Program helps erase poor choices

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The term "skin deep" often refers to something superficial with no lasting effect. But for Nick Leyva, some skin-deep problems -- his tattoos -- were standing between him and his dream.

The 21-year-old wants to be a firefighter with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, which does not accept applicants who have visible or morally questionable tattoos.
Leyva's tats were both. "One's gang-related and the other one is of sexual activity," he said.

Leyva had a double-lightning-rod tattoo behind his right ear. This is an abstract "SS" of the Nazi guard unit Schutzstaffel and therefore considered a white supremacist gang symbol.
He also had a number referring to sex tattooed on his Adam's apple. The only way he would be allowed into the firefighting academy was if he had his tattoos removed.

Fortunately for Leyva, who has been in and out of jail for several offenses involving drunkenness and violence, he had guardian angels at the Kern County Probation Department who could help him -- for free.

One such angel is Jennifer Webb, a paid intern with the Take Away Tattoos program of the Probation Auxiliary County of Kern. "Sometimes our kids don't think things through when they get tattoos put on them," she said. Many are intoxicated when they choose to go under the inked needle. She counsels a lot of youths who are referred to the group by their probation officers.

"This is a voluntary program," Webb said. "The court can't make them take their tattoos off."
In Leyva's case, she said, "He was mature enough to realize that his tattoos would be a hindrance to his aspirations. "He is very good-natured, pretty happy," Webb said. "We all make mistakes when we're younger. But sometimes we make permanent ones."

Leyva has gone through six laser treatments to get his homemade tattoos removed.
The "double-rod" behind his ear was done by his brother-in-law using professional ink, so it has been harder to remove and is still visible, although it is fainter than it was before the treatments began. He was never in a skinhead or other white supremacist gang, he said, but just trying to express "white pride" through his tattoo.

His brother did the tattoo of the number but did not use professional ink, Leyva said, so it is now hardly visible. His mother and other people found this tattoo to be in bad taste, he said.
Leyva was only 17 at the time. He was already sober -- he has been clean from alcohol and drugs for five years, he said -- but "just young and dumb" and didn't think he would regret having them done. He soon did.

Fortunately, his probation officer told him about Take Away Tattoos. "I go in and they shave the area and they take me in the back room and put on a little piece of medicine paper," he described. Webb said this special paperlike film is called "Second Skin." "It's refrigerated," she said, "so when the laser passes through it, it cools the laser so it's not as hot."

After the laser goes over the entire surface of the tattoo, Webb said, a topical antibiotic is applied to the area, which is then bandaged. Patients get pain medication and, in case their sugar level drops as a result of stress caused by the procedure, they are given some orange juice to drink as well, she said. The tattoos scab over and the ink is drawn to the surface and flakes off, Leyva said. The procedure is repeated every six to eight weeks until the tattoo is no longer visible.

Clinica Sierra Vista provides the space for PACK to do the tattoo removal procedures through volunteer health care providers.

Erin Martinez, a nurse practitioner with a local private family practice clinic, has volunteered to do tattoo removals for PACK since August of last year. "I was interested in volunteering for an organization where I could use my medical skills," she said, "and I had heard about this program and knew that I could make a difference."

Some young people she helps tell her their girlfriends or parents don't like their tattoos, she said. Some want to get out of the gang life. Some say they feel stigmatized for having tattoos, especially when they look for jobs, she said.

Webb knows that networking with others like Martinez, who are concerned for young members of the community, is important. That is why she readily accepted an invitation to participate in the mentoring round table organized recently by the Vision Committee of the Women's and Girls' Fund of Kern County. The one-day event brought together social service organizations from all over the county to pool their resources.

"It opened my eyes to a lot of different agencies," Webb said. "I didn't realize that we had all of these community programs. It's a great resource for the kids that I mentor."

Leyva spoke with pride recently about how he found out less than two months ago that he and his girlfriend are going to be parents. "He's grown up," Webb said. "You can tell that he's on a good track. "It kind of firms the belief that they're not bad kids -- they just make bad choices," Webb said about Leyva and others in the Take Away Tattoos program. "He's a genuinely good person who made poor choices."