

Tattoo removal helps change lives

Paula Doyle/CNS

MISSION HILLS, Calif. — Dominican Sister June Wilkerson directs a disappearing act at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills.

Sister Wilkerson, 78, runs a tattoo removal clinic for ex-gang members, punk rockers, convicted felons, prostitutes and drug addicts in the Los Angeles area who want to change their lives by removing visible signs of the past.

It is concern for her clients' well-being and personal safety that brought Sister Wilkerson out of what she thought was going to be her third, and last, retirement.

"In the trauma center at the hospital, we see a lot of victims of gang violence," said Sister Wilkerson, who previously ran a parish nurse partnership for the hospital's outreach program to local churches. Before that she was as a high school and a college teacher.

With \$25,000 in seed money donated by the hospital for rental of the top-of-the-line \$200,000 Versapulse laser machine, the veteran organizer and religious sister got down to business.

"This project is to reduce violence and serve the community," Sister Wilkerson told *The Tidings*, newspaper of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. "About the time a person reaches their mid-20s, they see that tattoos are a barrier to their life. They have a hard time getting a job or being promoted. Some may have left a gang, but nobody knows it because of the tattoos."

The project helps prevent clients from becoming random victims of violence because they still carry



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Dr. Sherri Peace uses a laser to remove a tattoo from the ankle of a client at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills, Calif.



signs of past gang affiliation. In 2000, this reality hit close to home when an 18-year-old client at a bus stop was suddenly stabbed in the midsection by a stranger who, as the victim surmised, "knew me by my (neck) tattoo."

The complete removal of a tattoo requires six treatments with an interval of six weeks between each one to allow the skin to heal. According to Sister Wilkerson, it can take a year or even two years to completely remove large tattoos.

Clients entering the program must agree to either do 16 hours of community service for each laser treatment or spend eight hours in an

educational or training curriculum.

For Maria Dena, a 33-year-old mother of five and former gang-member girlfriend who got her first tattoo at age 11, getting rid of her facial, chest and leg tattoos means saying goodbye to "negativity."

"With the tattoos, I feel like a bulletin board," said Dena, who explained that girlfriends of gang

members often get tattooed, with their boyfriend's name.

Dena is one of the 150 clients who have been trained to speak to junior-high and high-school students and juveniles in detention camps.

Benjamin Medina, 39, one of the program's first clients and a former gang member, decided to get his neck and forearm tattoos removed six years ago. "Being a dad, I didn't want the kids to see my gang tattoos," said Medina, a father of three.

He credits the program for changing his life. "It now allows me to be judged for who I am, because first impressions are a major component of social interaction," said Medina.

A substance-abuse assessment specialist for the San Fernando Valley Community Mental Health Center, he is one of 285 clients who have completed all the treatments and had their tattoos permanently removed.

On May 8, Providence Holy Cross Medical Center celebrated the fifth anniversary of its program. From its original February 1998 schedule of 24 Saturdays a year, providing 315 treatments annually, the program has increased to 48 Saturdays, which has resulted in an annual total of 1,327 treatments. Clients have contributed more than 80,000 hours of community service.

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