midland on July 25, 2016.

Katt got the tattoos after having breast cancer surgery.

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SAGINAW, MI — While most people go to a tattoo shop to get a unique decoration on their bodies, there are a few who go for a different reason.

They want to look — and feel — normal again.

Raquel Girardin, owner of Drunken Monkey Tattoo in Old Town Saginaw, said many of the breast cancer survivors who come to her studio for nipple and areola pigmentation after undergoing reconstructive surgery are apprehensive.

They've never set foot inside a tattoo shop before. And, perhaps unlike typical clients, they're not getting tattooed to stand out. They want tattoos to blend in, to feel normal again.

That was the case for a 45-year-old Bay City woman who visited her studio June 17.

She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2013. In February the following year, she had a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery.

"I'm about two years cancer-free," said the woman who spoke to MLive/The Saginaw News on the condition that she not be named.

"This is totally out of the box for me."

She learned of the service from Dr. Sussan Bays and a woman she met through a Covenant HealthCare support group who had tattoo work done.

"I thought there was no way it was going to look normal," the Bay City woman said. But after meeting tattoo artist Justin Walters and seeing photos of his work, she was convinced.

"I honestly could not believe it, how realistic it looked."

Girardin said area doctors who perform mastectomies and reconstructive surgery for breast cancer patients, including Dr. Ronald C. Barry, have referred patients to her studio.

Barry has been doing breast and nipple reconstruction for 25 years. He routinely does a nipple reconstruction procedure along with a tattoo that not only looks three-dimensional but actually is three-dimensional, he said.

That's a good choice for many of his patients, but not everyone is a good candidate for it, particularly those who have undergone radiation, he said. And, although it is a relatively minor procedure performed under local anesthetic, some people want to avoid another surgical procedure and are happy with simply a tattoo with a three-dimensional look.

"There are better candidates than others — a lot of it's personal choice," Barry said. "For people that do (just want) straightforward three-dimensional tattooing, I tell patients they have an option, they can have me do it or go to a tattoo person."

Barry said he has referred patients to Drunken Monkey specifically because he is familiar with the business and the quality of Walters' work. He said Midland-based permanent makeup artist Lorna Poulos is another nearby option.

However, unlike the nipple reconstruction and tattooing he does, tattoos done outside of medical offices are not covered by insurance, nor are they done under local anesthetic, Barry said.

Poulos, owner of Lasting Lines Permanent Makeup in Midland, has been doing permanent makeup and breast tattooing for more than 20 years. She's also a painter and sculptor.

She says one has to be an artist to do the kind of work she does well.

"You want it to be perfect, because it is the final step in looking back-to-normal again," Poulos said.

Dinah Katt was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2013. The following year, she underwent a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery.

She then went to Poulos on the recommendation of Dr. Julie Sofer, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon who was working for McLaren Bay Region at the time and who now has a private practice in Flint.

At first, Katt wasn't sure she wanted the tattoos.

"A friend had encouraged me, that that would be the final step for my reconstruction, and I decided I was going to go for it," she said.

Katt has no other tattoos.

"When we first started, I would say it was probably about two, three hours of designing, choosing colors, doing the tattooing," Poulos said during a follow-up visit with Katt in July.

"I like a few weeks in-between for touch-up, and then we see what takes, what doesn't. Sometimes the scarred areas are tougher to get the color in," she added.

Katt said she's feeling great about her choice.

"It looks very real, so I was really quite pleased."

Sofer said she prefers to refer patients who want the tattooing done to tattoo artists rather than doing it herself.

"I'm not an artist like that," she said. "If you find a really good one, they really know how to do that 3-D and it looks 10 times better."

However, many of her patients forgo both nipple reconstruction and tattooing, she said.

"The majority of patients do not want physical nipple reconstruction," Sofer said. "I'd say about half of the patients do want some kind of nipple identifier on their chest, but, surprisingly, there's less and less."

For some, that may be because they're exhausted with the process and don't want to undergo another procedure. For others, they don't want to have to wear a bra, she said.

"It's interesting to see the evolution of the patients' choices."

For Walters, also, tattooing is art. He specializes in realism and has experience tattooing portraits.

Amy Dwyer, 47, of Thomas Township is among his clients. She underwent a double mastectomy after her breast cancer diagnosis in 2009.

"I was very happy with the surgery, but the tattoos, I thought, 'You know what? I'm going to do something to make them look a little more natural,'" she said.

Dwyer didn't have any other tattoos and was somewhat apprehensive before having her tattoos redone at Drunken Monkey in 2014.

"Sometimes, the tattoo parlors, I guess, have a bad reputation," she said.

Dwyer researched tattoo shops in the area and decided on Drunken Monkey after looking at examples of the artists' work online.

"I was so pleased with it, as soon as I got home, I called every single one of my friends who had the same surgery."