



GETTING UNDER THEIR

HOMEBOY
INDUSTRIES



BY GILLIAN GAYNAIR

PA Volunteers Remove Gang Tattoos

PA GREG MENNIE was riveted by the newspaper story about Homeboy Industries. The article had all the elements of something big, something life-altering.

SKINN



PA Greg Mennie is one of three PAs who volunteer at Homeboy Industries' free tattoo removal program.

There was a priest and gang members. Bake sales and drug deals. Desperation and hope. There was a sense of community, of giving to others to help better society as a whole. And there was change—evident by the impact of one of Homeboy Industries' programs that offers free tattoo removal to former gang members, young and old. The visible tattoos—on the neck, hands, face and elsewhere—can become roadblocks to those eager to leave the past behind.

"Not only does that stuff get them killed on the street," Mennie said of gang tattoos, "but it limits their ability to get a good job."

Mennie was hooked.

Today, seven years after reading the article, he volunteers several times a month with the Ya'Stuvo Tattoo Removal program at Los Angeles-based Homeboy Industries. He's one of three PAs who are making a difference in the lives of former gang members, the others are Troy Clarke, PA-C, and Gary Ramirez, PA-C.

The program provides services to at-risk youth, former gang members and those recently released from prison to help them become productive members of their communi-

ties. Mennie, who specializes in family medicine, is a faculty member at the Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital Family Medicine Residency in Whittier, an affiliate of the University of California-Irvine School of Medicine's Department of Family Medicine. He encourages the residents he teaches to volunteer at Ya'Stuvo.

Volunteering is in line with the tenets of family medicine and the PA profession, as is the concept of taking care of communities. "If we make everybody better, every body is better," said Mennie, who has been a PA for 18 years. "It makes the streets safer. It protects everyone."

The success of Ya'Stuvo and Homeboy Industries is testament to that notion.

The organization has its roots in the Jobs For a Future program, which was founded in 1988 by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest and Los Angeles native. The jobs program aimed at addressing the unmet needs of gang-involved youth by offering them alternatives to the violence environment in which they lived. Four years later in response to the South Central Los Angeles riots, Boyle established Homeboy Bakery, a business that provided work experience, training



and an opportunity for rival gang members to work side by side.

Additional businesses grew out of the bakery such as Homegirl Cafe, which is managed by former gang-involved women and spurred the jobs program to evolve in 2001 into Homeboy Industries. The independent nonprofit is now lauded as a national model and the country's largest gang intervention and re-entry program. Its free programs including counseling, substance abuse assistance, job training and placement all aim to help young people and in many cases, adults, too, redirect their lives.

Ya'Stuvo, which means, "That's enough; I'm done with that," in Spanish, is no different.

Changing Lives with Lasers

Homeboy Industries' clinic has three laser tattoo removal machines, which were purchased through grants. The medical staff and volunteers see about 800 patients a month. "Each patient averages about 10 tattoos [each], so we work on about 8,000 tattoos a month," said Clarke, another longtime volunteer who also is the primary trainer for the nonprofit's medical volunteers. "I see at least 400 clients a month. They could have one tattoo, or they could have up to 20 or an entire collage on their arms and backs and faces."

While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates lasers, requirements regarding who has the authority to utilize laser technology to remove tattoos vary from state to state, according to Ann Davis, PA-C, AAPA senior director of state advocacy and outreach.

Approximately 10 states authorize only medical doctors to perform laser tattoo removal. AAPA is advocating to remove restrictions to PA use of lasers. "We believe that physicians should be able to delegate laser use to PAs when the PA is appropriately trained and laser use is part of the practice," Davis said.

A PA since 2001, Clarke practices in family medicine and urgent care. He began volunteering at Homeboy Industries five years ago because of his belief in Father Boyle's vision. "He has set up a supportive net for people who are willing to change and put the effort in to move forward with their lives. Being job-ready and employable are keys to their success."

A good day for Clarke is learning about a patient who, after multiple treatments, receives calls for three job interviews in a week.

Clarke estimates that he has completed 30,000 tattoo removal sessions. "Some are tattoos that were [applied] during a traumatic incident and without the individual's consent," he explained. "Many of the tattoos put family members in danger. In most cases, multiple treatments—from three to

People who come for tattoo removal may not be aware of Homeboy Industries' other services or, even, their own needs. But everyone who comes in is trying to move forward with their lives.

PA Troy Clarke

Nobody really judges you off of your expertise; everybody stereotypes and discriminates on the way you look. My visible tattoos are going to hinder me, regardless of if I have a master's degree in sociology.”

Louie Duran, Ya'Stuvo program coordinator and former gang member.

PA Greg Mennie, right, chats with Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit priest who established the jobs program in 1988 that evolved into Homeboy Industries.



as many as 40—are needed because of the amount of ink, the color of ink, the kind of ink and the depth of the tattoo.”

The medical volunteers are helping to increase patient access to care for a medically underserved population that might not otherwise be able to afford the costly treatment. But more importantly, Clarke said, they are helping not just the client, but the client's family by providing them with an opportunity and hope for future generations.

For Louie Duran, 31, the tattoo removal program helped him start a new chapter in his life. The former gang member is now a program coordinator with Ya'Stuvo. It's the first job he's ever had.

Medical volunteers at Ya'Stuvo are removing four tattoos, scripted into the skin of Duran's face, head and hands. The tattoos have the name of his neighborhood and “Venice,” the California city where he grew up. He said gang-related tattoos marking where someone grew up, a street number or name are among the most commonly removed in the Ya'Stuvo program. They are all a “permanent reminder of the past,” he said.

Everyone who comes to Homeboy Industries is trying to get away from the past.

Duran's grandmother and parents were in gangs, and he had been in and out of prison most of his life. That changed after he heard about the organization while in state prison,

and decided to check it out after he couldn't find work anywhere. “I tried various job opportunities, such as McDonald's and Jack-in-the-Box, and I was denied...due to my criminal background,” he said. “Nobody really judges you off of your expertise; everybody stereotypes and discriminates on the way you look. My visible tattoos are going to hinder me, regardless of if I have a master's degree in sociology.”

But with the gig at Ya'Stuvo, Duran's job hunt ended nearly a year ago. Today, he assists with paperwork and appointments for those coming in to have tattoos removed. He's working with healthcare providers, such as Clarke, on a regular basis. He's often with patients during the procedures, talking with them to help them relax.

At last count, the clients who have come through Homeboy Industries for tattoo removal services represented 1,100 gangs. People come from as far away as New Jersey and Texas to have the procedure.

“People who come for tattoo removal may not be aware of Homeboy Industries' other services or, even, their own needs,” Clarke said. “But everyone who comes in is trying to move forward with their lives. The tattoo services are the gateway for individuals to access other services, such as employment, mental health, anger management, legal, education and drug and alcohol services.”

Erasing Allegiances

It takes multiple treatments to remove a tattoo; how many varies, depending on the person's skin pigmentation, the age of the tattoo, what materials were used and how the tattoo was placed, Mennie said.

When a new patient comes in, Mennie first assesses the person's skin type and how it might react to the laser. The intense light essentially causes the tattoo's ink to break into smaller particles that are eventually removed by the body's immune system. Most patients have good outcomes from the procedure; however, the skin can scar, lighten, darken or become mottled, after a tattoo is removed.

When asked why PAs should volunteer in their communities, Mennie spoke plainly, but eloquently, about the responsibilities that come with being a physician assistant.

"Not to sound flippant—but it's because we can volunteer," he said. "Our profession, the medical profession, is very different from other professions. We have a skill that *all* people need to seek at some point in their lives, whether it's tattoo removal or health screening or health interventions. Unfortunately not all people have the ability or income to allow them access, and thus we should give back on some level and in some way."

Homeboy Industries offers tattoo removal services four to five days a week, with shifts lasting from four to eight hours, depending on the availability of medical volunteers. Currently, the waiting list for the program hovers around 3,000. There are 28 medical volunteers, including the three PAs.

Priority goes to those with visible, gang-related tattoos—including on places like the eyelids and lips—some of which people get in prison or at home. They are men and women of all races and ages; the youngest has been 5, the oldest, 77. Nearly all who come to Ya'Stuvo live in the surrounding community.

Getting a tattoo removed hurts much more than having it done, say those who have undergone the procedure. But it's a momentary pain. Much more difficult is building the courage to go through with it in the first place, Duran said. For former gang members, removing their tattoos means relinquishing a significant part of their identity and turning their backs on a tradition. With it, they deny all they had

known, been dedicated to and for which they committed crimes.

"To actually take it off," Duran said, "was a big deal physically and mentally."

But it's a key first step in helping former gang members move on with their lives. Ya'Stuvo's medical volunteers play a part in such triumphs. "I think that anything that would help a patient be successful in making a change—that's what PAs are about," Davis said. "So you really want to make it clear that if there's a job to be done, PAs are going to step up and do it, absent some arbitrary barrier."

Indeed, Mennie has done just that for nearly a decade. During that time he's become keenly aware from his patients' stories—whether they're teenagers or grandmothers—of just how significant a street number or a teardrop on the skin can be. It can mean life or death. Eliminating it can mean a job interview, a pay check and a second chance.

"For me, being involved in the Ya'Stuvo program reminds me that there are people out there actually doing something to make the world a better place," Mennie said.

"I want to be a part of that."

Homeboy Industries is always seeking medical volunteers for the tattoo removal program, in hopes of adding more clinic hours. PAs interested in volunteering should email the nonprofit at tattooremoval@homeboy-industries.org. **PA**

GILLIAN GAYNAIR is a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C. She covers topics ranging from global healthcare and the LGBT community to immigration and family violence.

Janette Rodrigues, AAPA managing editor of publications, contributed to this report.



PA Greg Mennie, Father Gregory Boyle and PA Troy Clarke.