

**SACRED
TRANSFORMATIONS
HEALING THROUGH INK**

Article by Lyndon Douglas
Photos by Eric Dean Spruth
(except where noted)

Sacred Transformations is dedicated to helping people who are tattooed, scarred, branded and/or burnt from negative experiences to transform those marks into art pieces that celebrate their individuality. This in part is the mission statement of the Chicago-based organization that is helping people to reclaim their lives, self-respect and self-image by covering unwanted skin markings with professional quality tattoos. For founder Eric Dean Spruth, Sacred Transformations is the realization of a dream that was ten years in the making.

Spruth is a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago with a Master's Degree in Art Therapy. After college, he volunteered and later worked with the mentally challenged community. From there he began his career within the Cook County Jail system at Cermak Health Services Hospital as an art therapist for the mentally ill. Working with the women at the jail, he noticed tattoos on their necks and elsewhere that he discovered were names of pimps or gang tattoos. His experience with these women gave birth to the idea of Sacred Transformations.

Working with women who had gang symbols or pimps' names burned in their flesh had a profound impact on him. "These women are trying to get their lives together," Spruth explained. "They have children, and yet they're marked by



Photo by Marc E. Nicolas

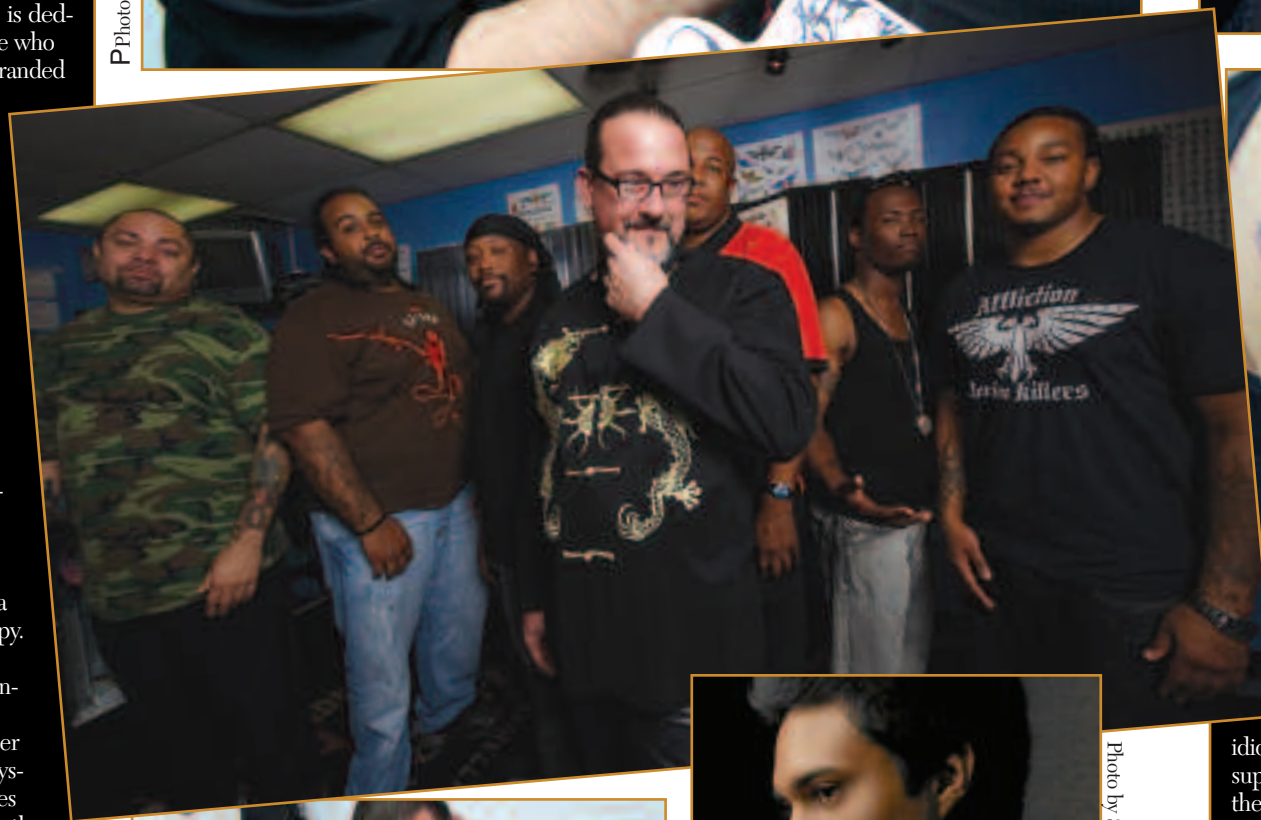


Photo by Sandro



Photo by Sandro

these idiots. How are you supposed to get your life back together when you've got some idiot's name on you? How are your kids supposed to not think that's cool when they see you naked in the house or the shower? If you smoke, your kids are gonna smoke no matter how bad you are. If you're involved in a bad relationship with a guy, your kids are going to follow that path, because you're the coolest person they've ever met."

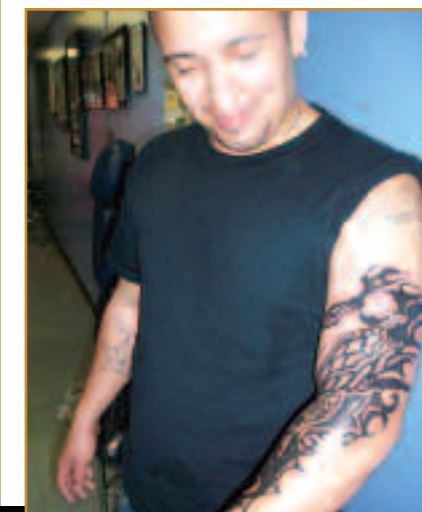
Spruth officially began offering "transformative tattooing" under the Sacred Transformations banner in 2002, operating out of South Side Tattoos, in Chicago. And while Spruth's goal has always been to offer people a chance at a better life through his art, his intentions were, and continue to be, to focus his help on those who are willing to help themselves.



Photo by Marc E. Nicolas



Photo by Sandro



There is no financial charge for the ink work done by the organization, but Spruth is quick to point out that the service is anything but "free." In order to be considered for a transformative tattoo, potential clients must go through a rigorous application process that includes giving examples of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual effects the unwanted skin markings have brought into a potential client's life. They must also list their life goals upon receiving the tattoo. Spruth also requires those chosen for a transformative tattoo to play a part in designing a piece that is significant to the life of the person he will ink.

"I want my clients to work at creating a new transformative tattoo design," says Spruth, "that is a reflection of the kind of iconography that represents the highest level of themselves and of their people. Or, in the event that their own genealogy does not work for them, to sincerely appropriate a symbol from another culture."

At this time, Sacred Transformations has over 450 applicants seeking transformative tattooing work from Spruth and his staff.

Since launching the Sacred Transformations movement, Spruth has received a number of awards for his artistic and humanitarian work. Spruth and Sacred Transformations has also been featured in media outlets including "WGN-TV Morning News," National Public Radio, the *Chicago Tribune*, "WTTW City Talk," and the *Chicago Reader*. Still, the truest form of satisfaction for Eric Dean Spruth and his staff comes from the knowledge that they are playing a part in giving people tattoos they can be proud of as well as a new lease on life.

"Choosing a new tattoo to express our individuality, as a rite of passage, or a symbol of evolving consciousness can be a powerful way to affirm personal evolution," says Spruth. "It is a concrete way of letting go of the past and making commitments to a better future"

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