

Erasing the Past

IN SOUTHWEST DETROIT, A TATTOO REMOVAL PROGRAM HELPS FORMER GANG MEMBERS LEAVE STIGMA BEHIND

BY CASEY NESTEROWICH // PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN VECCHIO

DAVID JIMENEZ PULLS UP A CHAIR across from me inside the canary yellow conference room at the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation; a fresh cup of coffee is resting in between his tattoo-less hands.

Eight years ago those hands were covered in gang symbols like pitchforks and snakes, with the words “Amoré de Cobra” etched onto the top of his hands.

It took a long road for him to turn his life around, and Freedom Ink — a laser tattoo removal program founded by local dermatologist Dr. Eric Seiger and run by DHDC — helped him move on.

Although his is a past not many would care to admit — he’s been in and out of jail and prison most of his life, and he’s actually escaped once — Jimenez is willing to share his story.

“I might talk your ear off, and I’m a bit of a cry baby,” he says with a smile.

The still-visible tattoos on either side of his neck are indecipherable, and as he rolls up his sleeves, faded black tattoos are revealed on both of his arms.

Although the 46-year-old used to be an Insane Spanish Cobras gang member in Detroit, as he tells me his past, I find I’m not afraid of him.

Growing up in Chicago, Jimenez’s father was a Latin King, con-

sidered one of the largest and most organized Hispanic street gangs in the U.S. As a young boy, Jimenez says he never realized his father was in a gang until he went to prison for a heroin charge when Jimenez was 9 years old. It wasn’t long until both Jimenez and his older brother joined the Maniac Latin Disciples, their first gang.

“My dad was doing a prison term and we were waiting for him to get out,” Jimenez says. “At that time we were old enough to roam the streets, and we were living in the wrong neighborhoods.”

The concept of a 9-year-old joining a gang might be foreign territory for most readers, but it’s a reality that still exists here in Detroit, too.

Jimenez made his way to Detroit after his family moved to Adrian when he was 14. He finished 10th grade and then dropped out to join forces with gangs in Detroit.

“I had my own so-called gang clique — a stealing clique, not no gang clique — and we were bandits, we would break into people’s cribs and take all their stuff,” he says. “I used to bring my stolen property to Detroit — that’s how I got connected with them.”

But you can only be so good before you get caught. When he was 19, Jimenez was put into prison for 10 years after being charged with 350 breaking and entering, two auto thefts, and one count of safecracking.

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DHDC BUILDING
MANAGER AND
GANG SPECIALIST
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LETTERING BY KOSTA FINNLOW





After serving almost the entire time, more years were added to his sentence because he escaped prison with a friend.

"I was on a work crew that day on a job site that had low security," he says. "And me and my buddy took the work van."

After that, he didn't get out of prison until he was 39 years old.

Although that's just one of the numerous stories Jimenez could tell about his life of getting caught and put behind bars, today he is a changed man.

"I've been court-free six years, thank God, and I'm going to stay that way. I'm not going the other route anymore," he says.

A HAVEN IN SOUTHWEST DETROIT

Jimenez first met DHDC Director Angela Reyes in 1998 during the formative years of the agency.

That's when one of his probation officers got him to attend one of Reyes' first gang retirement programs. He attended classes through DHDC's Gang Retirement and Continuing Education and Employment (GRACE) program and the tattoo "cover-up" program — at the time, the technology for laser removal wasn't available, so tattoos were covered with other tattoos.

"Their sessions were very successful," Jimenez says. "It stuck with me — it just didn't stick with me at that moment in time because I was living two worlds. It's kind of hard to say 'no' to a gang after you've been cycled that way for a very long time, and most of our gangs back in the day really nurtured you — they fathered you and mothered you in some type of way, and we took care of one another like brothers."

DHDC's programs are exactly what Jimenez needed to turn his life around. And if you walk into the DHDC, you'll meet dozens

of other people who also consider Reyes a miracle worker and mother figure. She's been working since she was a teenager in Southwest Detroit to prevent gang violence and assist anyone who needs it in the largely Hispanic community.

Several of DHDC's programs are for those coming out of the penal system who need employment or assistance transitioning back into society. DHDC has become sort of a neutral zone for opposing gangs — no violence is allowed there, and people respect it like a sanctuary.

"I started the agency with a few other folks by forming a truce with the leaders of several rival gangs and getting them to agree to leave the gang in return for jobs," Reyes says. "We were experiencing such high levels of violence in our community and going to one funeral after the other, I was tired of burying kids."

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— ANGELA REYES, DIRECTOR OF DHDC

Part of her success was an early partnership with Hispanic-owned manufacturing companies that has continued today; many companies have agreed to hire former gang members.

"One day they were rivals and the next day they were co-workers working next to each other, so it had a significant impact on the level of violence in the community," Reyes says.

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ABOVE LEFT: DHDC DIRECTOR ANGELA REYES HAS WORKED WITH AT-RISK AND GANG-INVOLVED YOUTH SINCE SHE WAS A TEENAGER.

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ABOVE: DR. ERIC SEIGER PERFORMS LASER TATTOO-REMOVAL SERVICES AT DHDC.

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THE DHDC'S WALLS ARE COVERED WITH BRIGHTLY COLORED GRAFFITI, PAINTINGS, AND POSITIVE MESSAGES.

Jimenez was reunited with Reyes in 2005 when he was doing some of his community service work at DHDC after the organization had expanded from Reyes' living room to its own building.

"I was in the backroom fixing something, and she comes back there and says, 'Hey, it's time to go home,' and I said, 'Hey, I'm already home,' and she turned around and looked at me, and she saw that I was serious and it wasn't a joke," he says. "And after that I had a phone call a couple months later for the job I have now ... and I've never looked back since," Jimenez says.

Today, it's been six years since Jimenez finally got off parole and he works with Reyes as the building manager and gang specialist at DHDC. He is heavily relied on as a key communicator for young people who claim gang membership or those who need a mentor.

He was also the first person to go through the DHDC's Freedom Ink tattoo removal program in 2007.

TAKING AWAY THE STIGMA

Gang tattoos represent beliefs, symbolize the wearer's membership, and are even used to record acts of violence or murder. Tattoos are most commonly given by one gang member to another.

"I was the one that gave my brother his first tattoo, but it's crazy because I also was the one that called him up once I started working here and I found out what Dr. Seiger wanted to do," Jimenez says.

Jimenez's brother is also no longer in a gang — and he, too, has had many of his tattoos removed through Freedom Ink.

Seiger, founder of Freedom Ink and a dermatologist of Skin & Vein Centers, a local dermatology/cosmetic surgery practice, partnered with the DHDC in 2007.

"Having somebody offer to do tens of thousands of dollars of work for free to people who thought those marks would never go away was something that was needed in this community," says Lex Zavala, DHDC director of youth programs.

"It's more than just getting a tattoo removed; it's washing away all that pain that they were carrying."

Seiger sought out the DHDC because he'd been looking for a way to give back to the community and create a sustainable community service project to help people leave violent lifestyles.

After researching other laser tattoo removal programs like Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, Seiger called the organization to ask if they would be interested in letting him offer laser tattoo removal at no cost to the Southwest Detroit community.

"These are people who are in situations where we're making a difference in life and death," Seiger says. "These are not just tattoos; they're like targets on these people."

When someone exits prison or jail, or chooses to leave a gang, it can cause isolation in the community and make it difficult to find jobs and transition back into society. Even if someone has exited a gang, most people have no way of removing the branded skin from their past.

"It shouldn't be a lifetime stigma; if a person has paid for their sins and they've proven that they can be more than their past — what more do you want?" says James Phillips, DHDC's coordinator of Freedom Ink. "When you change your mindset you've also got to change all those negative things that you bring with it and these negative signs and symbols that people wear on their bodies, every time they look in the mirror, they think negatively because they're reminded."

“I used to be ashamed of these hands, but I’m a new man now.” — DAVID JIMENEZ

Phillips connects individuals involved in the Freedom Ink program with business owners from the neighborhood who are willing to give them a chance.

“They’re under a lot of scrutiny and they work extra hard because of that. They are there every day and a lot of them are usually there before the shop even opens up — they sit there and wait for the manager to get there,” Phillips says. “They’re trying to prove themselves and for the most part once they have proven themselves they usually will be the best person someone has for an employee.”

Take Jimenez as an example. Even though he has paid his dues to society, after leaving prison, he was viewed in the community as a violent person because of the way he looked on the outside.

He starts to tear up when recalling the first time he saw the tattoos on his hands really disappear. It took about six laser treatments, each a few months apart for his skin to heal properly.

“During the course of Dr. Seiger doing [the tattoo removal], I hugged that man forever, I didn’t want to let him go, and when I finally started seeing results, that’s when it really hit me — I just fell to pieces in that room because I thought I had to live with that for the rest of my life.

“I had people looking at me all funny and I didn’t want people to look at me that way or shun me anymore, and say ‘what the hell is wrong with him?’” Jimenez says. “Dr. Seiger took that feeling away — he made that happen ... I think of him every day when I wash my hands and I say ‘wow,’ and I give my hands a nice little hug.”

Every two weeks, others are following Jimenez’ path to Freedom Ink, from neo-Nazis and former gang members to women leaving abusive relationships. They come through the DHDC’s doors, largely due to word-of-mouth.

“It’s very difficult to find funding for people like this who have such a negative stigma in society,” Reyes says. “Sometimes people need a second or third chance or fourth chance, and that’s what we offer here.”

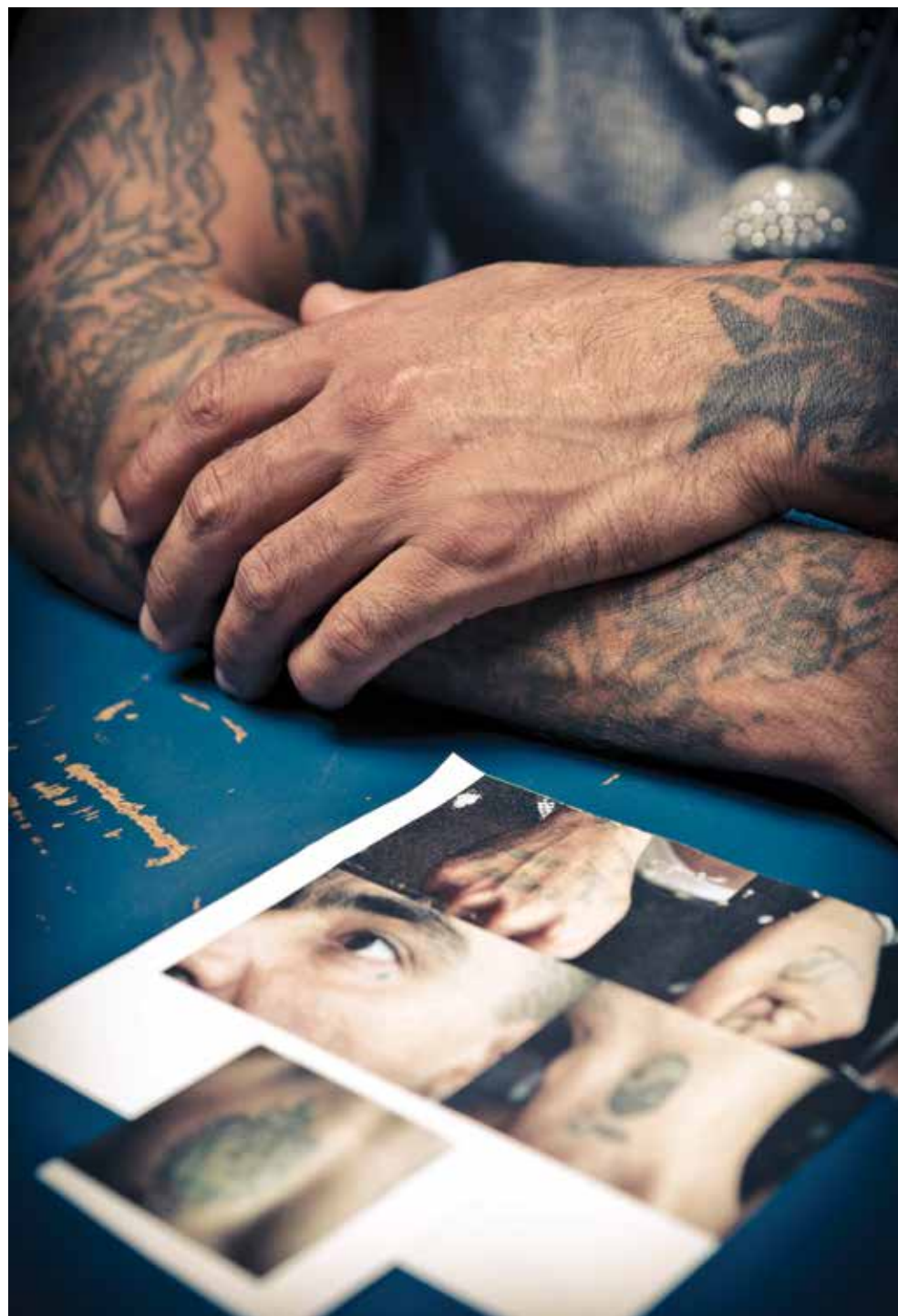
Participants pay what they can afford, up to \$25 for each laser session — a small fee charged to keep up with maintenance on the laser equipment and medical supplies needed for each procedure. Seiger has brought in medical residents to perform tens of thousands of dollars worth of tattoo removal for little to no cost for hundreds of people.

Just like Reyes has committed her entire life to helping the Southwest Detroit community, she’s committed to continuing the Freedom Ink program — no matter what it takes.

“It has such an impact on people’s lives and their future, and what they think of themselves, and what they can do with their lives that people don’t even realize until you’ve actually been through that process or seen someone going through that process,” she says.

Jimenez is continuing to get laser tattoo removal on the rest of his body. And as I leave the DHDC he walks me out and firmly shakes my hand with a smile before saying: “I used to be ashamed of these hands, but I’m a new man now.”

For information visit dhdc.org.



BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOS SHOW SOME OF THE TATTOOS JIMENEZ USED TO HAVE. HIS HANDS ARE NOW COMPLETELY TATTOO FREE.

JAMES PHILLIPS, COORDINATOR OF FREEDOM INK, WALKS THROUGH A MAIN DHDC ROOM THAT FEATURES AN AZTEC-INSPIRED MURAL.

TOP DOCTORS CONTINUED

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- Stoler, Robert L., M.D. // St. Joseph Mercy
- Tang, Jeffrey C. Formoso, M.D. // Henry Ford Health
- Veneri, Robert J., M.D. // St. John Providence, Beaumont
- Warren, Bradley J., D.O. // St. John Providence
- Weber, John R., M.D. // Beaumont, Detroit Medical Center

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- *El-Baba, Mohammad F., M.D. // DMC Children’s Hospital
- Fatima, Ayesha, M.D. // Beaumont
- *Gebara, Souheil, M.D. // Beaumont
- Lopez, Maclovio J., M.D. // U-M Health System
- Lyons, Hernando J., M.D. // St. John Providence
- Truding, Robert M., M.D. // Beaumont
- Zoubi, Najeeb F., M.D. // DMC Children’s Hospital

GENERAL SURGERY

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- Barnwell, John M., M.D. // Detroit Medical Center
- Carlin, Arthur M., M.D. // Henry Ford Health
- Czako, Peter F., M.D. // Beaumont
- Dinnan, Kelly A., D.O. // St. John Providence, Beaumont
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- Jacobs, Michael J., M.D. // St. John Providence, Beaumont
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- Knol, James A., M.D. // U-M Health System
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- Kreske, Edward D., M.D. // St. Joseph Mercy
- Kwon, David S., M.D. // Henry Ford Health
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- Sullivan, Daniel M., M.D. // St. Joseph Mercy, Crittenton
- Talpos, Gary B., M.D. // Henry Ford Health

- Weaver, Donald W., M.D. // Detroit Medical Center, Karmanos Cancer Center
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GENERAL VASCULAR SURGERY

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