

Marked for life

Local tattoo artist's brand brings in business

By Dana Johnson
Staff Reporter

Ralph Spangler doesn't get tattoos any more.

"It hurts too bad," he said, even though he has 30 tattoos, including some he did himself.

"I'm a real whiner," he said.

Spangler is the owner of Ralph's Hungry Eye Tattoo at 112 S. 9th St., and has been giving customers tattoos — and pain — for 12 1/2 years.

"They don't have to take the pain, we give it," he said.

But that's not the motto of the shop. "The customer always comes first," Spangler said.

This means modern sterilization techniques, including ultrasonic cleaning machines as well as dry-heat and liquid sterilization. This also means talking the customer into relaxing when receiving the tattoo.

"It's kind of a painful deal," Spangler said.

Customers sign a release form before taking the chair and are given strict instructions on how to care for the tattoo

when leaving. They also leave with a Hungry Eye Tattoo bumper sticker and key chain, courtesy of Spangler.

"We tattoo everybody, from all walks of life," he said.

Spangler says that there are no county regulations for tattoo shops, and that he has never had any problems.

"I think the only regulations is on the business itself, not necessarily the tattoo," he said.

And there are few restrictions at Spangler's shop, except for age restrictions, Spangler said.

"Under 18 with written parental consent only," he said, even though Spangler said there has never been a problem.

The strangest tattoo that Spangler has ever done was a facial tattoo almost ten years ago on a Lincoln man.

"I did a mask on a guy. It completely surrounds his eyes and down his cheeks and back to his ears," he said.

"They (tattoos) are designed to enhance their facial expressions," he said, even though he admits himself that some are strange.

There's also not much that Spangler

refuses to do. Some of the artwork that people bring in gets distasteful in the way of subject matter, Spangler said.

"There's things I don't like to do, but I'm here for the money . . . I don't like doing anti-Christ things and I don't like to do racial things. I have done it, though," Spangler said.

Spangler said he doesn't have a favorite design or a specialty.

"I'm pretty versatile," he said. One often-repeated design, however, is the Tasmanian Devil. He's done that one hundreds of times, he said.

One thing he can't do is remove the designs.

"I can cover them up with new designs. . . but I can't remove them. Well, I could with a razor blade," he said.

In his personal life, Spangler, 37, describes his marital status as "changing."

"I've been married three times, divorced three times, my girlfriend is leaving me now, and I've got another one on the line. Six kids . . . 2 to 11, no, I take that back 2 to 16," Spangler said.

In 1980, Spangler opened a shop near Lake Ozark in Missouri, but he

said "it was just dead."

Other than the brief Missouri venture, he has kept his business in Lincoln and says that lately the shop is busy all the time. Generally, though, spring and fall tend to be busy times, he said.

Spangler does up to a dozen tattoos on a good day. The majority of these are walk-ins, but Spangler does take appointments. He even has regulars which includes one customer who comes in once a week to have his tattoos "worked on."

Spangler had friends in the tattoo business 12 years ago and thought he was "rather artistic" and decided to get into the tattoo business also.

Now he is having the same influence on his apprentice, Jeff Kohl, 23, who has been practicing with Spangler for six months.

Kohl said that he pestered Spangler into teaching him the trade.

"He wouldn't leave me alone," Spangler said.

So Spangler gave Kohl the chance to prove that he would be an asset to the business.

"And he has proven to be," he said.



Photos by Shaun Sartin



Top: Ralph Spangler outside his store at 112 S. 9th St.
Right: Jeff Kohl, 23, Spangler's apprentice, receives a "legs" on experience from his mentor.
Above: The Brady Bunch consisting of Bob Full-

ner, Bob Jensen and Kohl display their like tattoos, which they got after their event-filled trip to Brady, Neb.
Next page: Kohl shows off his newest tattoo of Ace Fraley, guitarist for the rock band Kiss.



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