



by peyton moore

**WITH A NEEDLE** piercing her left rib cage, senior Brooke Taylor wasn’t scared. She smiled at her tattoo artist as he drew over the stencil — a permanent reminder of her Aunt Cherri. Even though she was getting her first tattoo to honor her aunt’s survival of stage III breast cancer, her parents didn’t approve.

But their religious views and strict parenting couldn’t stop her now. She was 18. “It was the first thing I did for myself,” Brooke said. “I finally felt like I could express myself.”

After the first three weeks, she stopped noticing the Bohemian vine draped on her rib when looking in the mirror. Instead of her usual slouch, she noticed herself standing taller, flaunting her newfound confidence and body in any swimsuit. When people ask ‘Why?’ Brooke explains that it’s dedicated to her Aunt Cheri and a symbol of her independence as a child.

But it’s not *just* that to her it’s *so much more*. As part of the new outlets for self-expression that have stemmed from Generation Z’s open-mindedness, body modification such as tattoos, piercings and stick-and-pokes have developed a new meaning to young adults — one that lies beyond the art itself.

To Brooke, the vine reminds her of gardening with her aunt as a child. But it’s also the same size and in the same place as her aunt’s surgical scar. When she looks at it, she doesn’t think about the pain that cancer struck on her family — she remembers how she grew independent living with her aunt and uncle as

a child, and felt stuck artistically after moving back in with her parents as an adolescent, which led her to escape her parents’ outdated views on body art.

For years, scientists have conducted studies in an attempt to prove their ideas that tattooed individuals have characteristics relating to sensation-seeking and impulsivity. But, the research has never matched up, according to licensed psychologist Mary Jane Harmless. In 2019, reports surveying members of Gen Z tried to place them into this box but found the majority didn’t fit. There were some connections found between the thrill-seeking tattoo junkie and the adrenaline rush from the needle’s pain, but nothing significant enough to show a link between these characteristics and Gen Z specifically.

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**BROOKE TAYLOR • SENIOR**

Dr. Harmless explains that humans have been modifying their bodies since prehistoric times. The art form has transformed from a way to conform to a group as a marine, criminal or circus performer to more of an individualized artistic expression — something to honor personal journeys or remember a loved one. Researchers have reverted back to an individuals’ personal reasoning on why one might get a tattoo, according to Dr. Harmless.

“We see everything from a little black heart on your thigh to a whole sleeve of detailed art that represents a series of events in one’s life,” Dr. Harmless said. “Their bodies become a map in that way. A personal map detailing their interests, pasts and passions.”

East parent and retired tattoo artist Ben Comes explains that this generational trend had deeper roots. In the early 2000s, Comes found that athletes and music stars modifying their bodies with piercings and tattoos altered the stigma that characterized tattooed individuals as ex-cons or part of the military.

“Once successful people started getting [tattoo] work done, the younger people must think their lives are pretty OK,” Comes said. “All of a sudden it was a sign of success.”

Tattoos have historically been viewed as unprofessional or irresponsible by employers, according to Comes.

Now, since the stigma has been slightly modified with Gen Z, the majority of workplaces no longer have the option to reject tattooed individuals as over a quarter of the US population has a tattoo, according to historyoftattoos.net. Comes found that this surge in the art form brought a younger demographic into tattoo parlors as they no longer had to fear rejection from most jobs due to a visible tattoo.

Working in Corinth Elementary’s after-school childcare program, senior June Hyde was always scared of the possible judgment from kids and parents for having tattoos covering her arms, legs and chest. Working in the

childcare industry with pink hair and over 30 tattoos as a 17 year old was a little daunting, but she soon realized the kids could care less — they don’t judge. Going into Elementary Education at KU, June sees herself in childcare in the future.

“It’s like my body is covered with stickers you find at a toy store so, if anything, I should add this to my resume,” June said.

June has been giving herself stick-and-poke tattoos for four years now. For June, the physical action of adding “art” (tattoos) to her “canvas” (her body) is what matters. The design or image — whether a pickle jar, sparkles or a magic wand — is not meant to represent something huge or monumental, but rather to create a connection with her body in the moment. June has an extensive “sticker collection.” Not because she’s in love with the adrenaline rush from a needle and ink, but because it’s a form of self care.

Each time June puts on plastic gloves and inserts the ink-covered needle at a 45-degree angle into her skin, sometimes tracing an outline and sometimes completely free-handing, June is transforming her body into something she can better identify with.

The blank canvas of June’s body has never felt like her own — through seven years of gender dysphoria, transitioning and de-transitioning — these tiny, self-drawn designs have slowly allowed June to gain a sense of who she is as a person, and helped to explore

her gender.

“The experience of being in a body that is very incongruent to my identity made it hard for me to see my body as my own,” June said. “Now in the gray area, it’s still very hard for me to feel connected to my body if it’s blank. I started by dying my hair and painting my nails, then stick-and-pokes. It was super grounding to feel like my body was actually mine and the tattoos were a way that I could be brought back into my body.”

Ask June what the equal sign between her fingers means, and she’ll explain that the uneven, faded lines on her left middle finger are a constant reminder that she’s equal to her peers surrounding her. She told her mom the meaning one day, and it brought her to tears. The next May, on Mothers Day, June gave her mom the chance to feel equal — giving her a matching tattoo in the same spot.

Art is a form of overall connection, allowing oneself to feel connected to a person, place or event. According to phys.org, tattoos can provide an anchor that helps satisfy a need for stability, predictability, permanence and identity.

For some, the permanence of tattoos is what urged them to get into the parlor. Senior Maggie Merckens had always loved tattoos and knew she’d get one eventually, but it took years to find the *right* one. One that inspired her. One that spoke volumes about her character and allowed her to tell her personal life story. While backpacking on Kesugi Ridge in Denali State Park, Alaska this past summer,

she found it.

Maggie was walking five to eight miles a day with a 40-pound pack filled with food, clothes and camping equipment dragging her down, in a group of boys twice her size. Almost every day, Maggie felt like she was at a breaking point. She couldn’t catch her breath. Each day she came up with a new excuse, a new way of phrasing “*I can’t do it, I’m weak, I’ll never make it.*”

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**JANE THIEDE • SENIOR**

Still, she persisted. She hiked the eight miles every day for five days and woke up at 6 a.m. the next morning staring at Denali Mountain, ready to go again.

She transformed her perspective from the girl of countless “*I can’t do it’s*” to being comfortable with the uncomfortable.

“I finally accepted that my body is strong enough to basically do anything,” Maggie said. “My whole mindset surrounding life and hard things changed as I learned that I was mentally and physically strong enough to do anything. I feel like I became my truest self in

Alaska and when I came back I wanted to keep that mentality with me.”

Maggie walked into the Gold Cathedral tattoo parlor three months later and walked out with Denali Mountain tattooed onto her left rib cage. She finally found her tattoo, the one that told her story, the one that spoke to her initiative.

Hundreds of high schoolers like Merckens have gotten tattoos. According to pubmed.gov, 27% of students have body piercings and 8% have tattoos, totalling to over a fourth of the demographic.

Senior Erin Hansen explains that this new idea surrounding body modification should be somewhat credited to Gen Z and their welcoming view on life.

“My mom is a Gen X’er, and she explained that our generation has opened the viewpoint for many older generations to be more open to loving your body and expressing yourself,” Hansen said. “Our generation doesn’t really care what we see, we care about their personality and what’s on the inside. Whereas older generations see tattoos as almost taboo and like it was the vision of an irresponsible or bad person, but Gen Z is very inclusive and see it more as a form of art and self-expression rather than judging it.”

According to Dr. Harmless, this tiny step toward inclusion has been accomplished by simply opening the conversation about one’s tattoos, revealing personal stories. Junior Laney Rupp finds that just the little reminder to be positive located on her left ankle can get

her through a day.

“I usually sit criss-crossed,” Laney said. “So in English class, when I look down or drop my pencil, I see [a smiley face] and even that quick reminder to be positive and happy can do so much.”

For senior Jane Thiede, that’s all it takes — a simple reminder. Tattooed on her wrist is the “angel number” 333 — a spiritual sign that represents healing and guidance. When she looks down at her wrist, Jane can see the numbers for their spiritual meaning, but she also sees her friend Olivia Piotrowski who passed away last August.

Three was Olivia’s lucky number.

“It’s a whole different experience to be able to put something on your body that you feel connected to,” Jane said. “It’s also a good expression of how I view myself and the things that I want to focus on in my life.”

These body modifications are not only a small reminder to stay positive, but a way for teens to connect to themselves, their peers and their loved ones. For these students, the idea of permanent art on their bodies allowed for an anchor in their lives — an anchor to their body. Despite the fact that this art form can mean countless different things for an individual, they all give students the chance to connect to their body as a form of self expression.